

‘Being on Trend’: Selfie as a Social Phenomenon

Ekaterina Orekh, Elena Bogomiagkova
St.-Petersburg State University

Abstract

The article analyzes the selfie as a social phenomenon. It considers theories in the field of social science that deal with this issue; reviews existing scientific approaches to the selfie and suggests criticism. Using the iconographic method (E. Panofsky) and visual discourse-analysis, we study visual content of a 200-picture random sample aiming to reveal the hidden rules of selfie's reproduction. As a result insights into the essence of selfie-taking as a social practice are offered, possible explanations of 2012-2016 selfie-boom are put forward. It is suggested that the selfie be viewed as a social practice that maintains an individual's social identity. The authors assume that the selfie popularity is caused by the convenient visual format of such communicative messages. Firstly, the visual format of the selfie explicates the main trend in the Western values (living a full life, experience strong emotions). Secondly, it allows for the active circulation of selfies on the internet: the visual pattern of photographed self-portraits facilitates reading and spreading those messages on the web.

1. Introduction

Rapid development of information technologies in the last decades has led to the emergence of new forms of communication: computer-mediated communication is becoming increasingly important in people's life; traditional social groups are being replaced by social networks on the internet. Apart from exchanging text messages users try to express themselves, exhibit their physicality. This results in the growth of visual content: various images, graphic and photographic, professional and amateur, serious and photo fads, etc. A special niche is occupied by selfies – photographed self-portraits made with a cell-phone or a smart-phone camera and, as usual, spread in social media. In the last quarter of 2014, worldwide smart-phone subscriptions were up 20%, with fastest growth in underpenetrated markets such as China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Russia. As to what people are doing with those phones, Google reports that, in 2014, people took approximately 93 million selfies per day on just Android models alone [1].

Indeed, in the last five years we have seen selfies spreading actively in social media, and this practice is not yet losing its popularity. It is being facilitated

by the invention of new technical devices (e.g. selfie-sticks). Users not only take selfies themselves, but also react to self-portraits made by people they know and people they don't know personally (such as celebrities and popular media personalities) by means of liking, reposting and commenting. The selfie is becoming a part of modern life, its popularity not depending on sociocultural context and social stand of an individual: selfies are taken by teenagers and businessmen, residents of Brazilian favelas and women from Arab countries, presidents and popular singers.

Such excitement about selfies has been met by researchers in various fields: psychologists, social scientists, culture specialists and even philosophers. This phenomenon is regarded from different perspectives, but scholars still haven't established a common conventional opinion about the reasons of its popularity and are still trying to explain what exactly it is about selfies that attracts internet-users, why selfies are so wide-spread and what distinguishes this means of internet communication from many others. In the article we offer a view of selfies as a social practice and, based on the methods of modern visual sociology, try to substantiate why it's so popular and what the essence of this phenomenon actually is.

2. Literature review

In our discourse about the phenomenon of selfies we invoke classical works on the nature of internet communication that raise the issue of the significance of virtual reality as a collective space shaping its participants, and introduce the concept of 'virtual personality'. With the internet turning to Web 3.0 version that implies mobility and high activity of users in content production and management, academic discourse is facing the questions about the character of the new forms of social existence and group identity, new ways of communication that appear as a result of this transition. Works by J. Walther provide insight into the issues of 'digital body' and 'digital face' as he wrote about potentially greater control of representation in computer-mediated communication in comparison to the face-to-face communication [2].

Control effect emerges owing to the asynchronous character of communication, which enables collocutors to have some time for

considering and altering their images. Virtual identity is becoming an area of choice, a result of conscious constructing by an individual of their image with the help of textual, multimedia and visual methods. As researchers observe, exchange of textual information on the web is decreasing, whereas circulation of visual images, produced and consumed easier due to mobile phones getting equipped with cameras, is on the rise. The fact that visual means of virtual communication are growing in significance may be illustrated with such an increasingly popular medium as Instagram.

Some researchers state that the main function of photography of the 'analog era', which serves as means of memory preservation, is no longer significant. Its leading functions nowadays are the communication as well as the shaping of the personality [3].

In the last five years selfies have become one of the most popular means of virtual communication. Problems of novel photo practices as well as selfie boom are of genuine interest in the academic community. There's a massive development of the theories substantiating the nature of this phenomenon, a broad range of empirical research of the practices of its production and consumption, perception and evaluation.

