One of the commonly accepted practices of opening an academic article consists in quoting the dictionary definition of the subject under consideration. I will abide by this precedent, with the intention of demonstrating, through the course of the analysis, that the manner in which we circumscribe the phenomenon of the ‘selfie’ reveals some of the peculiar cultural tensions condensed within it. Selected as “Word of the Year 2013” by the Oxford Dictionaries, the selfie consists of a “photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website”\(^1\). With this ostensibly simple and unambiguous definition, at least three aspects should already alert the media scholar to the complexity of the issues at hand.

One concerns the question of medium-specificity, and the multiple uses and slippery nature of photography in the digital age\(^2\). Secondly, there is the somewhat nebulous idea of the “self” which, in contemporary visual culture, has been represented in increasingly fragmented and heterogeneous ways\(^3\). The third problematic aspect lies in the tension between the two different acts involved in the creation of the selfie (one, taking a picture, and two, sharing it online). It is on this peculiar tension that I will focus here: I am interested in exploring how, as an object situated at the crossroads of two different practices, the selfie becomes a battlefield for negotiating the authorship and agency of the actors involved. As Stuart Hall theorized in his famous “encoding/decoding” model, the moments of production and reception of a cultural object are not necessarily characterized by the same power relations. This means that the set of meanings and values embedded in it can, to an extent, be overturned\(^4\). The selfie is, of course, no exception.


\(^4\) According to Hall, each of the phases that articulate the process of communication “retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence”. S. Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”, in S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, P. Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson, 1980, 128.
to this logic: different dynamics and power relations govern the phases of its production and of its circulation.

I have chosen to present here three case studies of selfies portraying powerful leaders: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Pope Francis. My hypothesis is that, in this ‘subgenre’ of the selfie, the tension I aim to illustrate will be at its highest. Initially the intention of selfie-taking was generally limited to the circulation of the image within the author’s relatively homogeneous community of (digital) friends. More recently however, the selfie has become a well-integrated part of the media strategy of political leaders and celebrities, and once it is turned into an object of global public consumption, its interpretive community differs greatly from that of its production. Moreover, the ideological mechanisms of celebrity culture are activated: with the selfies considered here, for example, issues of gender and sexuality are a key element of the ‘fantasy’ sustained by the images.

In discussing these three case studies, I will begin by investigating how each selfie is produced, and then focus on its subsequent interpretation. I will also briefly touch upon other related media objects, which I consider to be useful in revealing the framework in which the photographs have been interpreted. My analysis is in no way exhaustive: much as in the spirit of its subject matter, I aim at providing a fleeting snapshot of how the phenomenon of the selfie, in the early years of this millennium’s second decade, has become associated with powerful and public figures. Given the great speed at which the current mediascape evolves, the present remarks may indeed become obsolete within the span of a very short period, and a more significant critical distance will be needed in order to gain a solid grasp of the larger meaning of this widespread practice.

2. Hillary Clinton

On December 3rd, 2012, at the Kennedy Center Honors Gala, Hillary Clinton was photographed by Meryl Streep on the latter’s mobile phone. The two women appear next to each other, smiling and in a pose vaguely reminiscent of an iconic image of female friendship from the film Thelma & Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991). The picture, owned by Streep, was donated to a charity organization called Shutter to Think which, in turn, then sold it to fans. As such, the term selfie was introduced not because the original image was shared on social media (its circulation was on the contrary relatively limited, and corresponded to the traditional sales practices of star memorabilia), but rather due to the fact that a series of articles and on-line posts defined the act itself as the Meryl Streep/Hillary Clinton selfie. However, the photograph that accompanied these reports was, in actual fact, taken by an Associated Press reporter from a slightly more removed distance. It includes, then, Streep’s hand and telephone in the foreground and slightly out of focus, and it has a more patinated, professional look (fig. 1).

