Selfie taking: is there a socio-cultural risk ?

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The term selfie is now no more novel and nor is the phenomenon any more a fad, as was once presumably so. Selfie taking has increasingly become a habitual practice for many on a day to day practice. Though selfies make up 30% of the photos taken by people aged 18-24 years, selfies have become a global phenomenon seen in all age groups and may compose 60-70% of photos in many [1]. In 2012 Time magazine declared "selfie" one of the top 10 buzzwords of the year and in 2013 the Oxford English Dictionary gave it the honour of Word of the Year. The latest understanding of selfie is in terms of economy- how much worth does your selfie hold? The selfie economy is healthily thriving with worth going up to as much as Rs. 18 lakhs depending on your popularity (including non-celebrity) and social media presence [2].

Selfie is not the only raging phenomenon but the selfie terminology as relevant existing work also finds space in daily usage. The terminology includes words like- pelfie (pet selfie), belfie (butt selfie), felfie (funeral selfie), drelfie (drunk selfie), helfie (hair selfie), shelfie (picture of bookshelf), welfie (work-out selfie), ussie (group selfie), youfie (selfie of another person) and wealth-fie (rich-person selfie). This is coupled with the emergence of selfie points in various parts of the city of Mumbai and other metros that add fuel to the selfie movement [3].

Selfies are the new means of self-representation or self-expression and primarily a means to share about oneself with others and stay connected with them. However, with social media slowly creeping in every day functioning, selfies have grown to become an important part of self-identity, they carry specific messages of self-impression and have found to be associated with various psychological phenomenon on the spectrum of self.

Some reported reasons that explain why people click selfies include- staying connected with people, getting rid of boredom, boosting self-esteem, gaining attention on social media and grabbing the general limelight. Additionally, some people also report feeling validated after posting selfies online, a reason that blends with the concept of low self-confidence as posting selfies online may help quell primitive egos and quench personal insecurities [3]. The reasons for selfie taking behaviour can be attributed to, various antecedents like- people deriving satisfaction after posting selfies, some feeling insecure after taking selfies, some have the need to feel accepted and their routine is complete after having posted a selfie, while others also share having had a negative experience with selfie posting. Selfie taking has also been discussed as an obsessive behaviour where the urge to click selfie is on multiple occasions in a single day. Obsessive selfie taking may also have biological evidence [4]. Studies have shown a surge in dopamine levels while receiving feedback information from others and behaviours relating to selfie-taking like uploading content online, which has been strongly related to activities in the sympathetic nervous system, further enhancing social communication while eliminating loneliness. In conclusion, though selfies are meant to connect people, they are instead increasing the divide and isolating individuals. This directly contradicts the central idea of social media which was initially aimed at building rapport with each other and not decreasing intimacy in relationships.

Different platforms of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, Snapchat and Instagram, help selfie uploaders to gain access to opinions, judgements, appraisals, approval, criticism and at times, cynicism of other individuals which provides an opportunity for them to further enhance their self-image and identities. This idea reflects the psychological concept of the "looking glass self" where in self-perception develops on the perceptions of the people whom we interact with [5]. The frailty and frugality of this practice is that modern youth have begun to feel that their best, singled out selfie is the perfect representation of their online and offline selves. They have become indifferent to the fact that they actually view themselves and others via selfies in virtual media, allowing them to create infinite versions of themselves, while in reality the actual self remains the same. Immediate responses and reactions to selfies on social media leads people to crave further for approval and this sort of validation strengthens perceptions of physical attractiveness. Social media helps us to view selfies uploaded by others, putting us in a virtual competition, comparing ourselves to others and combating with their needs to be noted, appreciated and recognized. They also fall prey to the temptation of doctoring their selfies by using software, filters and programs that accentuate desired features. Further, what is crucial to note is that, people bring in these complains in therapy sessions in the form of- "I don't feel I am that great as a person because people don't really like me on social media", "I feel sceptical to upload on social media because people make a judgement about me" and "I don't know who I am because I am so used to being someone else on social media but my real life is so different". As practitioners, the work is then to develop the sense of self (esteem, identity and confidence) by helping people to unlearn their virtual identities and grow more accepting towards their real identities. It is a must to practice that social media platforms must not be the only source of validation- one must learn to understand the real divide between virtual media and reality.

