

Click a photo to perish: selfie-death and its implications to mental health professionals

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ABSTRACT

Selfies are not just development in technology but a disaster. Slowly and steadily it is becoming one of the causes for human death that is not natural. The number of incidences is even more staggering in a developing economy like India. What drives people crazy? To take such dangerous selfies, post it in Social Networking Sites (SNSs) and gain popularity. This review paper tries to understand the etiology behind the selfie taking behaviour, its harmfulness towards the society in general and what mental health professionals need to do to be aware and stay solution focussed for this upcoming menace. Studies across the platforms such as Scencedirect, Pubmed etc., have been reviewed and scrutinised for deriving out results. Newspaper publications and Wikipedia were also used for search of information in the public print. Review suggests that personality traits such as narcissism, openness to experience, dark triads, low self-esteem have all been linked to the concept of selfie taking. Recommendations have been made from the holistic point of view to intervene this growing danger.

Keywords: *Selfie-death, Narcissism, Dark triad, Intervention model*

Selfie as a term is defined as, “A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a Smartphone or webcam and shared via social media” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013). Before this selfie concept, smart phones or social media, the thought of taking self portraits existed among people in the form of using self-timers on the digital cameras. However, uploading and sharing was not so popular a decade ago even though people used social medias existed mainly for chatting with friends, etc.,

Selfies had become popular in the last five to six years with the rapid growth of technology and easy access to social media. Social networking sites (SNSs) provide individuals with an “ideal” venue for self-portrayal. Individuals prefer showing up themselves to others in a more “ideal” way than that of the “real” way (Zhao et al., 2013). These media platforms offer users the ability to present themselves in a more selective and desirable manner by enhancing their profile appearances (Manago et al., 2012).

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Posting photographs has become one of the most important components of self-presentation especially selfies. Research suggests that the number of selfies posted on SNSs has increased over 900 times from 2012 to 2014 and further by 300 times in the last 5 years i.e. upto 2019. A study has found out that there are four important motivations for posting selfies on SNSs: attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment. Amongst them, the particular interest to the psychological mechanism of selfies is the motivation of “attention seeking.” People want to make impact on other’s minds and would want to induce admiration towards them.

AGE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SELFIE-RELATED BEHAVIOUR

An online survey of a sample of 3763 Norwegian social media users was carried out. This study provides the first empirical evidence on how adolescents (aged 12 to 19), young adults (20 to 30) and adults (31 to 50) differ in terms of selfie behaviour. Females were more likely to take personal and group selfies, post personal selfies, crop photos and use photographic filters compared to males (Dhir, Pallesen, Torsheim & Andreassen, 2016). Furthermore, online self-presentation and computer-mediated communication is higher amongst women than men. For example, women want to appear attractive and part of a social group that seem to use photos for self-impression management.

Adolescents were found to be more likely than young adults to take own and group selfies, post own selfies, and use photographic filters. Adolescents and young adults actively engage in selfie-taking, posting and photo editing behaviour for exploring and building their online self identity. The predictive effect of age was stronger among women than among men regarding selfie taking, posting and editing behaviour (Dhir et.al, 2016). Adolescents tend to disclose more personal information compared to other age groups, since they are developing emotional intimacy, sexual identity and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2014).

Selfie-Related Dangers: Selfie or Killfie

Selfies have proved instrumental in revolutionary movements, and have also known to help election candidates increase their popularity. Many researchers have studied selfies for understanding psychological attributes of the selfie authors, investigating the effect of selfies on social protests, understanding the effect of posting selfies on its authors, dangerous incidents and deaths related to selfies and using computer vision methods to interpret whether a given image is a selfie or not.

Clicking self pictures has become a sensation. People prefer taking selfies near danger zones such as end of a cliff, near the beach or a waterfall etc., Russian government has banned people taking selfies at many identified risk zones. Mumbai Police department has marked some 16 zones as dangerous for taking selfies (Lamba, Bharadhwaj, Vachher, Agarwal, Arora & Kumaraguru, 2016)

Objective

The incidence rate of deaths due to the dangers of taking selfie had been increasing in the last two years or so. In India, it is alarming to see that many people especially youngsters and young adults indulge in extreme risk taking behaviours such as walking on the railway tracks, standing on the cliff of a mountain range etc., to get a “perfect” selfie and ending up in losing their lives. However, there had been very less studies that try to understand the psychological background behind this risk taking behaviours and trying to intervene them.

