

Self-Presentation, Social Media, and Beauty Standards Among Adolescents

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Abstract:

In the age of social media, the pervasive behavior of taking and sharing selfies has garnered significant attention, prompting a deeper examination of the motivations and consequences associated with this practice. This review paper examines the current state of knowledge in understanding the psychological and social factors driving selfie behavior. Key themes emerging from the literature include self-presentation, attention-seeking, communication, and archiving, each shedding light on why individuals, especially adolescents, are drawn to capturing and sharing their self-portraits. Despite the substantial body of work, there remains a lack of research on the anxiety-inducing effects of selfie behavior, particularly in relation to social comparison and selfie editing practices. One limitation of the current research is the absence of longitudinal studies that track the long-term psychological impacts of selfie culture. These findings have important implications for developing interventions to mitigate negative psychological effects and inform future research and practice in digital media and mental health.

Keywords: Selfie; Social Comparison; Anxiety; Self-Presentation.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed a dramatic increase in the prevalence of selfies, a cultural phenomenon driven by the use of smartphones and social media. Statistics show that millions of selfies are uploaded to social media daily. It reflects the deep integration of this practice into everyday life. In early 2021, over 4.2 billion people were active on social media, with teenagers making up a significant portion of this number. Specifically, 79% of adolescents aged 13 to 14 and 84% of those aged 15 to 17 had active social media profiles, highlighting the crucial role social media plays in their social interactions and leisure activities [1-3]. This surge in selfie-taking behavior has spurred extensive research into understanding the underlying motivations and psychological effects associated with this trend.

This review critically assesses existing research on selfie behavior to provide a comprehensive understanding of the field. The main questions guiding this review are: What drives individuals, especially adolescents, to engage in selfie behavior? What are the psychological and social implications of this behavior? By exploring these questions, this review aims to reveal the complex interplay between

self-presentation, attention-seeking, communicative, and archiving motivations behind selfies. Understanding this topic is crucial due to the impact of selfies on personal well-being, social interactions, and the broader cultural landscape shaped by digital media.

To address these questions, this review examines a broad spectrum of literature. The literature is categorized based on research objects, methods, and arguments, allowing for a systematic analysis of the key themes and trends. In summarizing the literature reviewed, this paper presents several important findings, including the important role of self-presentation in shaping online identities, attention-seeking behaviors associated with narcissistic traits, the communicative function of selfies in maintaining social bonds, and the archival purpose of recording life events. Despite these advances, significant limitations remain. For example, few longitudinal studies have explored the long-term psychological effects of selfie behavior, suggesting that this is an important area for further exploration. This review highlights the importance of continuing to explore selfie behavior in the field of digital media and mental health and emphasizes the need for more nuanced and comprehensive research to fully understand this pervasive cultural practice.

2. Motivations for Taking Selfies Behaviors

2.1 Self-Presentation

Humans often attempt to influence how others perceive them by adjusting their appearance or behavior, a concept known as self-presentation [4]. Selfies provide a platform for individuals, especially adolescents, to express their identity and personality. This can include showcasing their fashion sense, mood, or personal interests. According to Biolcati and Passini, selfies allow users to present a curated version of themselves, aligning their online persona with their desired self-image [5]. This process of self-presentation is further supported by the findings of Qiu et al., who note that selfies serve as a means for users to highlight aspects of their identity that they find significant, thus shaping how they are perceived by their online audience [6]. By selectively sharing images that reflect their personal interests and moods, adolescents can construct a narrative about who they are or aspire to be, reinforcing their self-concept and social identity in the digital realm.

2.2 Attention-Seeking

Posting selfies can be a way to attract attention and stand out in the social media landscape. This is particularly prevalent among individuals with narcissistic traits who crave admiration and recognition. Studies have shown that narcissistic individuals are more likely to post selfies to gain attention and maintain their self-image [5]. This behavior is driven by the desire to receive positive feedback and validation from others, which helps reinforce their grandiose self-perception. Additionally, Sorokowski et al. discovered that men with higher levels of narcissism are significantly more inclined to post selfies, as it offers them a platform to showcase their appearance and gain the admiration they desire [7]. Thus, the attention-seeking motive behind selfie behavior underscores a critical aspect of how individuals with narcissistic traits interact with social media to satisfy their psychological needs for recognition and esteem.

2.3 Communication

Selfies can be used as a communication tool to help people stay in touch with friends and family by sharing their daily activities and experiences. This form of visual communication enables individuals to convey information and emotions that are difficult to express through words. According to Qiu et al., sharing selfies on social media enables users to broadcast their personal moments and updates, fostering a sense of closeness and interaction

with social networks [6]. Similarly, Sung et al. argued that selfies play a significant role in maintaining and strengthening social bonds as they provide a way for individuals to stay connected and interact with friends and family on a regular basis [8]. By sharing their lives through selfies, people can create and strengthen bonds and ensure that their relationships remain active and meaningful despite physical distance.