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5 This constitutes a good example of how celebrity philanthropism has become intertwined with the logic of the market, as Mike Goodman shows in “Celebritus Politicus. Neo-liberal Sustainabilities and the Terrains of Care”, in G. Fridell, M. Konings (eds.), Age of Icons: Exploring Philantrocapitalism in the Contemporary World, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

Figure 1 - Hillary Clinton and Meryl Streep pose together (AP/Kevin Wolf)

What was it that turned this episode into a selfie? And why was it necessary, in this shift, to renegotiate the picture’s authorship? One simple answer lies in the break from common sense that the photograph represented. The combination of a high-profile institutional figure and one of Hollywood’s most revered actresses, caught in the act of taking their own picture, would not perhaps have been readily expected. As James Stanyer’s study *Intimate politics* argues, despite the convergence of politics and entertainment and the trend towards “intimization”, politicians remain a distinct and peculiar kind of celebrities. The manner in which we relate to them involves to a degree an act of denial. That is to say, politicians must continue to disavow the construction of their celebrity-status, thus projecting an appearance of spontaneity even when they are unashamedly exploiting the mechanism of mediatization. In this way, while reality shows such as *Keeping up with the Kardashians* can be produced, there cannot (yet) be a *Keeping up with the Clintons*.

That being said, in recent times the ex-First Lady, her husband Bill, and their daughter Chelsea have repeatedly ‘exposed’ themselves on social media, carefully staging the appearance of a very united nuclear family. These and other events, such as the publication of her memoir *Hard Choices*, point to a re-branding strategy of Hillary Clinton aimed at consolidating her potential 2016 presidential campaign. For her Twitter profile picture, Clinton has chosen an image of herself in an C-16 aircraft, landing in Tripoli on an official foreign policy mission. The piece accompanying the photograph in *Time* magazine uses a highly gendered metaphor.

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to describe it: Clinton here embodies “the traditional American hard power of military
strength with the soft power of US finances and values”\textsuperscript{10}. As Shawn J. Parry-Giles
writes in an analysis of the media treatment of Clinton through the course of her career,
she has been framed as “a sometimes all-powerful First Lady who becomes a more tra-
ditional ‘good mother’, and a ‘stand by your man’ wife who is victimized by a cheating
husband”. Images of Clinton have shifted “from a strong independent feminist to a good
mother and sympathetic wife/victim”\textsuperscript{11}. Her recent re-branding strategy (a compromise
between ‘authentic womanhood’ and more masculine, traditionally authentic ‘presiden-
tial’ qualities) did not go unnoticed in social media websites, and gave way to a series
of parodic responses. For instance, a “meme” was started based on imagining the text
messages that Clinton might have been exchanging at the moment of her Twitter official
photograph. What follows are some of the imagined exchanges with, respectively, Meryl
Streep, Mark Zuckerberg, and Ryan Gosling, as appeared on a popular Tumblr blog
called “Texts from Hillary”\textsuperscript{12} (fig. 2):

![Three images from the parodic Tumblr blog “Texts from Hillary”](image)

Figure 2 - Three images from the parodic Tumblr blog “Texts from Hillary”

It is telling, in my opinion, that in these images Clinton responds positively to her fe-
male friend invitation, while she has a more hostile reaction to the two younger men. A
hypothesis of the logic operating here will be presented following the other case studies.

3. BARACK OBAMA

Barack Obama’s selfie with David Cameron and Helle Thorning-Schmidt (fig. 3), the
then respective Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Denmark, was taken on
December 10\textsuperscript{th} 2013 at Nelson Mandela’s funeral.

\textsuperscript{12} http://textsfromhillaryclinton.tumblr.com/, last accessed June 25\textsuperscript{th}, 2014.
The first thing to note is that, again, Obama was not taking the picture, nor was the ‘amateur-style’ image taken with the mobile phone (which belonged to Thorning-Schmidt) shared on social media. Also in this case, what circulated was a series of (much more traditional) photographs from an AFP reporter. According to the above definition of the selfie, this act can hardly be considered as such; nevertheless it was almost universally described as “Obama’s selfie”.

