

Me and my brands: drivers and outcomes of ‘brand selfies’

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Cite as:

Borel Laurence, Stathopoulou Anastasia, Christodoulides George (2020), Me and my brands: drivers and outcomes of ‘brand selfies’. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 49th, (63842)

Paper from the 49th Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 26-29, 2020.



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Abstract:

In spite of a growing body of research in social networks, no empirical research has set out to establish what motivates consumers to post brand selfies on social media, that is selfies posted alongside a brand. A conceptual model is developed using in-depth interviews and an online survey of 511 respondents. Six motives for posting brand selfies are identified (attention-seeking, status-seeking, social interaction, archiving, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence) to influence brand selfie posting intent, which can consequently influence solicited and unsolicited WoM. The results contribute both to theory and practice by providing new insights to the brand selfie phenomenon and guidelines to digital managers of how to better segment and manage their customers and their digital campaigns.

Keywords: brand selfies, posting intent, WoM

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media track

1. Introduction

A recent phenomenon related to Social Networking Sites (SNS) use generating considerable practitioner and academic interest is the ‘selfie’ phenomenon, defined as “*a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website*” (The Oxford Dictionary, 2013). Selfies are “typically taken at arm’s length or in a mirror, and as such tend to be relatively close up pictures” (Iqani and Schroeder, 2015, p. 6). Recent research by Samsung suggests that “millennials will take an average of 25,000 selfies in their lifetime, the equivalent of one selfie a day during an average lifespan” (Brown, 2019). The propagation and commonality of selfies may be attributed to a technologically-led paradigm shift brought by the emergence of smartphones (e.g. Senft and Baym, 2015), which have considerably changed the way we take and consume photographs, but also the purpose of those photographs. As a modern form of self-portraiture (e.g. Fallon 2014; Senft and Baym 2015), selfies provide an autobiography of the self (Rugg, 2007) to freeze or maintain a moment in time (Carbon, 2017).

The present research is concerned with brand selfies, as a sub-genre of selfies, which remains empirically unresearched in spite of their potential impact on brands and consumer-brand relationships. Brand selfies may be marketer-led or spontaneously created by consumers, as a form of brand User-Generated Content (UGC), the latter being the focus of this research. In recent years, brand selfies have become a commonplace ‘practice of consumption’, and an important means through which average consumers consciously or unconsciously are self-presented (Iqani and Schroeder, 2015). This self-presentation is achieved by showcasing *how* consumers incorporate brands in their personal identity (Belk, 1988). Through brand selfies, consumers help promote a variety of brands in an authentic and credible manner (Lim 2016) eliciting greater engagement around the brand and products featured in the mind of the viewer (Lim, 2016). The products and brands consumers buy, and by extension the brand selfies consumers create and share, help them fulfil their inherent desire to tell stories about who they are (Wattanasuwan, 2005) or who they aspire to be. To explore and examine this phenomenon, this paper sets out to understand the motives and outcomes of brand selfies and develop a conceptual model that examines how different self- and brand-related motives affect posting intent of a brand selfie and consequently how this can lead to Word-of-Mouth (WoM).

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) is one of the most frequently used theoretical approaches used to research motives for media consumption (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973). As a theoretical framework, the U&G theory aims to establish an understanding of (1) what drives people actively choose to use certain media (Katz Blumler and Gurevitch 1973) to satisfy their needs or wants (Papacharissi, 2008), and (2) to understand the consequences of such media consumption (Katz et al., 1973). UGC and brand UGC posting lie at the heart of SNS use, transforming individuals from passive consumers of content to active producers (e.g. Muntinga, Moorman and Smit 2011). The posting of brand UGC online such as brand selfies, pertains to the highest level of social media activeness that others can in turn consume (Muntinga, Moorman and Smit 2011). Posting intent is therefore defined here as individuals' intention to post a brand selfie online on a social media platform such as Instagram.