2.4 Archiving

Many people record and archive their life events by taking and posting selfies. This digital record helps them preserve memories and reflect on past experiences. Biolcati and Passini noted that archiving important moments is a common motivation for selfie-taking behaviors, especially among adolescents who are keen on documenting their life journeys [5]. By posting selfies, adolescents create a visual timeline of their personal growth, milestones, and daily experiences that can be revisited and treasured over time. This practice not only aids memory but also strengthens social connections by allowing individuals to share their life narratives with their social circles. Sung et al. further support this notion by emphasizing that the archival function of selfies provides a tangible way to capture and share meaningful moments such as vacations, celebrations, and daily life activities [8]. The ability to look back at these visual records helps individuals reflect on their personal development and the relationships that have shaped their lives, making archiving an important aspect of selfie culture.

3. Selfies Trigger Anxiety?

Selfies can trigger anxiety for several reasons, rooted in the social and psychological dynamics of self-presentation and social comparison. One primary factor is the intense pressure to present an idealized version of oneself on social media platforms. This pressure can lead to anxiety, as individuals constantly strive to achieve and maintain a certain level of physical appearance and social approval. Additionally, the process of taking and selecting the perfect selfie involves scrutinizing one's appearance and editing images to meet perceived social standards.

3.1 The Effect of Social Comparison

Festinger proposed the Social Comparison Theory, aimed at the innate tendency of individuals to assess their own abilities and perspectives by comparing themselves to others [9]. Adolescents frequently compare themselves to others on social media, either by looking down on those they perceive as inferior or by looking up to those they

view as superior [10]. Upward comparisons often lead to lower self-evaluations and negative emotions [11]. On social media, selfie editing involves social comparisons driven by dissatisfaction with one's appearance or a desire to look better than others.

Studies have shown that selfie behavior on social media is positively associated with appearance comparison researched through questionnaires and asked questions related to upward comparisons, such as, "I would compare myself to someone who is better looking than me rather than someone who is not as good looking as me" [12-16]. Meanwhile, according to Lyu et al.'s research, selfie behavior is positively related to body monitoring, upward appearance comparison, and self-esteem. To further test the effect of physical surveillance on adolescents' selfie behavior on SNSs, they also included age as a covariate in their analysis [17]. The results showed that upward appearance comparisons significantly and positively predicted selfie behavior. Upward appearance comparisons also significantly positively predicted body monitoring. This suggests that physical monitoring mediates the relationship between upward appearance comparisons and selfie behavior. Frequent exposure to idealized images of peers can lead to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem.

Teenage girls may feel pressured to attain a certain level of physical attractiveness. The selfie behavior in the adolescent population was demonstrated to positively predict social anxiety through the study of Yixuan et al. [18]. People upload selfies for three main reasons: to boost self-esteem, to present their best self-image to others, and to gain more likes, comments, and attention. As a result, individuals often select or edit their selfies to achieve the ideal image they desire. When making upward comparisons, individuals may feel motivated to improve themselves, which can lead to editing selfies to compensate for perceived flaws. Conversely, if they make a downward comparison and feel content with their appearance, they are less likely to engage in selfie editing. For girls who frequently compare themselves upward, this can lead to decreased body satisfaction and increased anxiety due to the disconnect between their online and offline images. Subsequently, this can lead to social fatigue, social anxiety, and other adverse emotions [19]. They may also experience heightened anxiety because of the differences that exist between social comparisons.

3.2 Selfies-Editing Behavior

In pursuit of an ideal appearance, people often spend a lot of time and effort editing their selfies to conform to society's aesthetic standards. This process includes adjusting

facial features, smoothing skin, altering body shape, and using various filters to achieve the perfect look. Excessive exposure to filtered images and compulsive selfie-taking can alter and distort body image perceptions. Augmented reality makeup tools, along with beauty apps and filters, can influence feelings of authenticity and social inclusion. The use of photo manipulation and editing in online visual self-presentation can contribute to body image concerns. Selfie editing serves as a form of selective self-presentation. Chua and Chang conducted in-depth interviews with adolescent girls in Singapore [10]. They discovered that girls edited their selfies to attract attention from their peers by adhering to beauty standards set by peer norms. In other words, girls sought measurable signs of popularity, such as likes, followers, or comments. As a result, they used beauty apps, filters, or AI to enhance their selfies. They edit their true appearance to be more perfect and closer to their desired image. Downward comparisons may have less impact than upward comparisons, but they are similar in relation to selfie editing. Editing a selfie may be the result of dissatisfaction with one's appearance in a selfie, or it may be the result of a desire to look better than others; in either case, it is a result of self-evaluation [20]. The cycle of adolescent girls constantly denying their problems and engaging in editing behaviors creates a sense of anxiety about their true appearance. In other words, the reliance on selfie editing exacerbates the lack of confidence in true looks.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this review reveals that selfie behavior is driven by a variety of psychological and social factors, including self-presentation, attention-seeking, communication, and archiving. Key findings from the literature suggest that these motivations largely determine how individuals, especially adolescents, use selfies to construct and reinforce their online identities. Despite the extensive research on selfie behavior, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of the present review, such as the fact that few studies have focused on the long-term psychological effects and anxiety effects associated with social comparison and selfie editing behavior.

Based on the results of this study, future research could consider expanding the parameters to include additional variables, contexts, or populations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of selfie behavior and its effects. Further research is needed to delve into the unanswered question of how selfies affect mental health over time and to develop effective interventions to mitigate potential negative effects.

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