Rather than simply dismissing this as mislabeling, I am tempted to interpret the collective acceptance of the act as a selfie in the light of contemporary celebrity culture, and its interactions with politics. As in the first case, the authorship of the act has been reassigned, partly because of several transgressions to common sense: the President of the “free world” is not supposed to pose for a picture at such a solemn event; and generally speaking, one is not supposed to take selfies at funerals (although the ‘funeral selfie’ has actually become a subgenre in itself); moreover, due to the persistent reticence towards the objectification of male images, men are less expected to indulge in such practice. A selfie is taken, according to this pathologising view, either for vanity or for insecurity – and both of these contradictory allegations have been associated with Obama in the course of his career.

This set of tacit rules advising against taking this particular picture clashes with the fact that Obama actually is a star, and stars do take pictures of themselves. The President’s stardom is composed both of his performative skills, and of his high profile as a

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global celebrity. In an essay on the intersections between stardom and politics, Cristina Jandelli writes that Obama’s performative skills and star qualities were fundamental in building his consensus during his first campaign for the White House. In the televised debates, for example, he managed to remain cool and in control, even when faced with fierce attacks, thus distancing himself from racialised and stereotypical images of African-American men that characterize the US media. In order to illustrate this dynamic, Jandelli makes reference to a widely circulated photograph, in which George Clooney appeared absorbed and captivated by Obama’s speech. His star status is so great that, when in his presence, even other stars concede to it (fig. 4).

The interaction taking place at Mandela’s funeral, then, might be considered to be following this logic of stardom: as any fan would do when meeting their idol, the Danish Prime minister might have wanted a record of the occasion for herself. The overwhelmingly more widespread interpretation of it as “Obama’s selfie”, and the fantasy that this

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18 The author compares Obama’s image to movie stars such as Denzel Washington and Sidney Poitier, “both cultivated, refined and intimately positive figures, but also both performers with a lucid control and management of their own bodies”. C. Jandelli, “Il divismo cinematografico contemporaneo: le star della politica, la politica delle star”, *Agalma*, 22 (2012).

19 The picture was taken during a meeting outside the Oval Office in 2010, by the official White House photographer Pete Souza.
shift has encouraged, are structured by the wider significance of the president’s symbolic role. The specific context of the selfie (the memorial of the most universally recognized anti-racist icon) can be seen as another influencing factor. As Erica R. Edwards has persuasively argued, long before 2008, US popular fiction has presented “the black president as a solution to the racial rift of the nation”, inventing “a messianic figure who embodies the nation’s most sacred ideals of liberty, brotherhood, and equality”\textsuperscript{20}. Obama has incorporated “race” into the American Dream narrative, providing a fantasy of resolution of racial conflicts. In one of the speeches that put him in the national spotlight, “A more perfect union” (now also know as his “race” speech), he presented himself as the realization of this process, recalling that he is “the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas”. The interlocked dimensions of race and sexuality have also played a certain role, in my opinion, in how the selfie has been discussed: I will return to this in the final paragraph of the article.

4. POPE FRANCIS

Pope Francis’ “epic selfie” (as the hashtag associated to it in its original Twitter posting announced) was taken in the Vatican, as the pontiff met with a group of teenagers on August 29\textsuperscript{th} 2013. Again, in this case, as with the two previous examples, it was not the Pope himself who took or posted the picture: the author, Fabio Ragona, uploaded it on his online social media profile\textsuperscript{21}. However, in news reports this selfie was often substituted with a professional photograph taken by an AP reporter at a slight remove from the participants, and including part of Saint Peter’s Basilica in the background in a harmonic visual composition (fig. 5).

![Figure 5 - Pope Francis poses for his first ‘selfie’](AP Photo/Osservatore Romano)


\textsuperscript{21} https://twitter.com/FabioMRagona/status/373177674107072512, last accessed June 25\textsuperscript{th}, 2014.
Let us consider the page in which the popular news blog *The Huffington Post* featured the news of this selfie\(^{22}\), since it condenses many significant features of how the event was framed and circulated. Beginning with the title itself (“Pope Francis Selfie Blows Up Twitter”) both the author’s and the internet users’ agency is overshadowed: wasn’t it the latter’s action of re-blogging, sharing and commenting that caused the metaphorical ‘explosion’ of the social media platform? The caption then reinforces this reading, by defining Francis as the “tweeting Pope”: it was actually Ratzinger who opened the papal Twitter account, but he clearly lacked the qualities of the common man to allow for the “‘ordinary/extraordinary’ paradox” of “being ‘ordinary’ (like ‘us’), yet simultaneously distinctive and ‘special’”, as stars are supposed to be\(^{23}\).

