Chapter 3
Motivations and Positive Effects of Taking, Viewing, and Posting Different Types of Selfies on Social Media: A Cross-National Comparison

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explored the motivations and the effects of selfie taking, posting, and viewing. To understand the selfie phenomenon, we conducted in-depth interviews with 16 American and Chinese students. The findings suggest that the selfie phenomenon among American students is not necessarily related to narcissism and low self-esteem, as argued in many previous literatures. Contrarily, selfie usage among Chinese students is more associated with narcissism (self-indulgence in recreational selfie-taking) and impression management (selfie-editing to improve online self-image). In the general, selfie taking, viewing, and posting behaviors could be conceptualized as more than just a display of narcissism, but also as a new way of communication, life-recording, online impression management, and relationship management. Cultural differences between American and Chinese students’ use of selfies are also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Selfie, or digital self-portrait, is gradually gaining popularity since 2004, along with the world-wide spread of smart phones with camera lenses at both sides. The term was added to the Oxford Dictionaries in 2013. It has been recently defined by academics as “a self-portrait photograph of oneself (or of oneself and other people), taken with a camera or a camera phone held at arm’s length or pointed at a mirror, which is usually shared through social media” (Sorokowski, Sorokowska, Oleszkiewicz, Frackowiak, Huk, & Pisanski, 2015, p. 123). It has been reported that the usage of hashtag selfie went up by 170 times from 2012 to 2014 (Bennett, 2014). Although some believe that selfie taking, viewing, and posting were behaviors adopted mostly by females and adolescents, empirical findings showed that the selfie phenomenon occurred commonly among all individuals despite differences in age and gender (Souza et al., 2015; Sorokowski et al., 2015; Barry, Doucette, Loflin, Rivera-Hudson, & Herrington, 2017).

To further our understanding of this emerging phenomenon and its rising global popularity, this study was designed to examine the psychological, communicative, and relational motivations of selfie taking, viewing, and posting, assess the positive and negative effects of selfie-related behaviors on users’ psychological well-being and developmental outcome, and propose a new typology of selfies based on the functions. With in-depth interviews conducted on American college students and Chinese college students who are currently studying in America, this research also contributes a cross-national comparison of selfies as a global phenomenon by identifying the differences and similarities of selfie usage in Chinese and American contexts. In the next part of this chapter, we review previous literature on the selfie phenomenon and organized research finding into the following aspects: types of selfies, behaviors related to selfies, motivations of selfie posting, taking, and viewing, psychological effects, and American-Chinese cross-national comparison.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In previous literature, selfies, compared with pictures taken by others, were often conceptualized as a demonstration of negative personality like narcissism and low self-esteem (Barry et al., 2015; Sorokowska et al., 2016; Kim, Lee, Sung, & Choi, 2016; McCain, Borg, Rothenberg, Churillo, Weiler, & Campbell, 2016) or as a purposive self-constructed image to display physical attractiveness (McLean et
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