The "selfie" phenomenon between psychology, normality and extremisms

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ABSTRACT

The continuous interconnection made possible by social networks in the digital era is causing deep changes in social communication and in life. These changes are reflected in every sphere of human existence, from work to entertainment, from politics to art, from community life to intimate life, regardless of the degree of people education. In this article I offer an interesting analysis related to the selfie phenomenon, starting by a possible definition and considering its relation to self-esteem, phychology, extremisms, positive aspects.

Keywords: Selfie, Psychology, Life, Death, Self-esteem, Society, Social networks, Dependency

1. INTRODUCTION: THE "SELFIE" PHENOMENON

The advent of the digital era and the constant interconnection realised by social networks are creating deep changes in social communication, with impact in every sphere of human existence. Everywhere you look, there is no place without a person who takes a selfie.

The word "selfie" has entered with full right into vocabularies; in Italy, for example, one of the best known vocabulary, the "Treccani", cites the word as "neologism of 2014" and gives as first meaning [1]: "Self-portrait photo, generally done with a smartphone or webcam,

and then shared in sites of social relation". The word "selfie" has been named "word of the year" in 2013 by the Oxford Dictionary [2], considering the exponential spread of the term, in relation to a phenomenon that is for a lot of people a form of addiction, resulting in some cases in fatalities for the improper attention dedicated to the shoots.

The selfie has slight different features with respect to the canonical camera self-shoot; the latter allows to get away from the lens, thanks to a delayed release mechanism of the photo, while the selfie is done holding on hand the device and pointing the lens at her/himself.

To understand what is happening in the era of virtual reality, we must refer to processes of maturation of the human psyche. The birth is both a traumatic moment of mother separation and a liberation. The infant lives great anguish determined by difficulties to fulfill her/his needs, before her/his senses allow her/him to interact with the world. The first stage of human existence is self-erotic and narcissistic; the baby tries to remain within her/his psycho-biological sphere, trying to eliminate the perception of the outside world, that she/he cannot control.

Current historical time is marked by a general narcissistic regression, perhaps determined by the enormous perceptual pressure we are under. Internet has cancelled distances, TVs are always on, music is everywhere, often reduced to obsessive rhythm. This leads to a withdrawal into self, in an attempt to reduce external stresses, a kind of psychic immune reaction.

Two fundamental mechanisms of the human mind, the "identification" and the "projection", recall the photographic process:

a) the "identification" is the process by which a person builds her/his own personality through the assimilation of a part or parts of another person, and modeling her/himself on them. Parts of the outside world are mentally absorbed, just like a camera, and stored in a holder, the analogue of a memory card on a computer;

b) the "projection" is a primitive defense mechanism, that shifts personal feelings or characteristics toward other objects or persons. It is similar to a photographic enlarger that, from the stored support, projects some information on another object, i.e. the screen.

Technologies change and modernize, but people desire to immortalize the moment, the "now", to be able to live that again. The visual representation is one of the most archaic acts of human being; watching the pictograms stored in caves where our ancient ancestors lived, we understand how much structural is the human need to represent and leave traces.

The human being commits most of his mental energies to follow what happens in the present time, but many of his thoughts, emotions, desires are engaged in a world where time does not exist and where they survive; in photography, images, full of their affective resonance, they continue to live during years [3].

At the extreme level, selfies are connected to death, that symbolically represents an experience of loss, absence, emptiness. The virtual world makes even more wrenching the generalised loneliness of a fragmented and narcissistic society like ours. With selfies people photograph themselves, may discard unwelcome poses, choose the ones that seem the most successful; these are indeed the ones that best coincide with the ideal image that people have of themselves.

When the person is in a state of troubles in management and realization of desires, often lives this impossibility as a narcissistic injury. Selfies become then a reassuring ritual, an attempt to narcissistic protection; people withdraw the interest from the world and concentrate

to themselves. Social networks become the virtual equivalent of the gathering places of the past, facilitated by the fact that everyone can have this virtual place at home or wherever she/he is. Social networks are not only "sharing", but also "archiving", not only a collective showcase, but also a singular album, where you can always "admire" yourself in the infinite memory of selfies.