The redefinition of the picture’s authorship was indeed facilitated by the fact that, from the very start of his pontificate, Bergoglio’s (Pope Francis) public persona has been constructed using the tropes of stardom. He combines the ability to embody the ‘super-star’ at global media events, which characterized John Paul II\(^{24}\), as well as being open towards the evangelical function of new media, similarly to his immediate predecessor.

The illustrated magazine *Il mio Papa* – the first weekly publication exclusively dedicated to Pope Francis – incorporates both of these aspects. On the one hand, it builds on the format of the teen film and television/music fanzine (featuring articles on the Pope’s scheduled media appearances, insight on his dressing style, background information on his early life, large format posters, etc.). On the other hand, within this traditional format, it also entails a didactic digital media project, with the second issue of the magazine featuring a detailed guide of “how to receive the Pope’s messages on your phone” (that is, how to subscribe to his Twitter account).

![Figure 6 - Cover of the magazine Il mio Papa](2nd issue, 19th of March 2014, Mondadori)


Reiterating a long-standing iconography also present on the magazine’s cover (fig. 6), the Huffington Post page featured, below the original selfie, a gallery of 60 images of “Pope Francis Kissing Babies”, an item I will briefly return to in the final part of the article. At the bottom of the page we find users’ comments, starkly polarized between enthusiasm for the pontiff’s down-to-earth attitude, and (albeit in a minority of cases) anxiety over the trivialization of his role as a religious leader. The first kind of comment is typically formulated according to this structure: in the first place, the user writes “I am not religious”/ “I am not a Christian”/ “I really dislike the Church” and then goes on by stating “but I like what Pope Francis is doing”. A striking number of variations on this blueprint can be found among the comments, attesting to a general embrace of the Pope’s “celebrification”\textsuperscript{25}. Conversely, other commentators with a more specialized interest in the issue, express discomfort with the practice and posit a link between vanity, insecurity and the selfie\textsuperscript{26}. In a post titled “Christian selfies” published on a religion-related blog, Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas Pickett writes of how he has “become repulsed by the use of selfies, especially among Christians”\textsuperscript{27}. He provides an elaborate account of the dangers of this practice: the ultimate goal of selfie being the quest of “pleasure in considering what others think about us”, it can easily lead to “vanity, pride, or despair”. Finally, he places this in opposition to the teachings of Saint Catherine of Siena, who wrote that we must dwell “in the cell of self-knowledge in order to better know God’s goodness”\textsuperscript{28}. Even if by means of contrasting them, this last commentator implicitly points to an unexpected common ground between the selfie and those “arts of existence”\textsuperscript{29} from which Christian ascetic practices historically derive: both constitute a terrain for the “decipherment of the self”\textsuperscript{30}, and an object of ethical concern.

5. SELFIES, ‘TRUTH’, AND SEXUALITY

Let us now return to the question formulated at the beginning of the article. The pictures considered here are not self-portraits, nor have they been shared through social media by Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Pope Francis. Nevertheless, it is in their collective and public use as selfies that their cultural significance lies. How is it that they have become selfies? What intervened between the phase of production and that of circulation/interpretation? In order to formulate an answer, I would like to refer to the ideas presented by Theresa Senft in a talk titled “The Epistemology of the Second Selfie: What Queer Teaches Us About Digital Display, Surveillance and Power”\textsuperscript{31}. In opposition to the “first selfie” (the actual picture taken by someone and stored in the hard drive of their

\textsuperscript{25} The concept is used by O. Driessens in “Celebrity Capital: Redefining Celebrity Using Field Theory”, Theory and Society, 42 (2013): 543-556, where he interestingly applies bourdieusian approaches to describe the conversion of one kind of capital (political, economic, religious etc.) into “celebrity capital”.


