What The #SelfieRevolution Means for Brands

Understanding the psychology behind the behavior to inform consumer campaigns

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Author: Olga Kraineva
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OVERVIEW

There is not a hotter photo phenomenon right now than the Selfie. Every day millions of us take photos of ourselves and post them for the world to see. Why do we do it and how do brands capitalize on this trend are the two questions Olga Kraineva, account executive at Omnicom agency Fanscape/The Marketing Arm, sought to answer in this White Paper. Olga poured through hundreds of articles and interviewed countless sources and what she found was that psychological human patterns inspire us to take these self-centric photos and discerning brands can benefit from this knowledge. But while this understanding can be used to help engage consumers for marketing campaigns, if misused, this can backfire and stray significantly from the desired result.

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We hope you enjoy.

Thanks!

Larry Weintraub
Fanscape / The Marketing Arm
INTRODUCTION TO THE SELFIE

What Is A Selfie?

The Selfie concept is simple: take a photo of yourself, share it on your social networks, wait for feedback, rinse and repeat. Thanks to the proliferation of mobile technology combined with the popularity of social media apps like Snapchat and Instagram, the behavior of “snapping a Selfie” is easier than ever before. Featured in the millennials’ anthem “Lemme Take a Selfie” and named Oxford Dictionaries 2013 Word of the Year, the “Selfie” is a full fledged cultural phenomenon. Enter the #SelfieRevolution.

Brands are jumping on the Selfie-taking bandwagon as well; by December of 2013, 207 brands ran Selfie contests on Facebook and 781 contests on Twitter – a huge jump from the 13 and 252, respectively, at the beginning of the year. This growth is just the tip of the #SelfieRevolution iceberg for the brand world in terms of potential consumer engagement.

Our mission here is to explore the psychology of why people take and share Selfies, and how brands can better align themselves with this naturally occurring behavior to strengthen brand-consumer relationships.

Deep Dive Into Selfies

What has triggered this recent surge in Selfie taking? It can be argued that the Selfie dates back to the very first self-portraits painted on cave walls, but let’s fast forward to the more recent Flickr and MySpace era of the early 2000’s. To share a Selfie took effort, we would stand in front of a mirror or blindly face the Cannon/Nikon/Sony camera’s lens toward ourselves, shooting multiple times in hopes of netting a single usable image. Next would be uploading the images onto computers and onto the Internet for the world to see. Today, in only a matter of seconds, our Selfie comes to life as we use our smartphone to snap a picture with a front-facing, multi-megapixel camera, add a filter for artistic effect, and upload instantly to any number of preferred social platforms.
With such ease, and a perceived cost of zero, we’re creating Selfies at an unprecedented rate. As of March 2014, 313 million Selfies have been uploaded under the hashtags #me and #selfie onto Instagram, and Snapchat claims that of the 400 million photos shared daily, the majority are Selfies.

So who’s guilty of sharing all these Selfies? To answer this question, investigative website SelfieCity (http://www.selfiecity.com) analyzed over 120,000 Instagram images from five global cultural hubs: Berlin, New York, Sao Paulo, Bangkok, and Moscow. The study determined that the median age of the Selfie taker is 24 and that women share Selfies more than men. However, one must realize that this can be skewed as the study took these photos from Instagram alone, where over 90% of the platform’s users are under the age of 35.

**Selfie Takers**

People who take Selfies can be grouped into two categories: the *Chronic Abuser* or the *Occasional Poster*. Chronic Abusers take Selfies multiple times a day. In one recent and extreme case, a UK teenager was hospitalized for Selfie OCD after snapping over 200 photos of himself a day. The Occasional Poster, meanwhile, tends to only snap a Selfie when the occasion presents itself to be favorable – such as sharing a great experience or simply having no one available to take the photo for them. Lev Manovich, SelfieCity’s project coordinator, says there is no constant thread between why people take Selfies. Whereas some people take them to look good in front of their networks, others share to show what they are doing at a given time.
In “Truth, Lies, and Advertising,” author Jon Steel writes that it is important to “reach a deeper understanding of the way [consumers] think, feel, and behave; and then use those observations and discoveries … to begin to build a relationship with them.” In order for brands to create compelling marketing campaigns around Selfies, it is important to understand the human drives of **narcissism**, **self-expressionism**, and **validation** that fuel the desire behind the behavior.

### Narcissism

Narcissism has been defined as “excessive interest in oneself and one’s physical appearance.” Selfies embody this definition, as the tendency to take and retake photos “until we can produce an image that comes closer to matching our perception of what we think we look like” feeds our desire to project our best self to others.

Jennifer Chen, strategy director at social media agency Fanscape, claims, “A big incentive for people to post and share Selfies is due to the instant gratification and envy-inducing tendencies of posting glorified snapshots of your life.” One 26-year-old female noted that she posts Selfies as a, “Hey, look how hot I look with my new hairstyle … I do, however, expect my good friends and family to like my pics!” This expectation and almost demand for positive affirmation is a testament to why this behavior can be addicting, and so popular.

