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Insight into the motivation of selfie postings: impression management and self-esteem

Impression
management
and
self-esteem

1879

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media enables consumers to regularly express themselves in a variety of ways. Selfie-postings are the new tool for self-presentation, particularly among millennials. The purpose of this paper is to identify the motivations associated with selfie-postings among female millennials.

Design/methodology/approach – The exploratory study consisted of 15 in-depth interviews with women who were 19-30 years of age. The analysis of data was facilitated by an iterative constant comparison method between data, emerging concepts and extant literature.

Findings – Textual analysis reveals impression management to be pivotal in understanding the consumer selfie-posting process. Other sub-themes include happiness and physical appearance. In addition, self-esteem was revealed as a motivator and an outcome.

Research limitations/implications – The study was limited to females who were 19-30 years of age. Future research should include males and a wider age group and focus on empirical testing of the identified themes.

Practical implications – This research sheds light on the motivation and outcomes associated with selfie-postings. Implications for marketers and advertisers include a better understanding of how to engage consumers to post content in the form of selfies with brands and products.

Originality/value – This paper fulfils an identified need to explore the growing trend of selfie-postings and contributes to academic literature in consumer behavior by identifying the motivations of selfie-postings.

Keywords Motivation, Selfie, Online consumer behavior, Self-presentation

Paper type Research paper



Selfie is a word that has transformed social culture. At the 86th Academy Awards in 2014, host Ellen DeGeneres' celebrity group selfie was retweeted more than 37 million times worldwide and thought to be worth approximately \$1 bn in potential advertising dollars (Richford, 2014). Reality star and businesswoman Kim Kardashian has published a book, *Selfish*, filled with her personal selfies and has posted 18 selfies, within

a 24-hour period, on her Instagram account with more than 40 million followers. CNN.com posts 25 unique selfies each week from around the world. The word “selfie” has even been added to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, defined as “an image of oneself taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks” (Gilbert, 2014).

The selfie has become a popular and common tool for self-presentation on social media platforms. Selfies allow users to express themselves via images visible to friends and strangers, depending on their social media settings. Consumers post millions of selfies each day to social media sites, like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In particular, women of 16-25 years of age spend five hours a week taking selfies and post an average of three selfies a day (Matyszczyk, 2015). A search of #selfie on the photo-sharing app Instagram resulted in almost 300 million selfie images. According to a report by *Selfiecify*, female millennials are more likely to post selfies than their male counterparts (Williams, 2014). However, extant work has yet to examine the motivation for selfie-postings.

The purpose of this work is to identify the motivation of female millennials who post selfies. To explore this objective, a total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted. Findings reveal impression management as an overarching theme in understanding why female millennials post selfies. Specifically, findings showed that informants were motivated to convey the impression of the following two sub-themes:

- (1) happiness; and
- (2) physical appearance.

Findings also demonstrated that informants would post genuine and non-genuine selfie posts to manage their desired impressions. Additionally, findings revealed self-esteem to play an integral role in understanding selfie-posting behavior. Specifically, informants were motivated to post selfies to enhance their self-esteem, which occurs through the number of “likes” the selfie receives. Findings also revealed that the number of “likes” could detrimentally impact self-esteem. Thus, self-esteem is both a motivator and outcome of selfie-posting. This work contributes to the literature on self-presentation and impression management in the digital world. Although prior work has examined consumer motivation and participation in blogging and personal websites, this work is among the first to contribute to the literature stream on the motivation of selfie-postings.

The paper is organized as follows. First, a brief review of the relevant literature is discussed, followed by a description of the methods, analysis, conceptual model and key findings. The paper concludes with a discussion and summary of the findings.