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 29.

personal computer or in their mobile phone), she refers to the public use and circulation of self-portraits as “the second selfie”. In her view, this second selfie is submitted to a disciplinary logic similar to that of the “closet”.

In her work of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick analysed the closet as a “publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues” in a “culture where same-sex desire is still structured by its distinctive public/private status, at once marginal and central, as the open secret”\(^{32}\). The author’s wide-ranging hypothesis is that “a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning” in our culture are “indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition”, among which, “the pairings secrecy/disclosure and private/public”\(^{33}\). Building on Sedgwick’s work, Senft posits an analogy between homosexual panic and selfie panic: they both correspond to the question “why are they doing that in public?” Sexual practices involving same-sex partners became the subject of intense moral concern in nineteenth-century society, thus leading to the appearance, in several interrelated areas of knowledge, of a new “species”\(^{34}\): the homosexual. Senft argues that, in a similar fashion, the increasing collective relevance of self-representation in the digital age is accompanied by moral preoccupations. These are the specific circumstances under which an act that comes from a long tradition now acquires a new specification: “like queers and their bedrooms”, in fact, “selfies seem to be fine when they are between one’s cameraphone and oneself”\(^{35}\). The anxiety – and the subsequent need to formulate identifying definitions – arises when such practices acquire a public relevance.

As I have argued, moreover, another fundamental interpretive framework is that of celebification/stardom and celebrity culture, characterized by “the continual attempt to negotiate ‘authenticity’ in the star image, […] to lay claim to the ‘real self’ (what is the star ‘really like?’) […] organised around a desire to suggest a “separable, coherent quality, located ‘inside’ consciousness and variously termed ‘the self’, ‘the soul’, ‘the subject’”\(^{36}\). In this exercise of decipherment, not all areas of knowledge have the same status, and one of them has been particularly valued throughout the history of the star-system – that of sexuality. As Richard De Cordova reminds us, “the sexual scandal is the primal scene of all star discourse, the only scenario that offers the promise of a full and satisfying disclosure of the star’s identity”\(^{37}\). This remains the case today, in an age when the internet has facilitated an intensification of celebrity culture\(^{38}\), and social media perpetuate the modern impulse/obligation to reveal oneself\(^{39}\). In the cases considered here, additional scrutiny derives from the peculiar role of the people involved: they are not just ‘common’ celebrities, but also public leaders\(^{40}\).

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., 72.


\(^{35}\) Senft, “The Epistemology of the Second Selfie”.


\(^{39}\) The obvious reference is to Michel Foucault’s analysis of the production of knowledge and ‘truth’ in Western modern societies, via the privileged domain of sexuality. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*.

\(^{40}\) With varying intensity in different eras, politicians’ sexualities have been a determining aspect in shaping collective moral judgment; already in Greco-Roman antiquity, “the more one was in the public eye,
In my hypothesis, then, part of the appeal of (mis)reading these three images as selfies lies in their ambivalence towards specific forms of sexuality. By considering these pictures as selfies—that is, objects whose aesthetics and cultural function are closely aligned with ‘authenticity’—we allow ourselves to believe that they are conveying to us some fundamental truth about their authorial subject. Thus, these objects can reveal and contain anxieties about ‘illicit’ sexual fantasies circulating around these powerful figures. In the case of Hillary Clinton, the current re-fashioning of her gendered identity is related to rumors of her alleged homosexuality, which have surfaced regularly (especially in right-wing oriented US political media) in the course of her career. The selfie with Meryl Streep at once allows this fantasy to be formulated, and it conversely validates her image as an “authentic woman” via the trope of feminine friendship. As for Barack Obama, one of the responses to his selfie consisted in interpreting the episode as an attempted flirt between the US president and the Danish president (The Daily Mail, for instance, describe Thorning-Schimdt as a “flirty Dane”, and highlighted that Michelle Obama was apparently “unamused” by their interaction). Obama’s embodiment of the signifier of ‘race’ is here sexualized, through the implicit invocation of the figure of the ‘black seducer’, and of the ‘threat’ of miscegenation with a white woman. Finally, if we look at readers’ comments in the above mentioned Huffington Post page, widespread anxiety over the Catholic clergy’s sexuality emerges; and the gallery of the Pope kissing babies, as related content to his picture with a group of adolescents, seems to function at once as outlet and disavowal of that anxiety. Several readers bring up in their comments (in a way that seems unrelated to the selfie) the past scandals concerning episodes of child abuse committed by priests. It is a topic that condenses larger preoccupations with the way the Catholic church addresses the sexualities of both its religious and lay members.

