



## SELFIE-CRAZE: SOLELY NARCISSISM OR AN EXCORPORATION ALSO?

Payel Mazumder<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University Research Fellow, Dept. of Applied Psychology, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

### ABSTRACT

**T**he rise of Subclinical Narcissism in the mass has frequently been mentioned as the leading cause behind the gigantic spread of selfie clicking and posting behaviour. However, a critical inspection of the relevant literature brought forward two important questions to the present researcher. Firstly, was it justifiable to hold only the Subclinical Narcissism responsible behind the selfie-craze? The present researcher found evidence to believe that such individualistic explanation might not adequately account for this frenzy. Then, what else was playing behind the spread? To answer this second question, the present researcher proposed that a broader socio-cultural process might have been active behind the unprecedented spread of selfie-behaviour. It was believed that the theory of Excorporation, originally formulated by sociologist John Fiske might prove more adequate to explain the craze.

**KEYWORDS:** Selfie-Craze, Subclinical Narcissism, Excorporation, John Fiske, Social media

### INTRODUCTION

The world have already tagged the millennial generation as 'Generation me'. One of the chief traits of today's youth is considered to be heightened 'self-absorption' and 'self-love' typically noticed in people high on Narcissism. In support of this 'belief', both the commoners and the experts often cite the 'selfie-taking and posting' statistics. A quick look at them might even convince the sceptics that indeed the younger generation is showing a rise in their 'Subclinical Narcissism' level. A section of the Economists explain them as the immediate effect created by the consumer, competitive and marketing culture of contemporary world which encourages individualistic self-references and self-promotions for its own advantage (Milivojevi & Ercegovac, 2014). More specifically, they have pointed to the aggressive marketing and unparalleled popularity of the camera phones (especially, but not specifically smart phones) which aided in the development of this Selfie-Craze. In the last quarter of 2014, worldwide smart phone subscription were up 20%

with fastest growth in underpenetrated markets such as China, India, Indonesia, Brazil and Russia ("Gartner says," 2014). As to what people were doing with those phones, Google reported that in 2014, people took approximately 93 million selfies per day on android models alone (Brandt, 2014). Most of these selfie-takers were believed to be young adults. In totality, the picture that emerged was pressing enough to convince that indeed the millennial were becoming more narcissistic. However, there were some crucial gaps in the way the facts and figures were being interpreted. The present researcher intended to point out these gaps only to emphasize that the rise of Subclinical Narcissism might not be the only leading reason behind Selfie-Frenzy among the global mass, specifically the younger generation. After that, the present researcher attempted to give a socio-cultural explanation of this Selfie-Craze, one that might better account for the gaps than that of the 'Narcissism-theory'. But before all these, a brief review of selfie and Narcissism need to be done.

**SELFIE**

Selfie, according to Oxford Dictionaries, is “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a Smartphone or Webcam and uploaded to a social media website,” (“*Selfie is named*,” 2013) History claims that photographic self-portraiture is not something new. The first known selfie had been taken by Robert Cornelius in the year 1839 (New York post, 2013). But, modern selfie is distinctly different than this. Firstly, it is aided by instantaneous sharing. Social Networking Sites (SNS’s) like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram provide unlimited opportunity to share images within moments and with minimum costs. Thus the impression-formation in the virtual world is immediate and feedback is also readily available. Secondly, selfies actually provide a ‘way to control others’ images of us (“*Scholarly reflections*,” 2013, para.4). Thus, it provides an excellent opportunity to selectively present ourselves to others. However, in this process a certain image of the selfie-taker might be carried which is far from his or her real self. All such thing is done to create a favourable impression among the intended social media circle. And it pays off most of the time. Chiefly because of this feature, selfies have also been tagged as a symptom of social media-driven narcissism. The frequency of selfie-taking and posting behaviour apparently support such claim. The present researcher decided to use Selfie-Frenzy or Selfie-Craze alternatively to indicate such trend.