Relevant literature

Self-presentation, refers to any behavior that conveys an image about oneself to another individual (Benoit, 1997). Self-presentation involves not only individuals’ attempts to manage the impressions of others but also their efforts to control impressions of themselves (Greenwald and Breckler, 1985). Work in self-presentation can be traced to Goffman (1956) who discussed the importance of self-presentation for defining the individual’s position within a social order, for setting the direction and tone of an interaction and for facilitating the performance of role-governed behavior. Much of Goffman’s work concentrated on external factors – from other people that are

“impressed” on the individual (Goffman, 1956, p. 45), as opposed to inner psychological factors symbolic in social interaction. Further, he asserted that the presentation of the self is contextual, based on a particular setting and a definable and expected audience. He found a connection between people’s daily lives and theatrical performances, with individuals controlling and guiding how they are perceived by others and how others interact to obtain information about the individuals. Consumers present their “selves” daily, as they select clothing, outfits, hairstyles and brands to express the “self” in a specific context (i.e. theatre, sporting event). While traditionally research has focused on self-presentations in the form of face-to-face interactions, many consumers now engage in self-presentation online. However, the work is lacking in understanding self-presentation on this new digital platform.

Prior work has suggested that personal websites and internet offer consumers a new channel for self-presentation (Belk, 2013; Dominick, 1999; Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). Extant work has demonstrated motives for personal website creation, including a communication tool to reach friends and strangers (Schau and Gilly, 2003), social connectedness (Zinkhan *et al.*, 1999), self-realization (Hemetsberger, 2005), skill development (Zinkhan *et al.*, 1999) and entertainment (Zinkhan *et al.*, 1999). Social media posts and updates allow people to present themselves by sharing glimpses of their daily lives with others (Worthan, 2011). Self-presentation on social media has evolved beyond just posting messages and status updates to include posting selfies as a way for consumers to construct and present themselves on these platforms. Selfies allow consumers to feature their physical selves as the focal subject of expression and communication. While consumer self-presentation has been widely documented as being prolific in understanding consumer attitudes and behaviors (Belk, 1988, 2013; Fournier, 1998; Tian and Belk, 2005), there is a lack of research that has explored individuals’ motivations for selfie-postings. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore what motivates consumers, in particular female millennials, to post selfies.

Methods

The goal of this research was to understand the motivation associated with selfie-postings. An interpretive approach was adopted to investigate the topic with the meaning-based tradition of research (Ozanne and Hudson, 1989). The primary data was derived from phenomenological interviews with 15 informants (McCracken, 1989; Thompson *et al.*, 1989) (Table I). Consistent with an interpretive approach, the goal of the phenomenological interview is to derive meanings and conclusions from a first-person perspective (Ozanne and Hudson, 1989; Spiggle, 1994). The phenomenological interview process is appropriate for attaining an in-depth understanding of an individual’s personal experiences (McCracken, 1989; Thompson *et al.*, 1989). In sum, in-depth interviews allowed the researchers access to informants’ firsthand personal experiences related to their motivation for selfie-postings.

The informants were females between 21 and 30 years of age. This sample was chosen because the research of the general population identified that 90 per cent of females who are 18-34 years old are most likely to post selfies (www.picmonkey.com/blog/whos-posing-now-the-selfie-survey/). The informants were recruited from a large university in the southern region of the USA. Specifically, informants were recruited

Informant	Age	Educational background	Race ^a
Jane	21	Finance	Mexican American
Christine	21	Nursing	White
Vianna	22	Health information technology	White
Sara	21	German	White
Leslie	21	Pre-med	White
Kara	19	Pre-physician assistant	White
Kendall	21	Finance	White
Brooke	22	Communications	White
Lee	24	Marketing coordinator	White
Amanda	30	Life coach	White
Rebecca	25	Advertising	White
Lindsay	21	Pre-med	White
Kaitlin	22	Accounting	White
Regina	21	Social work	Mexican American
Claire	20	Journalism	White

Table I.
Overview of
informants

Note: ^aBased on US Census categories

through an announcement posted on course websites in the College of Business and College of Communication. The course announcement sought to recruit female students who identified as active selfie posters (defined as at least once a week) and who have used social media accounts for a minimum of five years. Participants who met the specified criteria were selected on a first-come first-serve basis, until the desired number of interviews was completed. Participants were compensated with \$10 gift cards. Thirteen of the informants were Caucasian, and two were Hispanic; all were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Accordingly, the generalizability of these findings to other social groups remains a question, which will be addressed by future research. However, according to Pew Research Center, the sample is consistent with the demographics for social media sites, where selfies are posted, which are predominantly white women between the ages of 18 and 29 years.