The selfie is often done quickly, almost without thinking about the aesthetic result; it is so linked to the mood of the moment and to the protagonism amount of who does it. It can say about a person even more than a professional photographer can do, especially as regards the individual's personality, bypassing the problem of the presence of a stranger, the photographer in fact, that could mislead the spontaneity of the portrayed person.

Especially for adolescents there are negative aspects related to selfies; they live the age where they try to define who really are, what they want to be. They can try to develop different identities and dissonances between what they want to be and who they are in real life [4]. The desire to capture some moments of our existence has always existed; the problem is that today the digital cameras accompany people wherever they go, are much more invasive than in the past. Many people have begun to see the world through the digital eye, therefore forgetting how to enjoy the real experience.

2. THE SELFIE ALPHABET

Selfies become a witness of existence, and require the spread on the net for being certified (through "likes", emotional expressions, verbal comments, shares). It has been created a whole alphabet to define the various hashtags dedicated to selfies, starting with the body parts.

a) In addition to foregrounds, it is shooted the best profile (#helfie, by "half selfie"), only the legs (#lelfie, by "leg selfie"), the fingernails, perhaps after a perfect manicure (#nelfie, by "nail selfie") , eccentric hair styling (#helfie, by "hair selfie"), the lower back (#belfie, by "b-side selfie"), male nudes torsos (#shirtless selfie), women's breasts intent to breastfeed (#brelfie, by "breast selfie") (Figures 1,2).

b) There are various expressions such as the tongue outside (#tongue-out selfie), the duck beak lips (#duck selfie), the fashion selfie (#felfie) showing garments, the wellness selfie (#welfie), that highlight body care, the gym selfies (#gelfie), that enhance the body's muscles (Figures 3,4).

c) The self-shoot is also extended to the presence of pets or farm animals, even plushies, and hashtags dedicated to them are a lot (#alfie, by "animal selfie", #delfie, by "dog selfie", #relfie, by "reindeer selfie", #pelfie, by "pet or plush selfie", #felfie, by "farm animal selfie") (Figures 5,6).

d) Other types of self-shoots are marked by the places in which they are made, as in the bathroom (#telfie, by "toilette selfie", #melfie, by "mirror selfie"), in front of paintings or statues (#museum selfie), next to coffins of deceased people (#funeral selfie), driving cars or motorcycles (#driving selfie) (Figures 7,8) [11,12].

Figure 1. Lelfie [5].
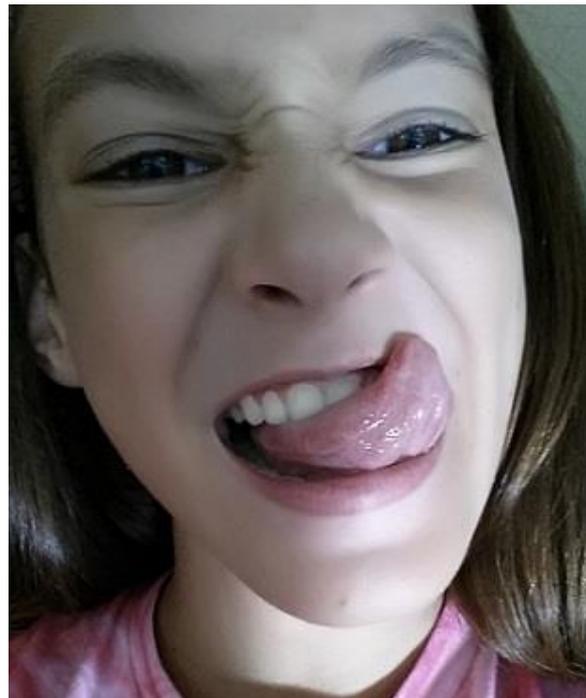

Figure 2. Nelfie [6].

Figure 3. Duck selfie [7].

Figure 4. Tongue-out selfie [8].

Figure 5. Delfie [9].

Figure 6. Alfie [10].

Figure 7. Melfie [13].

Figure 8. Funeral selfie [14].