Some scholars find that deep within the selfie-psychology lies an attempt of ‘selfie-branding’. Karen Nelson-Field, Senior Research Associate, Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science, University of South Australia stated, “We now all behave as brands and the selfie is simply brand advertising. Selfies provide an opportunity to position ourselves (often against our competitors) to gain recognition, support and ultimately interaction from the targeted social circle. This is no different from consumer brand promotion” (“*Scholarly Reflections*,” 2013, para.5).

In a nut shell, scholars so far have proposed that the selfie among else can function as a means of self-expression, a construction of a positive image, a tool of self-promotion, a cry for attention and love, a way to express belongingness to a certain community. The term was probably coined in Australia in 2002 and since then had increased its popularity so much that Oxford Dictionaries announced ‘selfie’ as ‘the international Word of the Year,’ (“*Selfie is named*,” 2013).

**SUBCLINICAL NARCISSISM**

One of the cardinal causes, behind the growing Selfie-Craze as claimed by some researchers is heightened

Subclinical Narcissism in the mass, specifically among the youth. The concept of Narcissism has its roots in the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, who fell into an all consuming love of his own reflection in a pool of water. In psychological literature, Narcissism is most usually regarded as a personality type characterized by strong egocentricity, great self-confidence, exploitativeness, exhibitionism, vanity, and a highly developed sense of self-importance. Popularized by Sigmund Freud, this concept has gradually entered into the mainstream psychology. History shows that such inclusion of Narcissism has followed three dominant trends mainly. One trend focussed on Narcissism as a cultural or societal entity, contending that society was becoming increasingly narcissistic (Lasch, 1979; Mazlish, 1982; Stern, 1980). The second trend drew its inspiration from Social Psychology’s literature on the Self-Serving Bias (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfield, 1978). This refers to the tendency for people to accept responsibility for successful outcomes and to deny blame for failed outcomes. Greenwald (1980) referred to this as benefactance and included it among two other cognitive biases (egocentricity and cognitive conservatism) with narcissistic overtones that characterize the cognitive processes of individuals. The third trend focussed on Narcissism as a clinical entity. Such perspectives of Narcissism can be found in the writings of Kernberg (1976, 1980) and Kohut (1976). Kernberg (1976, 1980) saw Narcissism developing as a consequence of parental rejection or abandonment. But, Kohut’s theory claimed that pathological narcissism could result from failure to idealize the parents because of rejection or indifference (1976). On the other hand, Millon (1981) in his social-learning theory viewed Narcissism developing not as a response to parental devaluation but rather as a consequence of parental overvaluation.

However, psychologists had to wait till 1984 to get the initial idea of the factor-structures of Narcissism. On the basis of the data obtained by the first measuring instrument of Narcissism (Narcissistic Personality Inventory or NPI, Raskin and Hall, 1979), Emmons, in that year revealed four factor structures of this trait. These are— leadership/ authority, self absorption/ self admiration, superiority/ arrogance and exploitativeness/ entitlement. Although for the most part in research-literature, Narcissism has been considered as a distinct clinical entity in need of therapeutic attention, Paulhus and Williams (2002) empirically established that Subclinical Narcissism existed in the mass. It denotes behaviour idiosyncratic of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), however the intensity of the aversive behaviour is much less. It can be

considered as a milder or non-pathological version of the trait Narcissism which is assumed to form a continuous distribution in broader community samples, covering mainly them, whose behaviour do not need clinical attention. For the present research, only Subclinical Narcissism has been taken into consideration.

### SOME CONTRADICTIONS

1. In the last two years, media reports documented quite a few tragic incidents where people died while taking selfies in life-threatening situations. A San Francisco-based data service provider claimed that nearly 49 selfie-linked deaths had happened around the world since 2014 and India topped in the list with the death figure being 19 (abcnews, 2016). A review of such incidents brought forward a fundamental question which the narcissism-theorists have not taken into consideration till date. Freud, one of the main proponents of the concept of Narcissism, had stated that it, "is the libidinal component to egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, or more simply, the desire and energy that drives one's instinct to survive" (Freud, 1914). Keeping that in mind, the question arose: why this 'instinct to survive' was not evident in those people who took selfies in life-threatening situation and died accidentally? If the narcissism-explanation is to be believed uncritically, then it must be accepted that people who think of 'mindless' self-promotion must have had elevated Narcissism level. Automatically then, it follows that these people must have had higher 'love' for their life and thus the instinct to survive must have had also been higher for them. If this was so, then why they did not care to take the potential life-risks emanating from the situation into consideration while clicking selfies and died accidentally?