### Self-Expressionism

While this demand for positive affirmation may seem alarming, Birmingham graduate trainee Rebecca Brown counters, “People think if you take pictures of yourself, you’re self-obsessed … not necessarily. A Selfie is a format and a platform to share who you are.” Selfies can be seen as an exploration of self and a fulfillment of the need to see yourself as others perceive you. “There is a primal human urge to stand outside of ourselves and look at ourselves,” said Clive Thompson, author of “Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better.”

Learning about yourself goes hand-in-hand with self-expression, as you become what you share. Manovich describes taking a Selfie as projecting to others a statement of “This is me at this point in time … This self-photography may be
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indicative of a whole new photography movement and a way for individual self-expression.”

For one 30-year-old journalist, Selfies are an expression of how she views herself. “I love my work so part of it is me saying, ‘Look at what I get to do today.’” Selfies enable us to learn more about ourselves and then project to the outside world the moments we capture and believe to be the best examples of who we are. Through all these photo moments, we are building an ever-growing memory book for ourselves and future generations.

Validation

The last and arguably strongest need to post Selfies is to fulfill our deep psychological need for validation and acceptance from our peers. Fast Company Associate Editor John Paul Titlow argues, “In today’s age people care more about what they look like and social acceptance comes only when the outside world accepts the way we look, even more so than the work we do, or the way we behave face-to-face.” Through the connectivity of the Internet, this kind of community affirmation can be instantaneous – and addicting.

A 54-year-old man claims that when he takes Selfies, he hopes to elicit a reaction. In The Week’s article, “Why We Take Selfies,” the author cites, “Our brains process visuals faster, and we are more engaged when we see faces. If you’re looking at a whole page of photos, the ones you will notice are the close-ups and Selfies.” This feeds into the cycle of posting selfies for attention and affirmation, as those are the photos most likely to receive engagement, leading to a feeling of acceptance by your digital/social communities.

Chronic Selfie posters most likely are driven by validation, needing outside affirmation for their own self-appearance, and are more likely to have self-esteem issues.
Photos are the preferred way for people to share information via social networks. Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram see daily photo shares at 400MM, 350MM, and 56MM respectively. \(^{xx}\) Jenna Wortham of *The New York Times* sees a preference for “online conversations and interactions that revolve around images and photos, [being] more effective at conveying a feeling or reaction than text.” \(^{xxi}\)

Brands tasked with telling a visually-appealing story that relates to the consumer must create content that is compelling enough to be “thumb-stopping.” Aside from Selfies becoming a cultural phenomenon among millennials, images with faces create stronger reactions, lending credence to the supposition that brands that use Selfies will see greater engagement.

### Millennials + Instagram

SelfieCity’s research pointed to millennials as the largest proliferators of Selfies. Brands that are hungry to engage with this audience may want to turn to photo-based social platforms like Instagram, which an L2 and Olapic report names, “the [type of] social network that has seen the fastest growth, most engagement, and highest conversion from browser to shopper.” \(^{xxii}\)

### Native Engagement

Consumers crave content that is an extension of their natural environment and not an outright marketing ploy. The rise of native advertising, defined by Wikipedia as “an online advertising method in which the advertiser attempts to gain attention by providing content in the context of the user’s experience,” is due to the consumer’s ability to scrutinize and demand higher quality content relevant to their interests. Consumers have begun to own brand and product conversations at a level previously unseen, \(^{xxiii}\) causing the traditional one-way message model to morph into a very active two-way dialogue that forces transparency and heightened customer service. If properly utilized, the Selfie can offer a brand the opportunity to create native and authentic engagement that humanizes the brand.
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By embracing insight data on who’s taking Selfies and why, brands can create campaigns that authentically take advantage of this cultural phenomenon. In a recent report, Buzz Marketing Group states, “The real winners in millennial marketing will understand how important it is to this demographic to have ‘once in a lifetime’ experiences.” xxiv Brands that create experiences for the consumer that tap into the previously cited psychological characteristics of narcissism, self-expressionism, and validation will have an edge.

Brand Examples

Under Armour

Under Armour’s “What is Beautiful” campaign (http://whatsbeautiful.ua.com/) inspires anyone who is training, amateur and professional athlete alike, to go on a journey with others around the country by sharing and documenting their training experience. Selfies are a natural fit for this campaign, as many people are already part of the “fitspiration” movement, documenting their workout progress and sharing the journey with their social networks.

Melissa Taylor, SVP of Account Management at The Marketing Arm states that often when there is a promotion, consumers are not participating because they are predisposed to be heavily invested in the brand. However, “utilizing a smart promotion strategy you can execute something that is so meaningful, or the process is powerful, that it compels the consumer to truly be invested in the campaign, therefore driving interest and investment around the brand. xxv Tom Edwards, senior vice president of digital strategy and innovation at The Marketing Arm, states, “documenting personal progress through a Selfie, for the right brand, can align with the brand’s persona, thus creating something even deeper than awareness – authenticity.” xxvi Under Armour succeeded through aligning natural phenomena with their brand in an authentic, community-building way.
GoPro