Extending past research on U&G and based on study 1 (explained below), through 20 in-depth interviews and theoretical matching, six main motives of brand selfie posting intent were identified: attention-seeking, status-seeking, social interaction, archiving, actual and ideal self-congruence. The following conceptual model is based on these motives that are hypothesized to influence brand selfie posting intent, which consequently can influence solicited and unsolicited WoM. These relationships are depicted in figure 1.

Attention-seeking is a self-presentational behavior commonly associated with SNS use (Seidman, 2012). The attention-seeking construct has been defined as the sentiment of getting attention and importance from others (Park et al., 2009). SNS enable individuals to seek attention from others through the posting on UGC and brand UGC. Based on Sung et al. (2016) attention-seeking was found to be one of the key motives for posting selfies online. Digital photo posting enables users to seek attention from others by driving attention to the self, and gain social rewards in the form of likes and comments (Malik, Dhir and Nieminen 2016). This attention is expected to be magnified if brands are hashtags and depicted in the selfie, by harnessing the brand's cachet and symbolic values. Thus, *Attention-seeking will positively influence brand selfie posting intent (H1)*.

Status seekers "continually strain to surround themselves with the visible evidence of the superior rank they are claiming" (Packard, 1959, p. 5). Any type of brand has the potential to help individuals seek status, provided they have the right cachet, which is conveyed through its symbolic values (O'Cass and Frost 2002) and benefit those who display or buy these brands. Therefore, the display of status brands helps status seekers create their identity. SNS offer the

perfect environment for status seekers to further enhance their status online by engaging in capital enhancing practices (Zillien and Hargittal, 2009). Status seeking is about getting recognition and (social) elevation from others. Through social networks, consumers might elevate their social standing by posting pictures with status brands. Therefore, *status-seeking will positively influence brand selfie posting intent (H2)*.

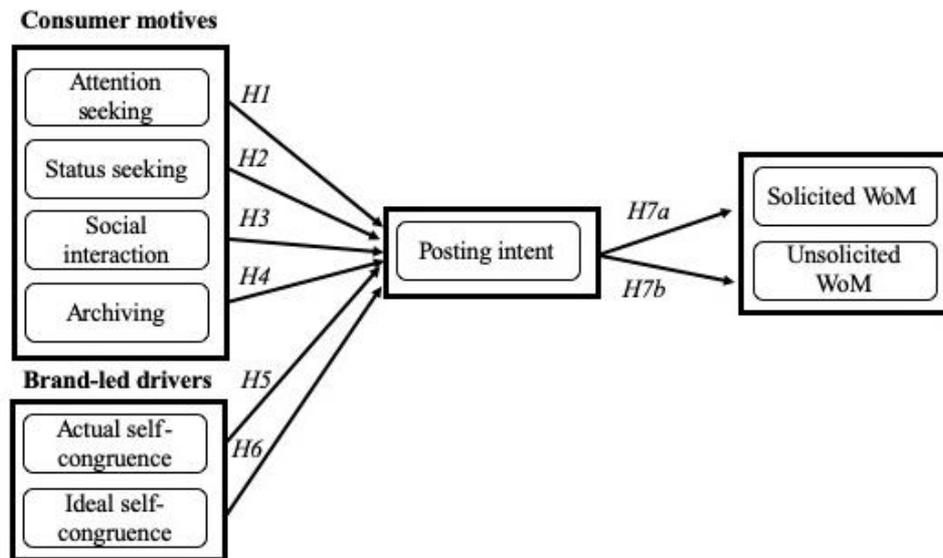
Early U&G research highlights that media use helps foster personal relationship such as social interaction (McQuail, Blumler, and Brown, 1972). In recent years, people have started using SNS to maintain relationships and interact with others (Muntinga, Moorman and Smit 2011). For instance, Facebook is regarded as a place to interact and socialize with others (Whiting and Williams, 2013), by commenting on status updates or sending private messages. Furthermore, the dyadic nature of SNS also drives consumer-brand social interactions (Kwon et al., 2014). Brand selfies enable users to interact with each other as well as brands. Thus, it is expected that *social interaction will positively influence brand selfie posting intent (H3)*.