It can be troublesome if repeated selfie-taking provides fodder to pre-existing narcissistic tendencies in an individual. It is agreed upon by many mental health professionals that obsessive selfie-taking can co-occur with other mental disorders. This has triggered many to point fingers at the millennials (current generation), who being overly self-absorbed individuals as "Generation Me", may have grown up with narcissistic traits, lacking human warmth and connection. This has been a subject of current research that point in its favour. The average millennial will spend about 2 to 4 hours a week on selfie-taking. A majority of 55% of all millennials post selfies as opposed to the mere 24% of the previous generation. Millennials are often associated with the concept of "quantified self" as they allow themselves to be dependent on numbers i.e. the number of likes, comments, approvals, disapprovals, followers and reposts or shares. Research discourses often discuss links between selfie and mental states such as narcissism, body dysmorphia and psychosis. Ever since the rise of selfie taking, mental health professionals have reported increased rates of complaints of dissatisfaction with body image, several plastic surgeons also reported increased cases of surgery with demands in perfection of how people appear [6].
Scientific literature also delineated on links between selfie and other psychopathological facets like psychopathy, self-objectification and Machiavellianism. There are further links with variables like lack of self-esteem, self-validation, isolation, concept of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and being self-absorbed and vacuous [7]. Back in 2016, the American Psychological Association coined the term 'selfitis', a deviant behaviour, indicating it to be an illness that could be graded at three severity levels- however, selfitis did not classify as an official diagnosis.

Curiously, the importance of facial expression has been a Darwinian phenomenon and it is worth ascertaining whether selfies are helping human beings re-evolve themselves. In an attempt to be self-empowered, millennials explain their over-use of social media and selfies as a technique to portray themselves positively. The idea behind this may also be to shatter the illusions of an overly demanding society which is filled with expectations of utopian body images to be displayed through self-portraits. With their lives rooted in a digital world, it shouldn't be surprising to witness millennials using the internet in different ways to manifest their thoughts and ideas, even if it is in the form of selfies. The millennials are born in an age of technology and advancement, where childhoods were wrapped around electronic devices and this 'digital nativeness' serves for their impenitent use of digital and social media. It would be deemed unfair to reduce this generation to merely one undergoing a 'selfie insurgency' [8].

An interesting aspect of selfie taking also trickles down to the expression of social identities and in garnering social support. It is not uncommon to see social media campaigns that invoke support on the basis of creating a culture that approves selfie-taking as an act of nobility and bolstering support for a cause. Another dimension that selfies also are a medium for is that of breaking gender stereotypes where people use the power of selfie sharing to come out with their gender and sexual orientations in order to secure support for the same. More than sensational, selfies have been a powerful tool to break stereotypes and social dogmas to give birth to a wave of newer identities and diversity. People pose for political selfies, joke selfies, sports-related selfies, fan-related selfies, illness-related selfies, soldier selfies, crime-related selfies, selfies at funerals, or selfies at places like museums- are behaviours that can be psychoanalytically explained based on what people believe themselves to be doing and what response they hope to elicit. Yet another use of selfies has been an ever-increasing use of selfies for the purpose of 'sexting' which is a nascent, virtual means of establishing pleasurable relationships.

From a socio-cultural standpoint, the dilemma is where to draw the line between healthy and unhealthy behaviour of selfie-taking and evaluating the influence on various innocent target audiences. People must be educated about selfie control and healthy practices of selfie taking to avoid the gradient of addiction. It is coupled with posting the selfie photographs on social networking sites. Further they are waiting for comments and opinions of friends and others. This has led to a chain of reactions leading to a complex addiction disorder which we may easily be called as Selfie addiction disorder or Selfie syndrome.

Selfie related deaths in India

Researchers from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences last year found that about half of the 259 reported selfie deaths and accidents between 2011 and 2017 occurred in India. Behind India, other countries with the most selfie-related deaths included Russia, the United States and Pakistan. The majority of the so-called "killfies" the researchers identified were caused by drowning, being hit by a train or car, or falling from a great height. But they said the total number of deaths could actually be much higher, as many cases go unreported and "death by selfie" isn't recognized as an official cause of death [9].

Death by selfie since 2017

- A 28-year-old man who snuck into a wildlife colony to take selfies with an elephant, and was subsequently trampled to death
- A man and an 11-year-old boy who were electrocuted while taking selfies on top of a train
- A couple visiting California who fell to their deaths off an overlook at Yosemite National Park
- Three men crushed to death by a speeding train as they were taking selfies on the tracks in the Indian state of Karnataka
- Two teenagers who drowned in the Tapi river after losing their balance while taking selfies and falling into the water

The authors (AD & PL) are presently working to understand the current trends of selfie taking as a behavior among the youth, with a pilot under process for Selfie-taking Scale. Though there haven't been direct links between psychopathological states and selfie taking, in concordance, there have been several sociological explanations that deny the link between selfie and mental illness, claiming that selfie taking is a normal phenomenon that individuals engage in. however, it remains quintessential to underline the use of selfie as a means of merely bridging communication and not making it the only one. It is a need of the hour to integrate the societies with humane communication networks versus isolating them under the cover of comfortable virtual communications

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