GoPro, like Under Armour, does a good job of capitalizing on Selfie self-expression. “Our entire company’s mission is to make it easy to self-document and share life’s experiences and look good doing it,” xxvii said GoPro Digital Marketing Manager Kevin Platshon. For GoPro, a Selfie campaign aligns with the brand’s mission and offers users a compelling way to engage and capture the shots that people want to share with their networks. Huffington Post Journalist Molly Fosco explains, “content that is shared and then re-shared among someone’s networks is content that incites emotion, offers value, facilitates a connection, is one-of-a-kind, or says something about the person sharing the content.” xxviii

Denny’s

But what about companies where a Selfie promotion may not seem as obvious as one related to lifestyle brands like Under Armour and GoPro? Who would have thought that Denny’s would strike digital marketing gold with the #DennysSelfie Tumblr campaign? The brand honed in on millennial needs and wants, such as an affinity for humor, to embody the brand in a way that was funny and, more importantly, made people want to go to the restaurant. The campaign then encouraged fans to tag their trips to Denny’s with #DennysSelfie for a chance to be reposted onto Denny’s Tumblr blog. As a result, Denny’s has had a constant stream of content, with hundreds of thousands of Selfies posted from fans since the campaign launched in 2013.xxix Edwards applauds this smart approach, as now “the consumer lives the truth for the brand and pushes the message for the brand on its behalf.” xxx
A Cautionary Tale

Brands should be aware of the dark side of the Selfie, especially when those posting are seeking self-validation due to low self-esteem. Where there is a post, there is often a comment. Dove, a company known for driving body love of all shapes and sizes since the launch of its Campaign for Real Beauty in 2004, recently launched a selfie-focused extension to the campaign, which centered on driving attention to the notion of cyberbullying. Knowing that body and self-esteem issues often stem from mothers, Dove encouraged middle-school aged girls and their mothers to take Selfies, which were then printed, posted in a gallery as an art exhibition, and asked to be commented on by others. xxxi Unanimously positive, these comments increased the confidence of both the younger and older generation participants, who were shown that what they might consider to be unattractive could actually be qualities envied by others.

Additionally, online privacy and data permanence are serious issues for brands to consider when creating and executing Selfie programs. Children under the age of 13 have their own special legal protections for online privacy and sharing. If brands are targeting consumers under the age of 18, they need to consider the circumstances, and plan for the additional legal hurdles that would come with using a 16-year-old’s selfie for their campaign.

According to USC Annenberg Professor Burghardt Tenderich, “There will probably always be a legal barrier to marketing, and a delay of what they will allow in relation to how quickly the industry is moving.” xxxii This is an important consideration for brands that must navigate their own internal structure for authorizing Selfie-related campaigns.
For brands to leverage the #SelfieRevolution in a smart way that activates and excites the consumer in 2014 and beyond, they will need to consider and focus on the following:

- Deep emotional truths behind why people take Selfies
- The shift to native advertising
- Impact and opportunities that lie within mobile technology

**Deep Emotional Truths Behind Why We Take Selfies**

For brands to be truly respected and engage with the consumer when using Selfies for campaigns, they must create value for the consumer. This comes first with understanding Selfie-takers’ psychological drives of narcissim, self-expressionism, and validation. The Marketing Arm’s Taylor states, “If you can provide consumers some utility and a better expression of self, and tap into how to better express the self that people want to project to others in social media, then you’ve tapped into something that is powerful and shareable.”xxxiii

**The Shift To Native Advertising**

There are native possibilities for brands to utilize Selfies. Technology apps that can identify influencers already advocating for a brand within an existing platform – and then aligning those influencers in a natural way with the brand’s message – can prove incredibly effective.

**Impact and Opportunities That Lie Within Mobile Technology**

The front-facing camera smartphone and mobile-centric social media apps like Instagram and Snapchat are where the Selfie has bred and fostered a movement. Mobile and Selfies go hand-in-hand, and brands must focus their social marketing efforts with a mobile-first mentality.
CONCLUSION

On a macro level, the Selfie phenomenon is a testament to the impact of technology on our lives. On a micro level, Selfies highlight certain psychological and emotional truths within us. Brands who will win the #SelfieRevolution will take both the sociological and psychological foundations into consideration to create smart, authentic campaigns that make sense and add value for the consumer. Brands that simply climb onto the bandwagon without diving deeper may end up looking like the uninvited and unwanted guests at the party.

While the effectiveness of the Selfie as part of a brand’s marketing strategy in three, six, or twelve months remains to be seen, the psychological drives that compel us to snap a Selfie have been around for ages, and will not be going away anytime soon.

ABOUT

The Marketing Arm Digital and Fanscape Social have been leading social, mobile, and content marketing for sixteen years. Our mission is always to help our clients reach and activate consumers and influencers to foster positive word-of-mouth sentiment about their products. Our expert marketers have insight-driven and in-depth understanding of consumer behaviors and are driven to increase our clients’ brand identification, share-of-voice, and sales.

For additional information, visit www.fanscape.com, our blog www.digitallyapproved.com and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Tumblr, and LinkedIn.

Contact: Larry Weintraub | LarryW@fanscape.com | (310) 754-2830
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