3. SELFIE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Every obsession hides a fear, testifies the vulnerability of those who experience it, concerning what dark impulse lies in being hassled by the need to take selfies. A self-photo can transmit the state of mind in a more immediate way than a verbal post, but the publication of selfies is the most direct way to draw the attention of others for getting their approval.

The process of editing photos is linked to high levels of self-objectification, a concept that refers to those who appreciate themselves overall for their physical appearance, rather than for personality traits or for their skills and success in life. People who have the tendency to self-objectification publish more selfies in social networks and, receiving positive comments about their physical appearance, reinforce their behavior. This is an artificially increased self-esteem, which does not account for other factors of personality. People who share a lot of photos in their social networks, are those whose self-esteem is mainly based and exposed to the evaluation of the others. Moreover, not all social network's users are active, many persons simply watch passively what others do.

People usually post selfies when they enjoy or are happy; this makes easier for others to look at these pictures and think that own lives are not so exciting [15]. People with a strong desire to appear famous are more sensitive to selfies, but in this case these posts increase their self-esteem. Who gets depressed by watching selfies of others is actually depressed because her/his life is unsatisfactory; she/he sees in the smiling faces of "friends" a further proof of her/his failure. But also the smiling faces of friends can hide deep situations of conflict [16].

4. SELFIE AND PSYCHOLOGY

Research is showing that some psychopathic traits, such as impulsiveness, lack of self-control and narcissism, are phenomena that can be also associated to the number of published

selfies. Narcissism can be defined as a relentless pursuit of adoration by others, along with a selfish behavior [17,18]. For an increased number of people the value attributed to themselves is linked to addiction of a need of external affirmation and therefore the true "self" is secondary if compared to the dummy one, that is built on the basis of what the others are expecting by them. It is important to take into consideration the psychological influence that this phenomenon can have on the younger generation. It is possible that in coming years new diseases related to psychological disorders linked to social media will arise.

The so called "dark triad" of personality is a group consisting of three behavioral traits: machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy [16,19]:

a) machiavellians are strategic and cynics, seek the satisfaction of their needs with little moral constraints and manipulating the others;

b) in the narcissist personality the perception of grandeur and superiority over the others prevail, but with a sense of insecurity;

c) psychopathy involves lack of empathy, impulsive and thrill-seeking behavior, with little consideration of the others.

The outcomes of studies seem to highlight in particular a correlation between narcissism and tendency to share selfies on the web. It has been found no particular correlation with the machiavellinism dimension.

The narcissism (narcissistic personality disorder - NPD) is defined by the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" (DSM-IV) as "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity or grandeur (in fantasy or behavior), a need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts" [20]. In narcissistic disorder the subject is absorbed by concerns related to self-perception, to how others perceive it. She/he has precise characteristics of personality and attitude: is manipulative, incapable of empathy, anaffective, with an inflated self-esteem and the tendency to exploit others for own benefit.

Social media are an ideal stage on which the narcissist can show her/him through photographs, status updates, comments, shares, gathering support and congratulations. People using social media like Facebook with great frequency, tend more than the other to receive diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder or to suffer of insecurity [21].

5. THE EXTREME SELFIE

The extreme selfie phenomenon goes further; it goes from inside to outside, to the dizzying heights of the skyscrapers, to the railway rails, to the crazy rides on cars or motorcycles (Figures 9,10). The pioneers have been the climbers of skyscrapers, towers, bridges, statues, trellises and what else could give a sense of verticality and dangerousness. These are self-shoots with empty background for signing a feat, a view of themselves on the edge of nothingness.

There are the "air selfies", shooted in freefall with parachute, by leaning out of the aircraft cabin, hanging in the void attached to ropes or cables. The "marine selfies" are made with whales and sharks, when one is overwhelmed by a wave with the surf, throwing her/himself headlong from a waterfall. With the "wild selfies" people embrace lions, tigers, elephants, running away from angry bulls or bears (Figures 11,12).

Figure 9. Motorcycle selfie [22].

Figure 10. Skyscraper selfie [23].

Figure 11. Shark selfie [24].

Figure 12. Lion selfie [25].