Two authors conducted the interviews. A combination of grand tour questions and floating prompts was used (McCracken, 1989). The interviews began with a broad discussion of the informants' opinions about selfies. Following the general discussion about selfies, the focus shifted to understanding the informants' experiences with selfies. It was designed to begin a dialogue in an open-ended manner. Interviewers asked informants to describe their motivation for posting selfies. If the informants felt comfortable, they were asked to select their own selfie-posting experiences on social media and explain their motivation for posting selfies. Informants chose the selfies they wanted to discuss; no parameters were provided in terms of selecting specific types of selfies.

The interviews were characterized by a conversational quality, where the informant largely determined the trajectory of the interview dialogue. Prompts were used when necessary to further understand the meaning of their experiences. Informants were asked to elaborate on various statements and provide more explanation for their discussed experiences. Interviews, averaged between 60 and 90 min, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Textual analysis

Textual data was analyzed using an iterative part-to-whole method of the constant comparative method (Spiggle, 1994). In this strategy, researchers develop a holistic understanding of each interview transcript, while also noting similarities across the transcripts (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). To achieve this goal, each interview was read independently by two of the authors to identify possible themes. Through this process, both researchers independently sought to identify emergent themes, while referring back to the literature (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson *et al.*, 1994). Researchers worked together to identify convergent themes. Axial coding was then used to identify relationships among the themes. Through selective coding, the researchers agreed on the most prominent themes. The results are discussed below.

Results

The purpose of this research was to explore the motivation that female millennial consumers have for posting selfies. The analysis revealed impression management to be the overarching theme for motivation to post selfies. Informants disclosed posting both genuine and non-genuine posts to manage the impression of happiness and physical appearance. Findings also show that self-esteem plays an integral role in understanding selfie-posting. Specifically, informants disclosed they are motivated to post selfies to enhance their self-esteem. In addition, the number of “likes” the selfie receives can positively or negatively affect self-esteem. Thus, findings reveal self-esteem serves as both a motivation and an outcome of selfie-postings (See Figure 1). These findings are expounded below.

Impression management

All 15 informants discussed engaging in impression management as their motivation behind posting selfies. The theme of impression management was discussed in general before delving into the sub-themes of conveying happiness and expressing physical appearance. This was followed by a discussion on self-esteem.

Impression management, a form of strategic self-presentation, refers to the goal-directed conscious or subconscious process in which people attempt to influence the perceptions of other people about a person, object or event (Goffman, 1956). They often do so by regulating and controlling information in social interaction

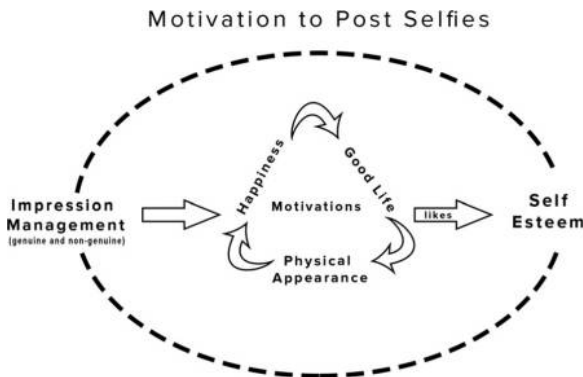


Figure 1.
Theoretical
framework

(Goffman, 1956), and social media platforms are considered as a source of social interaction (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Impression management comprises two processes:

- (1) impression motivation; and
- (2) impression construction (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

Impression motivation refers to when people become encouraged to control how others see them; impression construction refers to when people determine precisely the kind of impression they want to make and choose how to personally create that particular impression (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). People can attempt to create impressions of not only their personal attributes, but also their attitudes, status, physical state and interests.

Kara captured the sentiment of impression management as her primary motivation of posting selfies when discussing why she posts selfies. She said:

I think a lot of times it's who I want to be or how I want people to see me. It's more about the image I create for myself.