Existing interpretations of the selfie present it as assemblage of diverse elements [4], as a social practice, or as a cultural artefact [1]. Researchers come to conclusions about the role of the selfie in the processes of social activism and opposition to the existing order, about sociocultural and group differences in practices of using and spreading selfies. Selfies circulated not only within a pair, but also from many to many, transform classical ideas of view (in particular, men's view) [5]. There are interesting studies that point out to the divergence in the opinions of social groups concerning acceptability of self-presentation methods used in selfies (i.e. what men or women, teenagers and the elderly should look like, how conventional masculinity should be expressed etc.).

Let's sum up the essence of the key definitions of the selfie given by Western scientists. Firstly, here we observe a full range of interpretations of the nature and popularity of this phenomenon based on psychological traits of its creators. To start with, the conception of narcissism is applied that presents the selfie as a product of human self-admiration, its new level of development. Some researchers agree with the idea but not with the term: they reject the word 'narcissism' and suggest that 'exhibitionism' should be used instead [6]. Empirical data sometimes prove and sometimes refute the connection between practicing selfie-taking and personal traits associated with narcissism. The theme of gender, age and racial differences in selfie practices is being actively developed in the context of 'self-admiration'. For

instance, researchers have found that selfie practice among women is not bound with narcissism-associated traits (vanity, leadership, search for adoration), whereas there's such connection in the case of men: each of these indices suggests that a man who demonstrates it is prone to use selfies [7].

There are loosely psychological interpretations of the selfie – such as the conception of technological humanisation, which implies that people by means of their images adapt the world of technologies to make it 'habitable' [8], and the ideas of human tendency to 'falsify' the inner image of 'self', according to which the selfie is a convenient tool that is used to adjust one's appearance to the way one sees themselves [9].

Secondly, there's a group of theories about selfie associated with the development of technology as the reason for selfie boom. For instance, O. Schwarz writes that the new media prepared the ground for the transition from photographing others for personal consumption to photographing oneself for other people's consumption [10]. In addition, there is a conception, which emphasizes that the new technical opportunities changed the character of the social communication, and selfie is an inevitable outcome of spreading of the novel news format, since functions as news about oneself. What is more, the advocates of the visual communication succeeding consider selfie to be the best message exchange form because they are convinced that visual method of communication has much more chances to be understood in the web [11].

Both the first and the second groups of theories may easily be criticised for failing to take note of important aspects in the functioning of the selfie. Despite the fact that the concept of narcissism allows to predict involvement in selfie practices at the individual level, it does not explain, why selfie-boom started exactly in the 2010-s, not earlier: photographed self-portraits have been made for about half a century. This conception is criticized by social scientists of the activist kind, because presenting the selfie as a practice typical for narcissistic personalities triggers stigmatization of certain groups, for example, women and teenagers.

The idea of editing one's appearance in line with their inner representation of themselves falls short of explaining the huge variety of situations when selfies are made. The concept of 'humanized technologies' overlooks the fact that selfies are not so much stored on mobile-phones and smart-phones as circulated on the internet. Finally, all the attempts to describe selfie-boom as a consequence of modern media-technologies development - in particular, increasing spread of the internet, growing significance of visual images in communication, changing format of the news – give no explanation of the rise and persistence of the popularity of the selfie in contrast with other types of visual internet messages: e.g. demotivators, various photo fads (planking,

teapoting, pottering, hot dog legs etc.), rage comics etc. As a rule, all of them, except selfies, enjoy short-term popularity and soon give way to other types of visual messages.

A third group of theories that aim to explain the popularity of selfies may be identified. One of them regards this phenomenon in the context of 'consumer society' as a form of symbolic consumer behavior, an attempt to appropriate space and environment. In another theory the selfie along with other genres of photography is interpreted based on the ideas of anthropologist Christoph Wulf as a means of constructing an individual's group identity through mimesis (imitation) of group members [12]. This explanation is popular: for instance, the role of the selfie in maintaining group identity and constructing group and symbolic borders is discussed in a research by Boon and Petney [13]. The research shows that breast-feeding mothers, when taking selfies, try to comply with conventional ways of demonstrating one's own body, because alternative ways (e.g. those where the baby or feeding devices are shown) are perceived as breaking the borders of mother's role and therefore problematic.

