

A sociological perspective on Selfies

Disclaimer: The themes chosen by me from the provided table are as follows:

Technology	Social Relationships	Social Spaces	Concepts	Social Institutions
Selfie	Self	Human Cognition	Prosumption	Economy

Selfies or what intellectuals call “digital viruses to the world’s IQ”, are portraits of oneself taken, typically, by a smartphone held at arm's length. Since the first ever selfie (technically) taken in 1839 by an amateur chemist by the name Robert Cornelius from Philadelphia ^{1 2}, the definition of a “selfie” has covered immense area in terms of the breadth; for example, it’s still a selfie if it has multiple subjects in it, as long as one of the subjects featured took that picture. Having said that, it’s essential we stick to the definition declared above to be able to analyse critically and veracious-ly.

Sociological Imagination ³ is to sociology just like appetizers are to a full course meal; it’s incomplete without it. Sociological Imagination enables to place oneself outside of everyday routines and be able to view one’s actions or life from a third-party perspective. It is the intersection between biography and history. Going forward is my response to the three crucial

questions one needs to ask when viewing from the lens of Sociological Imagination.

- **What are the societal structures that brought this emergence of selfies? How has the fabric of society changed from its primitive form?**

I reckon that the Network society, as defined by Manuel Castelle as “a society whose social structure is made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies”^{4 5} could be a reasonable explanation for the emergence of selfies in such a societal structure. The way Van Dijk redefines it “as an information society with a ‘nervous system’ of social and media networks shaping its prime modes of organisation and most important structures”⁶ clearly portrays that information, here, is a basic element of the nervous system of a network society and with this arrival of the Information Age (fading away from the Industrial Age), “the communications technologies allow for the annihilation of space and for globalization”⁷.

- **What are the factors which contributed to popularising this digital technology in this timeline? What are the characteristics of such sociological factors which weren't present in history?**

As communicated above, communication technologies (such as the internet) play a significant role, in this Information Age. Technologies like Social Media, known to amplify trends (as discussed in the class), never existed previously and the birth of such technologies in this timeline has made selfies scale globally.

Also, I'd argue that with the introduction to the Internet, people, funnily enough, were more “lonely” than ever so^{8 9} (well, it depends on how you use it¹⁰). This kicked in low self-esteem in their blood and selfies acted as the antidotes to cure this and boosted the low self-esteem.

- **Who are the people who produce these selfies? Who are the ones who consume it?**

People who have access to the hardware to click selfies (smartphones, cameras) majorly are the producers (and the consumers!) of this technology. Furthermore, people who have the tools to connect to the Internet and have social media accounts are the major carriers, I'd say, of this technology. Of course, there's a pronounced 'Digital Divide' visible here (as seen in the case of Dalits ¹¹ in the class).

To settle the flow of the rest of the article, I tackle by answering how the digital technology of selfie cavorts with each of the mentioned themes individually.

How do selfies redefine (if it does) one's perception of self?

'Self' being the root word, one would not be showing justice if he/she doesn't analyse how selfies modify one's perception of self.

Coming from the theory of 'Social Constructionism' ¹², the 'self' is a social construct too, as discussed in the class; our identity is created by the social interactions with other people. 'Symbolic Interactionism' ¹³ further refines the above statement into - how the 'self' develops due to the 'significant others' and the 'generalized others'. The 'significant others' are those who belong in your personal space; with whom you carry out interactions in the immediate present. Whilst, the 'generalized others' simply put are the ones we cannot put a face to but they modify our perception of self; for example, CGPA, salary, etc. (as discussed in the class). I believe that selfies are a manifestation of the 'generalized others' simply because it acts as a form of data double that rests in the digital space, away from the immediate interaction, yet, can change our perception of our own body image and how we think about ourselves in the grand scheme of things! It's funny when we realize that how these lifeless matrices of pixels can redefine the 'self'.

Selfies can also be a way to realize self-tracking, which is also referred to as lifelogging or personal analytics by Deborah Lupton in the paper ¹⁴ discussed in the class. People take selfies of just about anything and everything they do in their lives, maybe, to reflect upon it later.