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This study tries to review the existing literature on the selfie-posting behaviour and dangers related to selfie taking. By doing so, the author is making efforts to understand the psychological constructs behind this phenomenon in order to draw implications for the psychologists and various other mental health professionals and policy makers in controlling the occurrence of the selfie-related deaths and to tackle the psychological issues related to the same.

METHODOLOGY

The current study is a review study by collecting and reviewing the existing literature on the topic of interest i.e. Selfie-death and dangers of selfie-taking behaviour. In order to collect the literature, the researcher had used search engines like GOOGLE SCHOLAR and PUBMED which provide a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature. These search databases helped the researcher to search across many disciplines and sources: articles, theses, books, abstracts and court opinions, from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other web sites like sciencedirect, Taylor & Francis etc.,

The keywords that were used in these database searches are “Selfie”, “Selfie-addiction”, “and Psychology of selfie”, “Selfie-death”, “dangers of selfie” and “Selfie as a mental health issue”. These keywords helped the researcher to get access to about 60 articles out of which only a few articles were found to be relevant for the present study. The researcher had also used the sources like newspaper articles and other editorials to understand the magnitude of these problems and arriving at a statistical data on the no of casualties related to selfie-death.

Once the literature had been scrutinised and selected, the researcher had started reviewing them and made effort to gain the relative information from all the articles and tried to provide implications from the same in this present study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

People when they involve in taking dangerous selfies show importance to the number of likes, comments and shares they get for their selfies which act as a social currency especially for the youth population. The desire of getting more of this social currency prompts youth to extreme lengths (Lakshmi et.al, 2016). This was evident from the events that have occurred in the recent past as well. In one instance, a boy who had survived a mere death after being hit by a running train while trying to take a selfie near Hyderabad, India had reported that he did the same because he wanted to get more no of likes from his friends and showcase to them that he is “adventurous”.

So how does a selfie become dangerous? This review has identified that the selfie-taking behaviour can potentially cause the following in certain people.

1. Losing weight as a part of obtaining the zero figure
2. Difference between the “real self” and “ideal self”
3. Projection of identity on to others
4. Taking Selfies at risky areas
5. Putting others Life into risk to take selfies
6. Suicidal tendency and self harm – due to overwhelming feelings of inferiority

It also reported that sharing of emotional feelings with family and friends gradually decreased when social networking sites came into our lives. (Arumugam & Nagalingam, 2016) Studies have shown that people have lost their lives while travelling because they tried to click

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pictures of themselves either during driving a vehicle or while stopping by at dangerous places. These studies have also accumulated the data regarding the no. of casualties due to the selfie-taking behaviour (Subrahmanyam, Rao, Sivakumar & Sekhar, 2016). From these studies it is alarming to see that the no. of deaths in India is almost double that of the collective deaths that has occurred in other parts of the world. The condition is partially because India is one of the fastest growing countries in terms of the usage of smartphones with selfie-cameras (Ref. Table 1)

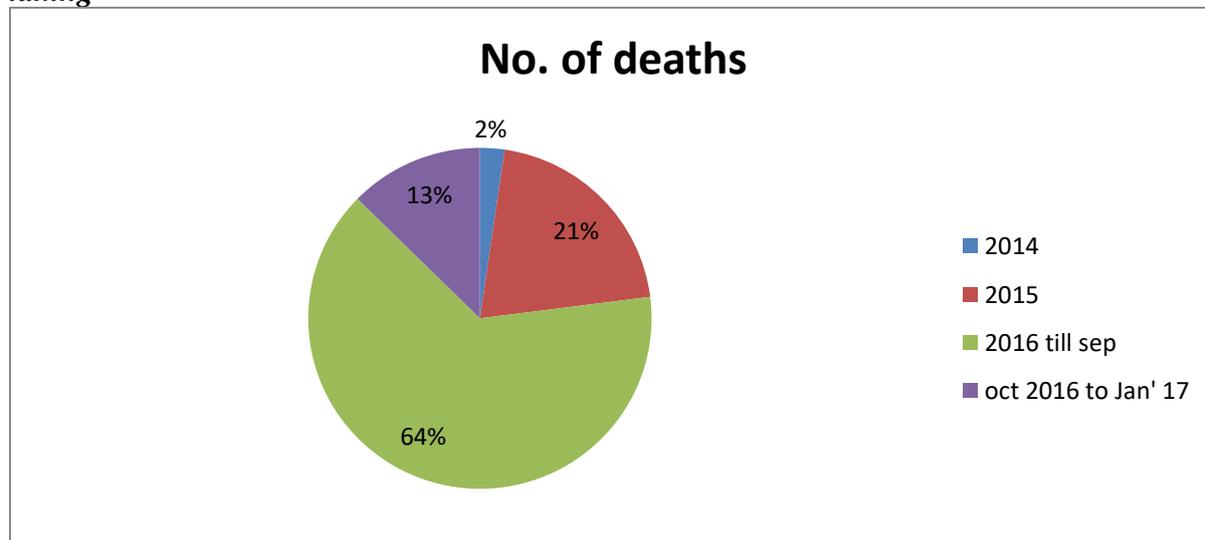
Table-1 shows the no. of selfie-deaths reported in newspapers between Jan 2014 to Jun 2019 (Based on news reports in Wikipedia)