Although social scientists' theories touch upon something that helps to understand the reason of the selfie spreading, the question of selfies' specific character in relation to other visual communicative internet genres (relevant to the second group of theories considered above) remains unanswered. In general, scientific interest towards the behavior of the modern online users provides several explanations of new ways of representation which are available as a result of the technology development. We attempt to answer the following questions in our research. How do the digital images differ from the previous ones? What are the ways of thinking about the world and oneself that emerged with the introduction of selfie? How does this perception of the world differ from the one people previously had?

In 2013, the Oxford dictionary recognized the word 'selfie' to be the word of the year and identified it as 'this self-portrait taken with a smartphone or webcam and posted on social networking site' [14]. The artistic tradition of self-portraiting could be dated back to the Renaissance period. Nevertheless, the production of such images before the technology development was common only for the wealthy, so it was available to the privileged class, who had an opportunity to picture themselves in order to make themselves recognized among the contemporaries as well as the descendants. After the introduction of the photography, portraits did not stop to be the symbol of higher social position, however, as making portraits became more widespread, it was no longer thought of as the practice available only to the elite, which led to changing the function of portraits.

Making photo self-portraits has more than 1,5 hundred history. Today there are a lot of attempts to trace back the history of first selfie on the internet. For instance, sometimes it is claimed that the first photographic self-portrait was created in 1850 by English art photographer and father of the photomontage Oscar Gustave Rejlander. Alternatively, American pioneer in photography Robert Hinnieser Cornelius is believed to be maker of the first known selfie in 1839. Interesting enough, that automatic photo booth created in 1889 was the first technological breakthrough which enabled taking photos without the photographer participation. The bright instance of these photographs is the series of portraits called "Russian Self-Portraits" which was the result of the three-days experiment conducted in Kiev by David Attie in 1977.

Possibilities that we have today thanks to our mobile-phone cameras are realized as a huge number of selfies. Today the range of the circumstances in which selfie are taken is endless: selfie on the funeral, selfie in the toilet, selfie with the homeless, selfie on any unusual background like the roof of the tall building or even in morgue setting with corpses.

Selfie taken on the funeral or in morgue are often considered to be inappropriate and constantly bring forth misunderstanding or even criticism of the person who took it. For example, Selfie with the prime-minister of the UK David Cameron and the former prime-minister of Denmark Helle Thorning-Schmidt, taken by Obama at the Mandela memorial service received a lot of negative commentary. A broad response and outrage among Russian-speaking bloggers was caused by a selfie made by two students from Novosibirsk, who photographed themselves against the background of corpses in a mortuary.

3. Research methodology

Studying the selfie most researchers apply such methods as interview, questionnaires, psychological tests, blog content analysis – in other words, they deal in some or another way with textual information. In this case, their attention is focused on, for example, means of argumentation used by participants themselves to substantiate selfie practices. Another body of data consists of notes, comments to selfies and even hashtags that can be used to find selfies on social media, such as Vkontakte or Instagram.

One more research method implies analysing viewers' perception and evaluation of selfies. Here the selfie is not the object of research itself, but the explication of people's notions of other social phenomena: femininity and masculinity, ethnic stereotypes, attitudes concerning acceptability of public demonstration. We hold the view that in order to understand the reasons of the wide spreading of

selfies and their special character textual information may not be sufficient, which implies turning to visual data. There are attempts made in some studies to address visual content, but these attempts are confined to content-analysis of face images with regard to such characteristics as gender, age and ethnicity. Such analysis leads to conclusions about, for instance, national and cultural features that define practices of making self-portraits in different countries [15].

The approach we suggest requires qualitative analysis of visual data. That is why we use a comparatively small selection, which does not have to be representative. We need a certain quantity of selfies not for the sake of counting elements in them, but to advance hypotheses of what unites those various self-portraits into a common type under the term 'selfies', whether common principles of constructing such images can be identified and, if they can, what kind of principles those are. In other words, we would like to describe the visual canon of the selfie and, based on it, formulate our own hypothesis of the reasons of the selfie popularity and the characteristics of this social practice.

