

「THE SELFIE
SHTICK」

CIRCA 2015, SELFIES STAND FOR SELF-EXPRESSION, BORN OUT OF THE HUMAN NEED FOR APPRECIATION, ENABLED BY SMARTPHONES AND TABLETS, FUELLED BY WIDE CRITICISM — AND GIVEN TO MULTIPLY BY SOCIAL MEDIA. LOVE THEM? HATE THEM? TAKE A PHOTOCALL!

BY MARY PAULOSE

* In April last year, a woman died in High Point, California, when her car crashed into a truck on a highway. Her car crashed, her friends disclosed later (the time of the crash and her posts were the same), because she was posting selfies on Facebook.

* A month later, a small plane crashed in Colorado, killing its pilot and co-passenger. Investigators concluded that cellphone use and taking selfies during various stages of flight, including takeoff and initial climb, disoriented the pilot.

* In May last year, a video of two Iranian girls went viral after it showed their car crashing while they were singing and recording karaoke on their phones. Thankfully, they survived, but were widely ridiculed online.

* A Polish couple fell to their death in August last year, while apparently trying to take selfies with their children on the edge of a cliff during a holiday in Portugal.

* In April last year, a 17-year-old Russian fell while trying to take a selfie on a railway bridge in St. Petersburg, no less. She grabbed electrical wires to break her fall and was electrocuted.

* Last month, a man in Oregon was run over by a train while posing for a selfie on the railway tracks.

What will it take to be less self-obsessive? Rules, maybe. Like a hefty penalty imposed if you are driving and clicking yourself at the same time. But then, how can rules be imposed *everywhere*? So, chances are, if you are a selfie lover, you will pull out all stops to be “selfied”, at all odd places and times, cocking a snook at danger even.

On the other hand, *as long as you are not being self-destructive*, there’s nothing wrong with being slightly self-obsessed, and there’s nothing wrong with selfies per se.

If you’ve been living under a rock, the “selfie” became a buzzword oft heard only in 2012 (well, there is a story in circulation that it was “coined” way back in 2002, in Australia, when a 21-year-old decided to post his photos online after a riotous night out), even though everything from medieval era self-portraits to self-timed shots taken on modern cameras can fall under the classification. The rise of uber-fast social media changed all that – Facebook, Twitter and Instagram made it possible for selfies to go from pixels on your phone to world fame (okay, more like peer group fame) in seconds.

Selfies defy all rules of a pop social trend or evolution. It’s not endemic to a particular age group – I know 37-year-olds with half-a-million selfies on their phones, and 22-year-olds who wouldn’t be caught dead posing for one. And the jury is out there on whether women take more selfies than men, or vice versa.

There’s a reverse snobbery at play here, with many seeing the selfie as a rather lowbrow form of self-portrayal.



INSIGHTS: (top) Dr. Saliha Afridi of The LightHouse Arabia clinic; (below) Dr. Thoraiya Kanafani, Human Relations Institute & Clinics

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IT’S IMPORTANT TO SEPARATE HEALTHY PICTURE-TAKING FROM INCESSANT AND CONSTANT SELFIES FOR ATTENTION

No wonder social scientists – and accident experts – are observing and complaining about the “selfie generation” for possessing an awareness of self-image, and a lack of self-awareness. But that’s rather unfair: so, he or she likes to click themselves with their faces contorted in funny ways and angled to Angelina Jolie’s perfection... so what? Why should that get my goat, or yours? Isn’t this a free world, with everyone and their smartphones holding the right to self-expression?

Clearly, the photo power that’s been unleashed by the cult of the selfie is spawning a radical polarisation among the tribe of opinionists – you either love it, or you hate it. We don’t think anyone is on the fence about this most popular photo-trend slash self-expression slash narcissistic-projection slash plain self-clicked-mugshot.

Love them, hate them, face it: selfies aren’t going away anytime soon. Thanks to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and ahem... that platform for all controver-

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MY INSPIRATION IS AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER VIVIAN MAIER WHO, IN THE MID 20TH-CENTURY, SHOT EXTREMELY CREATIVE PORTRAITS... — NADIA



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I DON'T THINK A SELFIE DEFINES MY BEHAVIOUR OR PERSONALITY OR SKILLS; IT'S JUST FUN — SARAH



sial selfies – Snapchat – selfies are breaking records, e being hailed as works of art.

Let's hear it from the some of the selfs who can't do with their selfies.

THE SELFIE VIEW

According to Sarah Vaidhyaraj, a 22-year-old MBA student in Dubai, selfies are a form of self-expression. They're convenient – plain and simple. "It's just convenient to take a photo of yourself, rather than ask someone to take a photo of you." Sarah, an unabashed fan of selfies, she says it's as simple as having something to do when idle, and apps like Snapchat – which don't save a copy of your photo or text – are a great platform to share with your friends or circle what you're doing at the moment.

On the point of excessive narcissism – a key trait of selfie takers – she says, "I take selfies, does it matter what people think? You're doing it for yourself. But it doesn't make me feel better or worse than any other photo of mine posted on social media. I don't think a selfie defines my behaviour or personality or skills either; it's just fun."

The main point of a selfie, according to Sarah, is to capture a moment or occasion. "If I'm at a birthday party or concert, then I post a selfie immediately, to show that I was there." Sarah says group selfies are much more fun than solo selfies, according to her. "The more the merrier, of course, because everyone in the picture can have a different expression."