Do selfies propagate through the social spaces of human cognition?

To understand the motivations behind a selfie, Ann Steele interestingly points out that the exposure a selfie gives to the one who clicks can make them feel like a celebrity and make them feel important ¹⁵, just like every generation thinks they are the special ones. This tinge of narcissism is now embedded in the brains of the selfie-takers and this might manifest itself in the numerous activities they do in their everyday lives.

Poor self-esteem, obsession, mental disorder - many such words are thrown when talking about selfies in this digital age although very little credible research is done to answer if selfies are the cause of it. A study on 'Selfitis' ¹⁶ was indeed carried out to address this which allowed them to come up with a 'Selfitis Behaviour Scale' which can be used to assess the severity.

Although applicable to photography in general, there's a ton of research on how even the naive act of taking a photo ¹⁷ can mess with our memories because we just weren't paying attention ¹⁷ and we rely on our smartphones to do all the work. Our brains, subconsciously, go - "Why do I have to remember it if there's a picture of it for the future"? This, given time for evolution to do its "magic", can perhaps degrade the 'memory unit' of our brains because it's not needed anymore.

What are the ways the concept of prosumption surface in the case of selfies?

The concept of prosumption (Pro[*duction*] + [Con]sumption) deals with the both production and consumption simultaneously rather than dealing with either of those individually (as discussed in the class ¹⁸) ¹⁹. Taking selfies is an instance of prosumption purely because the producer of the selfie (the one who clicked it) is invariably its first consumer (the simple act of viewing

the selfie makes him/her a consumer). After an exhaustive spree of clicking-selecting-filtering, only a handful of these products (selfies) are made available on technologies like social media for others to consume it. Additionally, George Ritzer puts up an interesting point stating that “the viewer of other’s selfies is not merely a consumer of the photos, but is also a producer in the sense that the viewer of the selfie is free to interpret the work not governed by the intent of the person who took it” ²⁰ .

The fascinating point to me when thinking of selfies as a form of prosumption is how we look at selfies as products. This opens a whole new domain of analysis; for example, “Just like any other products, how are selfies made more “attractive” to be “sold” in the “market”?”, “Are the subjects in the selfies seen as products too? If yes, what are its implications?”, etc. Apart from the above, as George points out, thinking of selfies in association with the concept of prosumption “allows us to compare selfies to other contemporary forms of prosumption such as blogs and writing on Facebook walls” ²¹ and how this can help us to get a richer understanding of the concept of prosumption.

Do selfies play a role in driving the economy? If yes, how?

The primary question to ask prior to analysing selfies and their effect on the economy is that “Why are sociologists even worried about the economy”? As discussed in the class, in the social institution of ‘Economy’ there are various nodes at which exchanges happen which mark importance in analysing social relationships. These very interactions (micro and macro) and the mends in relationships are what sociologists are attracted to. Also, the Marxist theory of a capitalist society comprising of the ‘base’ (means of production, relations of production - Economy) and the ‘superstructure’ (State, Religion, Education) ²² hints at how the relationship is bidirectional; the economy affecting education, religion and vice-versa. Irrespective of the recursive relationship, Marx claims that the influence of the ‘base’ is predominant which is why looking at the economy is a crucial ingredient to cook a perfect meal of ‘analysis’.

Selfies are made possible (and scalable) by a variety of products and services. From selfie sticks to high-end smartphones crafted to click the best selfies, from software-induced filters to enhance one’s looks to the social media network where the selfies are consumed - all these makeup what

people call the “Selfie Economy”²³ ! Ridiculous statistics like eBay claiming to sell one selfie-stick every 30 seconds during the months of September and November (2014)^{24 25} paves the way for the prediction of the “global selfie stick market to have a compounded annual growth rate of over 26% by 2020 to over \$200 million”²⁶ . Over on the smartphone market, things are moving even rapidly with the introduction of cutting-edge technologies like Artificial Intelligence to enhance one’s selfies (Ex: Oppo F5, Vivo V15 Pro). Even the front-cameras on the phones are evolving to match up with the selfies market, ergo, eventually contributing to the “Selfie Economy”.

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