In order to understand the essence of selfie as a message, we started to investigate selfies as virtual messages aiming to reveal the hidden rules of their reproduction. The analysis of random sample of 200 pictures, based on the search results for 'selfie' on the Yandex search engine in November – December of 2014, was performed using the iconographic method [16]. This technology, based on identifying the range of visual contexts where a certain image is placed made it possible to identify repeating themes and situations in which selfies are made. Next, we used the discourse-analysis of the visual information that helped to find and describe patterns present in constructing of a number of images, paid attention to repeated techniques of taking photos or the most typical characteristics of images such as the mood of the pictured people or the peculiarities of their poses. Having analyzed all the data received, we have arrived at the visual canon of the selfie, which means implicit rules of producing such images. Moreover, following the approach of analyzing the photograph as an action was rather beneficial [17]. We were aiming to understand what the authors of these selfies wanted to do by taking and posting this photo.

4. Discussion of results

Even the 200-photograph selection allowed us to see such diverse contexts people present themselves in that we can conclude – there haven't been specific situations that exclude selfie-taking, as well as no situations conducive to it to a greater degree than others. It means that describing contexts of selfie-taking we can't limit the scope of situations included therein to, for instance, only everyday-life situations,

or otherwise – solemn or unexpected events. Work or rest, any time of the day, indoor and outdoor environment, someone's presence and absence may all serve as a background.

The second important aspect that could be identified in the process of visual analysis of all the selected photographs is connected with technical limitations set by a medium – a mobile-phone or smart-phone camera. First, selfies were made from an arm's length distance and, as a rule, at a slant. Body proportions were therefore a little distorted, emphasis made on the upper part. The whole body could be shown only using a mirror – the way resorted to by many. Today, selfie-sticks have become a trend: they have widened the scope of selfie-taking possibilities, but haven't eliminated the specific features of body representation.

In comparison to 'old-fashioned' selfies today's ones have retained an important typical characteristic that influences a selfie perception by an onlooker. At the moment of pressing the button the eyes of the photographed are looking attentively at the smart-phone, which the selfie captures. As a result, we can see an interesting feature of such photo-representations: citing social semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen [18], a person in a selfie is not an object, but a full-fledged participant of the dialogue with the viewer. S/he is turned to us and looks active.

Even if a selfie shows someone at leisure or demonstrates a situation, which prompts relaxation or melancholy, the person in the photo doesn't look relaxed or detached at all. The specific character of selfie consists in the fact that one is presented not as a participant, but as a witness. This feature, a kind of frame for the comprehension of the image, makes the selfie similar to photo-based memes in which the code itself becomes the focus of attention. The sense of a selfie reveals itself in the exhibition of a face or body of the person who takes a photo of themselves as if saying: 'I've been here and seen it'.

The third conclusion stems from the analysis of emotions expressed in our selected photos. People in selfies do not always smile, but, at the same time, we can't find great emotional diversity here: self-portraits do not demonstrate sadness, withdrawal, inner turmoil or depression. Even if selfie is made in rather difficult condition (while being pursued by the bull or right after the plane crash), it never portrays people as dissatisfied or unhappy. It is explained by the fact that selfies are a kind of performance, a staging that doesn't allow anyone to oversee and depict the real state of a human soul. These photos prompt face-making, surprise-feigning, eye-rolling, lip-curling etc. – that is, deliberately constructing emotions with an aim to impress future viewers. There are no real feelings in such photos, but mere demonstration. Performativity is greatly important in

this case, because it leads us to the sense of the selfie as a kind of social practice.

Based on three above-mentioned ideas and taking into account thematic diversity of selfies, we can describe the feature of the selfie visual canon. Emphasizing non-reflexive rules of photographed self-portraits production it can be stated that a selfie implies informing people of the fact that its author has become a witness or a participant of some event. Here the semantic emphasis is placed on the author's participation; s/he is presented as an active person, the context or the event serving as a background only. This means that a selfie gives a possibility to demonstrate, that its author lives an interesting life full of exciting events. The main idea of the selfie taken at the funeral is that its author lives in the very stream of life and funeral is actually one of many events to come. Picturing the funeral is unique because it is not full of sorrow, loss pain as it is typical of the traditional way of picturing it since the purpose of the message is different.