Nipin Tharoor, who works in event management and promotions, has a whole different take on the photo phenomenon. "A selfie becomes a selfie only when you take a photo and share it on social media – otherwise it's not a selfie. The whole reason it's a cult now is because it essentially celebrates regular people. If you Google selfies now, you'll see more regular people than celebrities, and even the latter use them to communicate and project an image." And they're a great self-boosting tool, he points out. "Selfies celebrate the s

SELFIE – noun

A photograph that one takes of oneself with a digital camera or front-facing smartphone, tablet, or webcam, especially for posting on a social-networking or photo-sharing website.

– "Selfie" was Oxford Dictionary's word of the year for 2013, and one of Twitter's top trends in 2014.

– **The Chainsmoker's** successful single, #SELFIE, released last year, is something of a popular club track.

– **Facebook is** the most popular social media platform for posting selfies.

– **Dubai's Burj Khalifa** is one of the world's top selfie-taking venues.

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SELFIES ESSENTIALLY CELEBRATE REAL, REGULAR PEOPLE... YOU'RE PART OF A BIGGER CANVAS — NIPIN

and give you a niche and a space to love yourself more than anything else... they have, to some extent, reset the standards of beauty, giving you the power of how you want the world to see you, as you're not at the mercy of the photographer. Physically and mentally, you're part of a bigger canvas."

Selfies are definitely here to stay, and they've even broken photographic rules by not sticking to the rule of the third, where the subject should occupy a third of the frame, Nipin says. As for criticism, he says, "Changing profile photos is a de-stress exercise for me. It's more philosophical than showing off – it's about expressing my state of mind."

And, for selfies, "I usually prefer going solo and avoid sharing the limelight with anyone else," he laughs. For someone who started out hating to take photos, he says Facebook gave

him a new avenue and forum to experiment. "I don't think people have still understood the social impact of the selfie – there's a lot of information to be derived from it; it'll probably help in understanding humanity, and be a big tool in the coming years to understand child and adolescent behaviour better as well."

For graphic designer Nadia Mendez, selfies take on a high form of artistic expression. Her selfies, shot from rather unusual angles, often blurred and depicting only parts of herself, are immediately eye-catching. "My inspiration is American photographer Vivian Maier who, in the mid 20th-century, shot extremely creative portraits of other people and herself. I like those kind of selfies," Nadia says, adding that she hates the word 'selfies', preferring to call them "portraits."

For her, the journey of selfie-taking began at university, where she had photography exercises that required her to shoot or paint herself or other people, but the iPhone opened up wider avenues. "I think I like taking selfies in Dubai as it's a new location for me, and it's a great way for friends back home to see what I'm up to."

THE CLINICAL VIEW

Dr Saliha Afridi, clinical psychologist and director of The Light-house Community Psychology Clinic in Dubai, feels that people can be addicted to the sharing of selfies and the recognition, validation, and appreciation they get once they share the selfie online. "They may be suffering from an underlying low self-esteem or could just like the attention," she says.

Adolescents and young adults who grew up in the "I"-generation may show more traits of personality disorders. But to say everyone who takes selfies is a narcissist is quite a myopic way of looking at the situation, according to her. Some researchers are looking into how selfies can actually make people feel good about themselves because they are in control of the outcome (final image) rather than having another person control the outcome of the picture. "More control equals more confidence and higher esteem. And lastly, not all selfies are created equal! It's important to differentiate between people who take selfies and post them versus those who just take them for their own documentation. There are many who take selfies to document their travels or important life events, and never end up sharing them with anyone," Dr Saliha states.

Dr Thoraiya Kanafani, clinical psychologist at the Human Relations Institute & Clinics Dubai, feels that "it's important to separate healthy picture-taking from incessant and constant selfies for attention". When pictures are taken to get attention and expand a person's follower profile, then these types of selfies may be unhealthy and harmful to one's mental health, she points out. As society shifts from a culture of "know thyself" to "show thyself", Dr Saliha adds, the long-term implications of this could be that we will be less introspective, less mindful, less insightful.

Love or loathe them, selfies are probably going to be around on the social media sphere for a long time to come. Harmless pastime, online photo chronicle or plain narcissistic, this form of photo-taking and sharing has become a phenomenon. The average person likely has a love-hate relationship with the selfie – while you don't fancy them too much, you can't avoid them either. The selfie probably doesn't say much about our collective, or healthy sense of self and, a 100 years from now, people may look back and wonder why humans of a certain generation were incessantly posting images of themselves everywhere online, when they could just look in the mirror. Call it a quirk of socio-psychological evolution, a gimmick, or a desperate attempt for attention, everyone's cashing in on it – clubs having selfie nights, banks offering selfie credits cards and marketing strategies surrounding selfies. But while you're pondering over all this, you might want to take a selfie... **W**

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EVERYONE FROM BARACK TO BECKHAM HAS BEEN SPOTTED CLICKING A SELFIE. HERE ARE SOME OTHER IMAGES OF CELEBS WHO ARE SELF-STYLED SELFIE ARTISTS.



US President Barack Obama posing with other heads of state



Priyanka Chopra



Lady Gaga



The famous 2014 Oscars selfie



David Beckham

BEATING IT DOWN

On an aside, major museums and art institutions worldwide are now banning selfie sticks! Recent ones to impose the ban include the Smithsonian in Washington, New York's MOMA and Met museums, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and even the Palace of Versailles in Paris