2. In few cultures, selfie-clicking is not a manifestation of self-absorption. For example, in their article "Empowering the Marginalized: Rethinking Selfies in the Slums of Brazil", Nemer and Freeman(2015) claimed that in the Favelas (urban slums) of Vitória, Brazil, the teens posted their selfies to speak about violence in their area, to self-document their lives, and let their parents know they were safe during the day. According to Nemer and Freeman (2015), in such instances where people are suffering in a relatively severe living environment, selfies work as mode of empowerment to exercise free speech, practice self-reflection, and form strong interpersonal connections.

In Australia, Kath Albury (2015) found that though many of the 16 to 17-year-olds she interviewed engaged in the sort of gender policing that often led to the production of 'ideal image' photos, they also talked about

producing selfies as jokes. In still another variation, selfies sometimes served as a part of a particular social campaign. For instance, the 'Selfie with daughter' campaign which was launched by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to save more girl child. Keeping these perspectives in mind, it might be reasonably argued that not in every situation, selfie-taking signifies self-love; rather sometimes digital self-portraiture can be an effective means to empowerment and social campaigning.

3. The third doubt has been shaped by a debate which is still going on within the expert-fraternity. They have been tormented by this question whether Subclinical Narcissism has at all increased in the mass or not. In AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION's (APA) cover story, Dingfelder (2011) had clearly delineated the perplexing scenario. There, he mentioned about the study by Twenge and Campbell (2009) where the researchers claimed that between 1982 and 2006, college students' Narcissism scores increased significantly. However, from another study, Trzesniewski and Donnellan(2010) came to the conclusion that such a rise might not exist in reality. They drew data from a nationally representative, annual survey of 50,000 high school students which investigated several factors related to Narcissism, for example; Egoism, Self-esteem, Individualism and the importance of Social status. On all of those measures, high school seniors in 1976 looked just like those graduating in 2006. Although the empirical settlement of this contradiction is not done yet, some of the researchers have already attributed the Selfie-Frenzy to the assumed increase in Subclinical Narcissism level in the mass. The present researcher believed such attribution must be done more cautiously and only after empirical settlement of the debate have been done.

4. There is no denial of the fact that in some empirical studies, Narcissism and selfie-posting behaviour have been found to be significantly correlated. In one study by Sorokowski et al. (2015), it has been found that the general Narcissism scores as well as the subscale-wise scores in case of men positively predicted the number of selfies posted. However, in case of women this relation has been found to be quite weak. From these data, the present researcher raised a question; why only in case of men such relation has been demonstrated? The doubt increased its strength when in the same article; the researchers mentioned that women posted much more selfies than men. From this observation and keeping the assumed Narcissism-selfie-posting behaviour relation in mind, one might easily reason that since women posted more selfies than men, then they must be higher on

Narcissism also. However, Paulhus & Williams (2002), in their empirical study on the Dark Triad of Personality (Machiavellianism, Subclinical Narcissism, and Subclinical Psychopathy) in a 'normal' sample, found that males scored significantly higher than females on Subclinical Narcissism along with Subclinical Psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Even after that study also, it has been intermittently documented that males score higher on Narcissism domain than females. If this is so, then how the more frequent selfie-taking behaviour among women can be explained from a Narcissism perspective? The present researcher believed that this was another indication that something other than Narcissism was influencing such frenzy.

From the above observations, the present researcher believed that individualistic explanations of Selfie-Craze in the form of heightened Subclinical Narcissism level might prove inadequate. Rather, a broader Socio-cultural explanation of this phenomenon must be furnished to account for the unexplained parts. To that end, the theory of Excorporation by John Fiske might prove more adequate.