Countries	No of deaths
India	200 +
Pakistan	30 +
USA	20 +
Russia	10
Phillipines, China	7-8
Spain	6
Indonesia, Portugal, Turkey, Peru	4
Rest of the world	20+

* Source- Wikipedia and newspaper excerpts

These deaths involved mostly group incidents, and others were individual incidents. By group incidents, it is meant that multiple deaths were reported in a single incident. An example of this could be an incident near Mangrul lake in the Kuhu district in India, where a group of 10 youth had gone for boating in the lake. While they were trying to take selfie, the boat tilted, and 7 people died. The study counted all such incidents as group incidents. Out of all the group incidents, 16 of the incidents involved 2 individuals, 5 involved 3 people, 1 incident had 5 casualties, and there were 2 group incidents claiming the lives of 7 people each. By analyzing selfie deaths - in terms of group and individual deaths, it can be concluded that taking dangerous selfies not only puts the selfie-taker at a risk but also can also be hazardous to the people around them (Lamba et. al, 2016)

Figure-1 shows the Year-wise No. of deaths reported in India alone because of selfie-taking



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From the figure above, it is seen that the most no. of deaths had been reported during the year 2016 and the death toll had been increasing steadily. Most of the accidents reported being group related which had led to the demise of larger number of people. Some of the main causes or locations of these deaths are by drowning in a lake, river, reservoirs, backwaters, sea or any other water body, falling from the cliffs, edges of the mountains, rocks, etc., falling from buildings, vehicles etc., and being hit by a train or fast moving vehicles on the road, missed shots by guns or any other weapon.

Psychological Constructs of Selfie

From the existing literature, it had been found that the following psychological constructs are highly correlated with selfie-taking behaviour and deaths related to the same.

Narcissism

Narcissism and self-esteem have frequently been proposed as important considerations in the upscale of selfie related culture in social media. Individuals with narcissistic tendencies may be more apt than others to post selfies on social media. Narcissism is a personality trait that manifests itself in an infatuation and obsession with oneself and in an aspiration to attain self gratification, achieve dominance, and satisfy ambition (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Going by this definition of Narcissism, people who involve in selfie-taking behaviour primarily involve in the same in order to attain gratification or pleasure for themselves which in turn boosts their ego or self. But on the other hand, what determines the sharing of selfies in SNSs is that because people who have narcissistic tendencies want to show themselves in a better light to others, creating an idealistic picture of themselves for others to see and admire. (Błachnio, Przepiorka & Rudnicka, 2013)

Indeed, studies indicated that self-reported frequency of selfie posts on social networking sites was significantly correlated with self reported narcissism among adult males. Furthermore, because the format of many social media sites allows individuals to carefully choose, edit, and even delete what is posted or who is allowed to access their posts, individuals with low self-esteem may be more inclined to self-disclose (i.e., post a selfie) on social media as opposed to making overt displays of their appearance or personality during face-to-face interaction.

Exhibitionism

Grandiose Exhibitionism (GE) is one of the components of Narcissism. It reflects self-absorption, vanity, and exhibitionistic propensities. Individuals with high level on GE are in love with them and crave for attention; they enjoy showing off and actively seek opportunities to promote themselves. For individuals high in this trait, posting selfies constitutes a means to not only seek attention but also admiration from others (Weiser, 2015).

Dark Triad of Personality

The Dark Triad of personalities includes subclinical (i.e., within a normal range of functioning) Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Machiavellians seek to satisfy their own needs with little regard for morals, often by manipulating others. Narcissism had already been covered earlier. Finally, psychopaths lack empathy and often engage in impulsive and thrill-seeking behaviors regardless of the cost to others.