This quote suggests that Kara posts selfies to express a specific and desired image of herself that she has construed; she wants others to perceive her in the same way. In addition, it suggests that perhaps Kara posts selfies to convey an ideal self to others – who she wants to be or aspires to be. The notion of conveying an “ideal self” was common among participants. However, although some respondents discussed managing an impression of their ideal-self, other respondents conveyed wanting to manage the impression of how they actually see themselves. This sentiment is echoed by Regina, who states:

I think everyone has an image that they would like to be perceived as. I have an idea of who I am in my head, and want other people to perceive me this way.

Thus, Regina seems to be motivated to communicate an impression to others that parallels her actual-self. Both of these quotes are demonstrative of impression management, but suggest that consumers may differ in the type of image construction they desire to promulgate. Some may want to convey an image that is consistent with how they see their actual-self, whereas others may be motivated to convey an image that is consistent with their ideal-self.

The informants also disclosed using selfies to manage a positive impression even if it may not be genuine. For example, Kendall described using selfies to convey a specific positive image, one of glamour and fun, admitting it may reflect a more aspirational life than she actually lives. She stated:

For me, I feel like I try to look like my life is a little more glamorous than it is. Like, oh I'm going to brunch at this cool place, and I'm gonna do this and that, even if that isn't really accurate.

Kendall readily admitted to living a more ordinary life than what she shares on social media and what others may perceive from her selfies on social media. She also does not mind depicting an inaccurate image of her life to others. Kendall engaged in impression construction, displaying selfies to create a better online self-image to others. The notion of posting non-genuine selfies also emerged when conversing with Sara, who stated:

I post a lot of selfies when I go out [like this one] – so I think it makes me look like I have a lot of friends and a really fun life, even though I only have a handful of close friends and really don't go out that much. But, my selfies make it look like I am popular with a fun life.

Sara desired an image of popularity and having a fun life and is strategic about posting selfies when she is out having fun with friends. Like Kendall, Sara admitted that her selfie postings make her appear to have a more fun life than she feels she actually has.

Both of these quotations illustrate active management of the informants trying to control how others view them and their lives. In addition, these findings suggest that some individuals are motivated to post non-genuine selfies to communicate their ideal-self because it communicates a more favorable impression than the actual-self. While Kendall admitted she wants her life to appear more glamorous, and Sara wanted to be perceived as popular and fun, other informants also discussed posting non-genuine selfies to manage the impression of a happy life, which is discussed in more detail below.

In sum, impression management was revealed to be an overarching theme in understanding what motivates female millennials to post selfies. The sub-themes of managing the impression of happiness and a positive physical appearance are discussed below.

Happiness

Informants disclosed that they post selfies to express happiness – a consistent theme across all 15 informants. Happiness can be defined as “a state of well-being and contentment; a pleasurable or satisfying experience” (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2016). While some believe happiness to be singular in nature, other research suggests it is highly subjective and distinct to each individual (Gilbert, 2007). Informants commonly discussed posting selfies to convey happiness and disclosed that they would not post selfies when they looked unhappy. For example, when explaining her thoughts on selfies, Amanda stated:

You know, like you feel confident and good and happy; and you feel like it's written on your face kind of like a glow and you kind of want to show that [in your selfies]. Always. I mean I wouldn't have taken a selfie when I was unhappy.

This quote demonstrates that displaying confidence and happiness is a central motivation to post selfies. Informants also disclosed that they only catalog moments of happiness. This information supports the theory of impression management that suggests people attempt to exhibit the best parts of their lives. Through impression management, people select specific aspects of the self to portray and consciously control how those images are expressed (Goffman, 1956). In this instance, informants expressed wanting to be viewed as happy individuals and posted selfies via social media to convey this persona.

For example, Jane explained:

No one really posts sad stuff on social media; it's all about only posting happy moments, and when you compile all these happy moments and people look at your Instagram, they think you're happy all the time.

Similarly, Brooke stated:

It's all about only posting happy moments, and when you compile all these happy moments, people look at your Instagram, and they think you're happy all the time. Even if that's not the case, people think you are happy. Who wants people to think you are sad or lonely?

Jane and Brooke, like many informants, discussed accumulating happy selfies on their social media networks. With the growth in digital photography, social media networks have become online photo scrapbooks for users. Jane believed that others view her selfie-postings as a photo collage, which is interpreted holistically, rather than just a single moment in her life. Since others are not just viewing one image, but a series of images over a period of time, individuals want these images to be a positive reflection of their whole lives, not just that moment.