These three episodes, in conclusion, share some common traits: what underlies the definition of these pictures as selfies does not lie in the moment of their production (since the agency of their actual authors and the explicit dynamics of fandom/stardom go largely unnoticed). It is rather the possibility of sustaining an ideological fantasy—allowing ourselves to experience these photographs as confessions of some subjective ‘truth’—that compels us into this belief. The ‘truth’ in question is closely related to the gendered identity and sexuality of these powerful figures: as Sedgwick, via Foucault, re-

the more authority one had or wanted to have over others, […] the more necessary it was to adopt and maintain, freely and deliberately, rigorous standards of sexual conduct”. Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, 60.

42 The whole title on the front page reads “Dave, a flirty Dane and a ‘selfie’ that left Mrs Obama VERY unamused”. See the caption in the CNN page quoted above, containing references to other articles with the same allegations. Obama’s selfie also works in contrast with the picture posted after re-election, with Barack hugging Michelle (standing in for America), and the caption reading “4 more years” (the photograph was the most re-tweeted post of all time, before being replaced by Ellen De Generes’ notorious “Oscar selfie”), https://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/26603129345503744, last accessed June 25th, 2014.
43 To take one example, one reader asks (without providing further context or a direct link with the selfie): “What is (the Pope) doing about all the child molesters in this church?”. There seems to be a specific focus on the institution, rather than on the person, in the case of Bergoglio: this could be related to the fact that, as leader of a religious movement, the Pope relies more on the ‘derived charisma’ of the institution than politicians in liberal democracies do. For a useful taxonomy of the different kinds of charisma, see Emilio Gentile’s remarks in ‘Mussolini’s Charisma’, in The Struggle for Modernity. Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism, Westport (CT): Praeger Publishers, 2003, 127-131.
44 On the mechanisms of mediatization of this topic, see the articles in “Forum: The Catholic Church, Paedophiles and Child Sexual Abuse”, Sexualities, 6, 1 (2003).
minds us, our culture “has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity”\(^{45}\). By simultaneously expressing and containing specific anxieties related to identity, selfies exert a significant influence on the perception of and engagement with celebrities and political figures, and as such have become a potent component in the relationship between the public and the powerful leaders who inhabit the contemporary mediascape.

**SUMMARY**

The selfie has become a deeply integrated component of the media strategy of politicians and public figures. This article considers three case studies of selfies portraying powerful leaders: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Pope Francis. It argues that these images became a battlefield for negotiating the authorship of the actors involved, and that issues of gender and sexuality are a key element of the ‘fantasy’ sustained by them. The analysis traces the overlapping of the mechanisms of celebrity culture with contemporary political communication. In observing the manner in which these selfies have been discussed, each image is placed in relation to other related media objects in order to delimit the interpretive framework. How come such pictures, which were not directly taken by these three public figures, have come to be identified as their own selfies? This question can be partially addressed by queer theory, which provides useful insights on how moral concerns over sexuality and online self-representation shape the perception of selfies. The appeal of (mis)reading these three images as selfies lies in their ambivalence towards ‘illicit’ sexual fantasies circulating around these powerful figures. By considering these pictures as objects whose aesthetics and cultural function are closely aligned with ‘authenticity’, we allow ourselves to believe that they are conveying some fundamental ‘truth’ about their authorial subject.