Admiration Demand is a related concept. It serves as a need for an individual to be admired by others. It predicted number of selfies posted by men. Sometimes indulging in dangerous selfie posting has earned a lot of appreciations, likes, and comments on social media thus

fulfilling their need for admiration (Sorokowski, Sorokowska, Oleszkiewicz, Frackowiak, Huk & Pisanski, 2015)

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to an overall positive or negative evaluation of the self. One way of fulfilling self-esteem needs is the use of social media to communicate interpersonally which might provide an opportunity for people with low self-esteem to engage in public behaviour with reduced risk of humiliation and reduced social anxiety. Hence the highest number of selfies is posted by the people with high self-esteem. Also, the people with low self-esteem levels take and post the lowest number of selfies. It was also seen that there exists a significant relationship between low self-esteem levels and posting selfies to boost self-confidence.

Big Five Personality Factors

The five-factor model classifies personality traits of individuals into five dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Extraversion refers to the type of personality that is sociable, enthusiastic, and outgoing. Individuals who are extraverted enjoy being the subject of attention. Openness to experience involves being curious, reflecting the propensity to seek out creative and new experiences (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992).

Selfie-taking behaviour is positively correlated with extraversion especially taking group selfies. However, there is no literature available on predicting what factors amongst these lead to dangers by clicking selfies. From the above definition, it seems to the researcher that the people high on both extraversion and openness are the ones who would like to take more risks in order to be the stronger subject of attention amongst their friends thus leading to disaster for themselves and sometimes for their friends as well. But there is no literature available to corroborate the same.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Selfie-death seems to be one of the contemporary psycho-social issues which had bloomed into existence in the last couple of years across the countries more so in the Indian sub-continent. Selfie-taking and posting selfies on SNSs had been on the rise and in few people it has actually led to the adverse mental health effects.

As we have seen in this article, some of the common psychological constructs related to selfie-taking are narcissism, exhibitionism and need for popularity. Sometimes it also becomes an obsession for people especially youngsters whom post about 20-25 selfies on average per day. A newspaper article published recently had reports of three youngsters admitted in All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi after being reported with selfie-addiction. Some of the common psycho-social issues seen with people suffering from selfie-obsession are irritability, drop in academic performance, and excessive grooming. In few women, it is also leading to the body-image disturbances which require greater attention from the mental health professionals.

Some people, those who are limited in their real life interactions use social media as a means for fulfilling their communication needs with others. As we have seen in this study, selfie-posting is becoming a way of communication for people poor in social interactions and having high levels of shyness and in some cases social anxiety as well.

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There has been a report circulated saying that selfie-taking is a psychiatric disorder and classified in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-5) by American Psychiatric Association (APA). However, in their annual report, APA had clearly mentioned that there is no such disorder called selfitis and expressed concern over the psycho-social issues due to the selfie-taking.

The main objective of this review study was to throw lights on the need for psycho-social interventions in order to decrease the occurrence of selfie-deaths and address the disturbances associated with the same. It should be done at three levels: Individual level, community level and policy-making.

At the *individual level*, the role of mental health professionals i.e. Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Social workers, Nurses and other related professionals is pivotal in helping the individual suffering from excessive obsession about selfie taking. A thorough assessment of the selfie-related behaviour is needed to get an understanding of the individual. This becomes the first step. Screening for excessive selfie taking can be done with most of the youngsters or young adults visiting mental health setups. Psycho-education about the dangers of taking selfies, limiting social media network usage, enhancing their socio-occupational functioning and improving interpersonal relationships are some of the goals of the psychological treatment of the condition. Interventions should be tailor made depending upon the co-morbid conditions of the individual. If needed, medications to be also considered apart from psychological interventions.

At *community level*, education of the dangers of the selfie right from the schools is needed. Usage of smart phones should be encouraged with caution. Sign boards can be kept at places that are considered to be dangerous for taking selfies and Smartphone usage can be restricted in those regions.

In the *policy making* too, certain regulations can be brought in by the legislators in order to prevent the deaths caused by taking selfie. Mobile phone companies those who create Smartphone with front camera can also include a statutory warning following the guidelines for taking selfies. It is difficult to control the usage of social media since it serves various other purposes but the social media can also involve in spreading messages and creating awareness by posting themselves about dangers of selfie taking, reducing the no of selfie uploads using higher technologies and user policies can be thought of in the future.

CONCLUSION

Selfie-related injuries and deaths have been overlooked despite the steady increase in the number of incidents causing death especially in India. Measures need to be taken at larger levels to identify early stages of selfie related problems, counsel the youth as well as needy and help them come out of this form of behavioural addiction. This review identifies a need to conduct survey and trials to elicit data in the same regard for further interventions.

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Conflict of Interest

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