Additionally, these quotes suggest that informants post non-genuine selfies to convey happiness. Both Jane and Brooke revealed that "people think you are happy" with Brooke acknowledging that it may not always be the case. Such findings suggest that it is important for them to convey happiness – a happy life – through their selfies, even though this may not be felt every day. Informants seem to believe that happy selfies are a reflection of a person's life – and happy selfies will be interpreted as happy people with happy lives, whether they are genuine or not.

Further analysis revealed that it is particularly important to post happy selfies following a breakup with a significant other. Thirteen informants discussed how important it was to post selfies to communicate the impression of happiness and having fun during this unhappy time.

When discussing selfie-postings, Leslie explained:

A lot of people post really happy selfies after they breakup with their boyfriend. I was with a friend once at the beach and she was miserable and crying all day because she had broken up with her boyfriend. Then I saw she posted a selfie of her on the beach drinking out of a coconut looking like she was having a great time, but I knew she had been crying all day.

Lee described a very similar story:

My friend, last night, was just posting snaps. Her boyfriend had just broken up with her, and I was like "she's not having a good time", but she was trying to make it look like she was having a great time and carefree. I notice a lot of people post these really happy and fun selfies after they break-up.

The majority of informants described similar stories. It appears, for female millennials, that a breakup is a critical time to appear happy to others. Selfies are a mechanism with which this task is accomplished. Lee realized many people post happy selfies after breakups, which insinuates that perhaps others comprehend the posting of happy selfies during this time as not genuine. Yet, despite whether or not others believe the genuine nature of the happy selfies, post-breakup is an important time to convey a happy and fun life through selfie-postings.

In summary, all informants discussed expressing happiness as a motivating factor for selfie-postings; informants want to display themselves in happy moments via selfies to convey a happy life, even if they are not necessarily happy at the time they post the selfie. Findings suggest that the informants want others to see them as having a happy and fun life. By selectively posting selfies that indicate happiness, they hope to develop this desired impression.

Physical appearance

Another motivation that emerged for selfie-postings is to project a positive physical appearance; all informants mentioned this as a reason why they post selfies. Physical appearance refers to how a person looks and encompasses the defining traits or features of a person. This can include facial features, body size and shape, hairstyle and outfit. Similar to the theme of happiness, informants wanted to demonstrate a positive self-view by posting selfies when they felt they had a positive physical appearance. This motivation is consistent with impression management theory, which posits people are likely to convey impressions that are biased in the direction of the desired identities (Markus and Nurius, 1986). In this instance, informants were motivated to post selfies when they felt their physical appearance was positive. For example, Amanda said:

I have posted a picture where I'm really happy or smiling and thought I looked really pretty, like looking good and feeling good. Stuff like that. You know, when you have a really good hair day. You feel pretty.

Lindsay echoed Amanda's sentiment by stating:

I post selfies when I feel like I look really pretty. Like, I look good so I want to show that off. I have on a cool outfit or my makeup looks really good. Just to show that off.

Both Amanda and Lindsay acknowledged they post selfies when they feel pretty and look good. They like their physical appearance, and they wanted to share their appearances with others through posting selfies. Both informants also mentioned specific physical characteristics that made them feel particularly good about their physical appearances. Feeling positive about one's hair, makeup, outfit, or general appearance is a motivation to post a selfie. In addition, Lindsay's quote suggests not only that she posts selfies when she feels that she looks good, but that she wants to flaunt her positive physical appearance to others.

Some informants disclosed posting selfies on what they considered to be special occasions. For example, Sara described:

I would say that it's like showing the world. Because I don't wear makeup to school during the week, but when I do and when I do take selfies, it is normally when I am dressed up and I do look nice so it's kind of like saying "I look nice today, just so you know. Monday through Thursday, uh, but check me out on Friday".