Other real challenges of danger regard reckless acts, as to stay on the rails just before the train arrival, to climb on the pylons of high voltage cables, to use for joke weapons or hand grenades, to self-shoot in catastrophic circumstances such as fire, explosions, shipwrecks, attacks. There have been cases of deaths on the rails as they tried to take a selfie, for having touched the high-voltage wires, blown up while taking a selfie holding a grenade in the act of trigger it, for a shot in the head by mistake taking a selfie by pointing the gun to the

head, brutally gored while trying to take a selfie chased by bulls, flew off a cliff for getting a panoramic selfie, always for having a photo in extreme conditions.

When the show is done also at the risk of life, then the behavioral traits can take psychotic tendencies, where there is no more the perception of a real danger. The extreme selfie seems to support this need of certification at any cost, even at that of life. In the virtual dimension of social networks, in which everything can be simulated, really dying looks like the only authentic way to make real their representation, because nothing like death can attest the existence. Do not realize the risk of dying, or deliberately challenge a risk just to make "extraordinary" a trivial experience, complaints a psychotic impulse to go beyond themselves, doing something exceptional. Some psychologists have defined with the term "selficide" this tendency to exceed the daily alienation even at the cost of own life. Therefore it is possible to get to situations where the selfie is treated as a substance that can be addictive and habit-forming, that can alter mental activity and behavior, pushing to simulate extreme acts. In this dangerous game it hides the true obsession for selfies.

6. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF SELFIE

Selfies have not only negative or borderline aspects; there are also many positive aspects in doing a selfie. In the past people did photographs and family movies; they were born to be kept by themselves, while selfies are born generally (but not necessarily) to be shared. This is an important difference, but the root is always the same amateur, private image, to be not shared with the whole world, but with an expanded version of the family and of private space, i.e. the "social networks friends".

When ordinary unknown people take a selfie for sharing it with friends on social networks, it is an attempt of self-representation, for getting a long-time image. That image betrays their fragility, the constant human search for personal identity.

But not always the post of a selfie conceals a specific weakness, it can be a way to satisfy her/his own ego in a healthy and fun way. Everything is in the right measure attributed to our image and to the judgment that others give of it. Through selfies people also take care of ourselves, demonstrate love for ourselves. When this love is excessive, it becomes easily narcissism, which is the dark side of selfies, for which it is so much despised; the mistake is to hate the instrument and not those who narcissistically use it [26].

7. CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays there are no specific studies that attest an exact illness related to selfies, although there are different forms of abuse that can lead to dependence, frustration, conditioning, inadequacy, self-reference. It is thus more a discomfort than a disorder, more an excess than a disease.

In United States, where often diseases are "created" for the exclusive benefit of pharmaceutical multinationals (see the continuous revisions of DSM), it has started talking about "Selfies Syndrome" as a disorder that affects people which are too much concerned with their own digital image on social media. Instead of thinking that social media make us

more narcissistic, we must carefully consider the use that we make of them; not all users use social media in excessive and compulsive way.

Selfies are not harmful in themselves, as it happens with any new technology. One of the big problems is that today they are the expression of a society obsessed from the image at the point of having embraced narcissism. It is therefore important to learn how to enjoy every moment of real life and calibrating the use of technology. The image will probably be lost among thousands of photos, experiences and emotions remain on the contrary alive in our memories.

When we take a selfie, we claim the right to have an image that represents us, without a mediator (a photographer) who decides persons having the right to be photographed. In this sense the selfie is another step in the process of dis-intermediation made by the new media [27].

Biography

Paolo Di Sia teaches physics by the University of Bolzano-Bozen (Italy) and is a member of ISEM in Palermo (Italy). He obtained a bachelor in metaphysics, a master in theoretical physics and a PhD in mathematical modelling applied to nanotechnology. He interested in classical-quantum-relativistic nanophysics, theoretical physics, Planck scale physics, mind-brain science, philosophy of science, science education. He is author of 225 works at today (articles on national and international journals, international book chapters, books, internal academic notes, works on scientific web-pages, in press), is reviewer of two mathematics academic books, reviewer of many international journals. He obtained 9 international awards, has been included in Who's Who in the World 2015 and 2016, selected for 2017 "Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award", is member of 7 scientific societies and of many International Advisory/Editorial Boards. http://www.paolodisia.com/

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