### **THEORY OF EXCORPORATION**

The term '*Excorporation*' was highlighted by sociologist John Fiske in his 1989 book, '*Understanding Popular Culture*.' He stated that Excorporation is "the process by which the subordinates make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system" (Fiske, 1989, p.1-20). Once the culture has been formed and the norms are set, increasing number of people becomes part of it. After certain time, it creates a pressure on the system to modify the resources and commodities provided by the initial dominant system to cater to the mass-need. The present researcher believed that this was precisely what happened with selfie-behaviour.

Initially photography was a costly affair. Only a handful of people could afford them. But, with the advent of digital camera and especially the camera phone, photography became an accessible commodity to the mass. The popularity grew in leaps and bounds because of faster internet service and the social networking sites which allowed the commoners to share images instantaneously. Thus, these were the commodities initially provided to the subordinates i.e. to the mass by the dominant system. With these resources, the subordinates have formed their own culture, the 'selfie-culture', one that is promising them control, popularity and importance. For example, today, when the mass see Barrack Obama clicking selfie with his daughter, they lose no time in replicating similar thing with their camera phones. In fact, it was the

burgeoning popularity of the camera phones among the mass (the subordinates) that led the mobile manufacturers to think about front cameras, one with which the mass can capture the 'me-moments', just like the celebrities do (change in the production system to cater to mass need). It is through this process that a new mass-culture was created. The culture got nourished by the fact that it gave the mass a sense of 'celebrity like importance' & 'control over one's images' – two things that ordinary people are always in want of. These attracted even more people to become part of the culture. The craze spread. The norms grew stronger. And it is a known fact that majority of the mass like to conform to norms even when they know that the stand taken might not be right (Asch, 1951, 1955). Such conformity is observed even in the selfies taken. For example, it is very frequently found that there is a huge similarity in the gestural expression (neck tilted) in all the selfies. Taken together, these are the evidences which indicate almost unanimously that a broader socio-cultural change has been at work in the gigantic growth of selfie-behaviour.

Having thus emphasized the role Excorporation in spreading Selfie-Craze, it must be pointed out that Subclinical Narcissism might play the role of a moderator variable here. People high on Subclinical Narcissism might get affected more by such norm and thus in them Subclinical Narcissism could be a better predictor of selfie-behaviour. However, people with lower Subclinical Narcissism level are also conforming to the norm only to be a part of the newer culture.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this article, the present researcher tried to establish one key point i.e. Subclinical Narcissism could not solely account for the selfie-craze. As a complementary explanation, the researcher narrated Fiske's theory of Excorporation, which showed how a mass-culture in the form of frequent selfie-taking and posting has been formed with the advent of camera phones and social networking sites and how the culture has furnished a new norm for its members across the globe to conform to it blindly. However, the author believed that Subclinical Narcissism might play the role of a moderator variable in this regard. But, there can be exceptions too. For example in those cultures, where Narcissism is not the main determinant of Selfie-Frenzy, there also Excorporation might enjoy an adequate explanatory power. For instance, the culture that was studied by Nemer and Freeman (2015) in Brazil, might have developed their own norm from the resources provided by the rest of the world which encourages them to use selfie as a mode of empowerment instead of a means to express heightened self-love.

Before concluding, the researcher wanted to point out that this article contains few of the typical lacuna of a theoretical paper. For example, despite the presentation of related empirical data, the reasons behind Selfie-Craze might sound speculative at times. Secondly, no statistical analysis has been carried out, thus the scientific rigor might apparently appear to be missing. Having said that, it must be pointed out that Selfie-Frenzy is a pretty recent phenomenon. Hence, empirical researches on this topic are clearly negligible and so is the theoretical explanation. At such a juncture, sometimes the behavioural scientists are forced to start the investigation from a speculative explanation and then proceed to test them empirically rather the other way round. The present researcher has attempted to follow similar epistemological approach, but of course with the intent in mind that these speculations are to be verified empirically in a foreseeable future.

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