Sara stated that she does not normally wear makeup and dress up during the week, but when she does, she wants others to see this version of herself. In addition, Sara alluded that she wants to show others that she *can* look good. Thus, perhaps Sara posted selfies in this instance, because she wanted others to know she has the potential to look different than she does during the week. Sara is constructing the impression that others have of her. In addition, Regina stated:

I usually post them if I am dressing up for a function or something, and I'll think oh, I look good so I'll post a selfie. You know, like I can look good.

Regina's comment is consistent with Sara's comment; she wanted to convey that she can *look* attractive. In sum, both quotes suggest that the informants want to show off their physical appearance, when it may deviate from the norm. Although Sara does not refer to a formal special occasion, she suggested that wearing makeup and dressing up are a special occasion for her.

The theory of impression management defines desirable images as those that depict what a person would like to be or thinks they can be, at least at their best, having social acuity amongst their peers (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Indeed, these quotes suggested that although some informants may not consistently dress up or wear makeup, they still associate a positive physical appearance with a positive self. In sum, informants suggested their desire to create and manage a positive physical appearance, and posting selfies on social media is a tool to establish this self-identity.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is defined as one's global perception of the self (Rosenberg, 1965) and is considered both a judgment and an attitude of oneself. All 15 informants discussed self-esteem in relation to posting selfies. Predominantly, informants discussed self-esteem in conjunction with their physical appearance. The following quote by Claire is representative of self-esteem as a motivator for selfie-posting:

It's honestly just to show yourself. Like oh, I can be pretty! Just for self-esteem [...] that's really what I think selfies are for.

This quote suggested that Claire wanted to communicate her positive physical appearance; to Claire, showing off her physical appearance is associated with positive self-esteem. This was a common theme throughout all 15 conversations and tied directly into the sub-theme of physical appearance. Thus, informants posted selfies to project a positive physical appearance to maintain and enhance self-esteem.

In addition, informants discussed self-esteem as a consequence of selfie-posting related to number of "likes" they received after posting a selfie on social media. Specifically, a greater number of "likes" is perceived to positively impact one's self-esteem, whereas a lower number of "likes" is perceived to negatively impact one's self-esteem. All 15 informants discussed this extensively. For example, Christine stated:

It does boost your self-esteem and confidence when a lot of people like or comment on your picture. And it kind of like gases you up and legitimizes your feelings. Like I felt good and I felt happy today and obviously everyone else thought so too.

In this sense, self-esteem emerged as both a motivation and outcome of selfie-posting, which was a consistent theme. Here, Christine experienced genuine positive feelings about herself, and these positive feelings were enhanced by the responses that the selfie-posting received. Christine's quote is not only illustrative of the positive impact of self-esteem, but also suggests that selfies, and specifically the feedback of selfies in terms of number of "likes", can affirm positive feelings about the self. In addition, Christine's quote echoed Lindsay's sentiment from earlier, when discussing posting selfies that are consistent with the actual-self. Christine felt genuinely happy, and the responses from others reinforced her positive feelings. This illustrates the integral role that self-esteem plays in understanding the motivation of selfie postings. Sara echoed this sentiment when stating:

It's really nice to post a picture of yourself and have literally 100 people like it and be like "oh my gosh!" I think that's a lot of the reason because you like the way you look that day and then other people like it and it makes you feel good.

Positive feedback from selfie postings can increase self-esteem – and affirms one's feelings of looking or feeling good. Selfie posters may think they look or feel good, and

when this feeling was confirmed through “likes” from others, it enhanced their self-esteem. In this sense, selfie-postings are positive experiences for the informants. These findings are consistent with prior research that demonstrates that social network usage can enhance self-esteem and positively affect one’s well-being (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011).

However, informants also discussed that a lack of “likes” can negatively impact self-esteem. Vianna echoed the response of the several informants by stating:

“I have posted a picture where I am really happy or smiling and thought I looked really pretty, and if I didn’t get many likes on it, I will think that’s weird when I am happy and smiling”. And, then I don’t feel like I look as good. It’s like getting negative feedback without actually getting feedback.

Vianna explained receiving no feedback on a selfie-post is the same as receiving negative feedback, which negatively influenced self-esteem. Similarly, Kaitlin described:

“I generally post selfies when I think I look good. If I don’t get many likes it makes me feel bad”. Like, maybe I don’t actually look as good as I thought. So, then I think maybe I shouldn’t have posted it because now I feel bad about how I look.

