Chapter 1
Shameless Selfie-Promotion:
Narcissism and Its Association
With Selfie-Posting Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Taking selfies and sharing them on social media is a popular activity in the age of the smartphone. Why do people take selfies and post them for others to see? This chapter reviews the empirical literature on the association between narcissism and selfie-posting behavior. Narcissism is a multidimensional personality trait characterized by grandiose views of oneself, a sense of superiority and concomitant feelings of entitlement, and a lack of empathy toward others. Included in the chapter is a discussion of important conceptual and methodological considerations in the study of narcissism, as well as a qualitative review of studies examining the association between narcissism and selfie-posting behavior and what these investigations have revealed. Finally, theoretical models explaining the association between narcissism and selfie-posting behavior are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Are we so in love with ourselves that we have to take a “selfie” for every activity that we do and then post it for everyone to see? Who cares? Are you that insecure or are you just that arrogant? This will be the most photographed generation in history and all for the sake of vanity. It’s really sad. – Central Iowa man (2016)

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The smartphone has become the gateway to the online world. Over three quarters (77%) of U.S. adults now own a smartphone, more than double the level of 2011; these devices are ubiquitous among young adults, with 92% of 18- to 29-year-olds owning one (Pew Research Center, 2017). The increased penetration of smartphones has given rise to a new genre of self-expression: “selfies,” or amateur self-photographs taken with these devices and often shared with others through social media websites. We are now living in a world awash in selfies; they are popping up everywhere, whether it be sporting events, graduations, or funerals. We have selfie sticks to take better pictures of ourselves and “no-selfie zones” to prevent putting ourselves in danger.

We enhance our selfies to increase the volumes of “likes” and comments they elicit on social media; for instance, photo-editing applications enable us to add charm to our selfies, improve our appearance, and edit them into works of art in the styles of Picasso, Chagall, and Kandinsky. We scrutinize ourselves in our selfies mercilessly and relentlessly, prompting some writers blame “selfie culture” for the dramatic rise in Botox treatment among millennial women in recent years (Blanchette, 2017). We add pop culture to our selfies by photo-shopping ourselves into selfies with celebrities. A true selfie with a celebrity, especially when transmitted instantly to friends and followers thru Instagram or Snapchat, carries enormous social currency; indeed, country music superstar Taylor Swift claimed that that the autograph is now “obsolete” and said that she hasn’t been asked for one “since the invention of the iPhone with the front-facing camera” (Swift, 2014, para. 11). Without a doubt, selfies have become irrevocably ensconced in early 21st century culture and pervade every corridor of social media; Instagram, for example, hosts hundreds of millions of photographs hashtagged with either #selfie or #me.

The prevalence of selfies in social media raises intriguing questions concerning why people post them and what they represent. In some respects, the selfie can be viewed as a technology byproduct, a side effect arising from the confluence of mobile operating systems, social media, and online photo-sharing platforms. However, the selfie is best viewed a social phenomenon serving as a means of individual and creative self-expression; as such, selfies convey important information about oneself and – given their pervasiveness – one’s culture. But what information do they convey? Indeed, why do people take selfies and post them to social media, and why do some do it more frequently than others? What are the social and psychological motives that drive this behavior? What is it, exactly, that sharing selfies accomplishes?

This chapter addresses one specific factor linked to selfie-posting behavior, namely, narcissism. The term narcissism is familiar to most people; formally and informally, we use the word “narcissist” in reference to the individual who seems to think he or she is special and comes across as conceited, vain, and entitled. Personal photos, when shared privately with friends and loved ones, enhance intimacy and social connectedness; when shared publicly, they signal the desire for relationships, as well
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