It is vital to outline that one of the most significant traits of selfie is to be shared by the means of social media so that they are widely available almost for everybody. Self-portraits and avatars get signs of social approval called 'likes', which reflect the correspondence of socially-accepted norms and personal lifestyle presented on the Internet by the selfie-taker. If the image were not positively assessed by 'friends', in other words, if it did not get many likes, this means that the person who posted it is not fully socially integrated. Despite the fact that the picture could be 'liked' by a 'friend' even if he or she does not find it attractive but sympathy with its owner, it should be socially-acceptable anyway. Likes, comments, number of views combine social capital of the modern users. Sometimes likes help to define the borders of the group, they seem to form a link between the members of the group as well as to be the means of the group identity.

In the light of the visual canon described above and the analysis of selfie-spreading practices on the internet, we can now draw a conclusion about the social significance of this phenomenon. The key answer is to treat selfie as the action or visual statement, which aims to confirm social identity. So, people make selfies in order to fix and represent themselves in socially acceptable manner to others so that they can get desired recognition, inclusion and approval.

In his book 'Camera Lucida' Roland Barthes states that 'In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art' [19]. As it is clear from this quote, the second image-repertoire plays significant part when it comes to selfie because it demonstrates how the person wants to be perceived

by others. Taking selfie is not about constructing oneself but about creating social identity of a person. Thus, selfie could be considered to be the form of performance in the society.

Analyzing thematic variety of selfies we can make an assumption that today the essence of social conventions expressed in selfies is demonstrating to others that one 'lives a full life'. It means to be trendy, cool (in other words interesting, attention worthy, good-humored and buoyant simultaneously) and sexy as well as being at the center of events. On the whole, people who make self-portraits demonstrate socially approved behavior (such as being active, sociable and etc.), but sometimes the pursuit of making unique picture results in crossing socially-acceptable norms and taking selfies that are no longer appropriate. The example of selfie taken in morgue by two students in Novosibirsk is the perfect illustration of this idea since they just wanted to show how exciting their live was by having taken it [20]. On the basis of our analysis it can be presumed that rapid growth in the quantity of selfies in the last four years testifies to the prevalence of the above-mentioned values in the society and high demand for them.

Indeed, concentration on the expression function of selfie helps to consider the role of the elements, which provide the similarity of the visual messages in the web. The monopoly on the production of mass information is in the past so today everyone is capable of replicating and translating created messages. Intensification of the information flows as well as the necessity to recognize, decode and then code again big amount of information results in the variety of message templates available on the Internet. In fact, replicating the messages by strongly relying on the template is in trend. Prototyping is ensured by the standards of the photo composition. Unification is the key answer for quick recognizing reading and internalizing of the message in case of the growing amount of information which is to be read and assessed.

All things considered, the model or template could be found in most of the Internet communication genres such as rage comics, demotivators, and even the Internet mems. For better understanding, one could draw an analogue between the template and Erving Goffman's concept of frame, which provides certain view and interpretation of the events. This mechanism is similar to the template of the message. Of course, the ability of standardizing is up-to-date in the modern world on the grounds that a human has to read and analyze a lot of information in everyday life. 'Cookie-cut' images circulated in online communities may be regarded as a kind of thesaurus providing for mutual understanding between communication participants.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we explore the possibility of analyses of self-portraits in the social networks, in order to provide the scientific view on the fascination with new computer practices like selfie and reject the moralistic judgments about the nowadays computer users state of intellectual abilities while taking into consideration the ways of information spreading as well as obtaining social support and approval. In making selfie, the traditional function of photos such as the preservation of memories of oneself at certain moment or memories of the social circles together with situations is no longer important. Moreover, identification function of a picture is of fundamental importance, namely, obtaining social approval for the external qualities, imagination, compliance with standards of living, which are considered to be valuable and correct (for instance, geographic mobility, availability of exclusive places and things, originality).

Notably, social researchers always have paid attention to how heavily the images taken with the camera rely on certain patterns of production, so today's stream of similar faces and bodies in photographs is in some way a natural consequence of 'trivialization' of technology. It is interesting to note that the patterning is not typical to the verbal communication but the body language.

Summing up the results, it can be concluded that the importance of academic attention towards everyday practices online self-representations is crucial. Moreover, new type of 'action man' could be understood through the Construction of the new image, and, on the contrary, confirmation of identity by means of images as well as physicality presented in online rituals.

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