Congruent to the discussion about a positive self-esteem and affirmation, both of these quotes suggest that the lack of “likes” may lead to disconfirmation of a positive self-view. Informants expressed concern that when they look or feel good, but others do not “like” their selfie, it can threaten their confidence and lower their self-esteem. These findings identify the importance that “likes” play in the selfie-posting process and suggest a potential undesirable side of selfie-postings. In sum, the desire to enhance self-esteem is a motivation for posting selfies, and self-esteem is a positive or negative influence, depending on the number of “likes” the selfie receives.

General discussion

As technology and internet evolve, selfie-postings via social media have become a common form of self-presentation. This research aimed to contribute to the online consumer behavior literature by extending the knowledge of self-presentation to include online selfie-postings and to identify female millennials’ motivations of selfie-postings. Findings from this study revealed impression management to be a primary motivation for selfie-postings. Consistent with the theory rooted in impression management, consumers were motivated to post selfies to convey a positive self-image. Findings from this study also revealed that desired images included looking happy, having fun and projecting a positive physical appearance.

Informants discussed the importance of cataloging primarily happy selfies to reflect a happy life. Although the findings revealed that the informants posted selfies when they genuinely felt happy, the act of posting non-genuine selfies to show happiness also emerged. This finding suggests that consumers want to be portrayed as a happy person, even if that is not always the case. One common instance of posting non-genuine happy selfies was after a breakup with a significant other. This finding is interesting because female millennials may post selfies as a source of comfort, when they feel upset or depressed. If others who view their selfies “like” and comment, the informants feel support and are reassured that they are okay. If others “like”, selfie posters feel better. Perhaps this exchange can provide or reinforce happiness and build self-esteem.

A positive physical appearance was also a desired image that informants wanted to convey. Sometimes informants described experiencing happiness or feeling pretty and posted selfies to capture the moments. Others discussed their everyday physical appearance may not be positive; thus, they post selfies to create a more positive self-image and wanted to communicate to others when they felt they looked good. The word *selfie* by definition is to display an image of oneself, and this research found that female millennials are motivated to display a positive physical appearance, whether it is genuine or not, via their selfies.

Self-esteem was identified as a critical factor in understanding selfie-posting behavior. Self-esteem was found to be both a motivator and an outcome. Initial findings showed that consumers post selfies when seeking a self-esteem boost. This notion was evident among all informants. Further examination of the data revealed that self-esteem is enhanced through the number of “likes” a selfie receives. When a selfie received a substantial number of “likes”, it validated the consumers’ positive self-image (happiness or physical appearance) and enhanced their self-esteem. However, when a selfie failed to receive a substantial number of “likes” the positive self was not confirmed, which negatively impacted their self-esteem. Thus, self-esteem played a role as both a motivator and an outcome. If a consumer wants to portray a positive self, she may post a selfie; based on the number of “likes”, self-esteem is either enhanced or diminished.

By identifying these motivations, more knowledge is available to understand why the society is experiencing a growth in the selfie phenomenon. It appears that selfies allow the opportunity for instant gratification in the form of positive feedback. This result is different than pre-social media, where it would be quite uncommon to receive 100 compliments instantly from peers. Thus, selfie-postings provide for the opportunity to feel good about oneself. However, as this work reveals, there is also an opportunity for one to feel bad about oneself.

Limitations and conclusion

This exploratory study investigated the topic of selfie-postings, which has only recently begun to receive attention in the academic literature. This study had a sample limited by age, gender, geographic location and socioeconomic status. However, the demographics of the sample are most likely to post selfies, thus the sample is appropriate. To form stronger generalizations of motivations, a larger sample – which includes males, a wider age range and varying ethnicities – is needed.

The selfie phenomenon is transforming the social culture. This study is one of the first to understand the motivations of selfie-postings. When the female informants discussed posting selfies to manage the impressions of happiness and a positive physical appearance, they received affirmation through “likes”, which enhanced their self-esteem. However, failing to receive positive affirmation can potentially negatively impact one’s self-esteem. To these female millennials, selfies represent a significant mechanism to both convey and receive information about the self.

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