Archiving is the digital storing and saving of experiences and possessions as a mean to record the self and preserve memories (Etgar and Amichai-Hamburger, 2017). SNS enable the archiving of memories through their very design, by aiding the maintenance of a sense of the past (Belk, 1991), whilst subconsciously encouraging further (brand) UGC creation. Brand selfies help consumers express their thoughts and feelings about brands, whilst documenting their lives (Presi, Maehle and Kleppe, 2016), and allow them to capture both important and mundane moments (Iqani and Schroeder 2015; Sung et al. 2016). Thus, *archiving will positively influence brand selfie posting intent (H4)*.

The *self-congruence* construct draws on the idea that consumers prefer brands with images that are consistent with their own self-image (Sirgy, 1985). The actual-self and the ideal-self facets of a consumer are affiliated with product image. Thus, an actual self-congruent brand reflects who the consumer actually is, whereas an ideally self-congruent brand reflects who the consumer would like to be. According to Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak and Sirgy (2011), self-image congruence explains and predicts different aspects of consumer behavior. Hollenbeck and Khaikati (2012) showed that consumers use brands interactions to mold impressions of themselves that may represent either the ideal and/or the actual self. Furthermore, Wallace, Buil and de Chernatony (2016) found that self-congruence with a brand page is increased by social ties within one's social network. Although no research linking self-congruence and brand UGC has been identified, based on the aforementioned studies, it is expected that, *actual (H5) and ideal (H6) self-congruence will positively influence brand selfie posting intent*.

Finally, previous research has suggested that brand UGC such as brand selfies enable consumers to communicate about the brands they consume, and as such may be regarded as a form of WoM (Christodoulides, Jevons and Bonhomme, 2012). Thus, it is expected that *brand selfies can lead to solicited WoM (H7a)*, a pro-active behavior (Wien and Olsen, 2014) and *unsolicited WoM (H7b)*, a reactive behavior (Wien and Olsen, 2014).

Figure 1: Conceptual model



3. Methodology

3.1 Study 1: In-depth Interviews

A two-step approach was used to undertake this study. Firstly, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with (brand) selfie users to identify the motives for posting brand selfies. To be selected for the interviews, respondents had to exhibit moderate to high levels of (brand) selfie posting. Respondents were recruited until theoretical saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007). The interviews aimed to uncover respondents' *own brand selfies behaviors* by establishing, what types of brands would take a central role or a peripheral role in a brand selfie. This was followed by a series of questions designed to explore respondents' motives and relationships with brands through their *own selfies*. Projective techniques including imagery association, and sentence completion techniques were additionally used to tap into respondents' subconscious feelings. These projective techniques helped uncover the emotional drivers surrounding the relationships consumers have with the brands featured in their own brand selfies that may otherwise have been rationalized (Malhotra et al., 2007). The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and content analysed (Miles and Huberman,

1994). Consistently with Berthon et al. (2008) and Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2011), statements pertaining to brand selfies motivations were found to frequently contain multiple motives. A code was therefore allocated to each statement until each motive was captured (Muntinga et al., 2011). Following theoretical matching (matching the qualitative results with pre-existing concepts), the six motives explained above in the conceptual model for posting brand selfies were identified: attention seeking, status seeking, social interaction, archiving, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence.

3.2 Study 2: Survey

An online survey was developed and tested on an online panel through Qualtrics in UK. A final sample of 511 eligible respondents was utilized, that are posting brand selfies through their social media accounts. A definition of a 'brand selfie' was provided. All measures used came from pre-established scales. Attention seeking was adapted from Sung et al. (2016); status seeking from Eastman et al. (1999); social interaction from Park et al. (2009); archiving from Sung et al. (2016); actual- and self-congruence from Sirgy et al. (1997); brand selfie posting intent from Jones et al. (2000); solicited and unsolicited WoM from Gremler et al. (2001) and Algesheimer et al. (2005). The final sample comprised of 511 valid responses, of which 52.1% were males (n=266) and 47.9% females (n=245). The majority were under 44 years of age (72% of the total sample), and the largest group were aged 25-34 (n=162; 31.7%). The majority were college educated (n=168; 32.9%), or had a degree (n=160; 31.3%). Income-wise 53.3% (n = 272) of the total sample earns £29,999 per annum or less.

To test the measurement model a confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS was conducted. The fit of the model was acceptable with a χ^2/df ratio of 2.384 ($p < 0.000$), 1,259 degrees of freedom, the CFI equal to 0.916, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) of 0.908, and root RMSEA equal to 0.52 (Hair et al., 2009). To test for Common Method Variance (CMV) both Harman's single factor test and Williams et al.'s (2010) CFA marker technique were performed (Williams et al. 2010). Harman's single factor test has been conducted in the present study using Principal Axis Factoring (unrotated). The single factor from the factor analysis explained 21% of the variance, which is much lower than the 50% which is the cut point for common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Thus, the results suggest that common method variance is not a problem in the present study. As an additional measure to detect CMV, Williams et al.'s (2010) CFA marker variable technique was also applied also confirming that CMV was not an issue. Finally, reliability and validity statistics of the scales

was established through Cronbach's Alpha, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Construct Reliability (CR). All scales were above the cut-off values.

4. Results and Discussion

The conceptual model was assessed using a structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS, with a good fit ($\chi^2(354) = 1190.440$, $p < .001$, CFI = .928; TLI = .917; RMSEA = .068; SRMR = .066). The below table 1, shows that all of the hypothesized relationships are supported. However, H1 is partially accepted as the results show that attention seeking can influence significantly posting intent but in a negative and not in a positive way. An explanation of this might be that attention seekers do not want the attention to be disturbed from themselves by potential brands. Thus, attention seekers would prefer not to post a selfie with a brand but only with themselves as a focal point.

Table 1: Results of SEM

Hypothesis	Stand. Estimates	Acceptance /Rejection
(H1) Attention seeking -> posting intent	-.215**	Partially Accepted
(H2) Status seeking -> posting intent	.245***	Accepted
(H3) Social Interaction -> posting intent	.170*	Accepted
(H4) Archiving -> posting intent	.200**	Accepted
(H5) Actual SC -> posting intent	.242*	Accepted
(H6) Ideal SC -> posting intent	.173*	Accepted
(H7a) Posting intent -> solicited WoM	.746***	Accepted
(H7b) Posting intent -> unsolicited WoM	.743***	Accepted

These findings contribute both to theory and practice by providing a comprehensive model of motives of posting a brand selfie on social media. Although the majority of previous research is focused on the phenomenon of selfies in general, we empirically demonstrate that brand selfies have a direct and significant impact on brands. Our findings highlight that brands in brand selfies can be, on the one hand, meaningful relational partners, or in some cases props used to draw attention to the self (i.e., self-promotion, cf. Berthon et al., 2008). Status seeking is found to be the strongest driver of brand selfie posting behavior, which appears to be an indirect form of brand consumption in line with previous research on conspicuous and symbolic consumption suggesting that brands are often used as vehicles to enhance consumers' image and status (e.g. Hirschman 1980). Lastly, this study suggests that brand selfies can lead to desirable outcomes for brand managers: WoM. Whether consumers will recommend a brand (regardless of whether this recommendation is solicited or unsolicited) depends directly on their willingness to post selfies with the specific brand. It is common practice that companies

will approach ‘influencers’ on social media to recommend their brand through sponsorship. This study provides empirical evidence that even ‘regular’ social media users can contribute to the spread of awareness of the brand, especially when they feel close to the brand and when they feel this brand reflects their identity. Based on the different motives identified, brands can more effectively segment their customer database through social media and possibly recognize the users who are heavily posting selfies with their brands. Given the importance of building meaningful consumer-brand relationships, understanding what motivates consumers to create brand selfies and their interactional factors has the potential to create informed and impactful brand UGC campaigns.

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