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'But first, let me take a selfie': Personality traits as predictors of travel selfie taking and sharing behaviors

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‘But first, let me take a selfie’: Personality traits as predictors of travel selfie taking and sharing behaviors

A couple was getting ready to pose for a photo with the logo of The New York Times Building in the background. I love that I work at a place that people deem worthy of memorializing, and I often offer to help. My assistance was not required. As I watched, the young couple mounted their phone on a collapsible pole, then extended it outward, the camera now able to capture the moment in wide-screen glory. I’d seen the same phenomenon when I was touring the Colosseum in Rome last month. So many people were fighting for space to take selfies with their long sticks—what some have called the ‘Narcissistick’—that it looked like a reprise of the gladiatorial battles the place once hosted. (Carr, 2015).

The ‘selfie’ has a long history, but in the past couple years the phenomenon has become more prominent due to the confluence of front-facing cameras on smartphones and tablets, faster and wider distributions of wireless networks and a cultural proclivity of online self-presentation and representation assisted by the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (Levin, 2014) and in particular the proliferation of messaging and self-publishing mobile social media applications—Whatsapp, Snapchat, Instagram, Vine. In 2013, ‘selfie’ was selected as ‘word of the year’ and added to *Oxford English Dictionary*, and defined as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.”

The ‘travel selfie’ has also gained prominence, so much so that hotels, such as the Four Seasons Houston, are offering their guests selfie sticks, hawkers at popular tourist attractions are now selling selfie sticks instead of offering to take and sell polaroids of visitors, and legislators are passing laws banning certain kinds of selfies, as is the case in New York where a recent law banning ‘tiger’ selfies has been signed into law. Selfies have also become increasingly part of the tourist landscapes, where it is common to see individuals taking selfies at tourists sites, and in some cases selfies have become part of the physical infrastructure of the site, for example the ‘selfie’ billboard in Times Square or the ‘selfie’ stations at the new Beach Mall in Dubai that allow visitors to take and email selfies from the informational boards.

The purpose of this study is to explore the emergence of the ‘travel selfie’ by first examining attitudes towards travel selfies and travel selfie taking and sharing behaviors, and second investigating the relationship between these attitudes and behaviors and individual personality. This paper attempts to address questions: What do individuals include in the background of their travel selfies? Who do they share the travel selfies with and how? And what is the impact of personality and self-esteem on this behavior?

To the authors’ knowledge, the ‘travel selfie’ has yet to receive any direct attention in the academic tourism literature, and only cursory attention in the wider academic literature. Most ‘selfie’ studies have emerged from within the field of Media Studies (Fallon, 2014; Levin, 2014) and Psychology, and studies that have focused on the relationship between selfies and personality, have emphasized the relationship with the personality dimension of narcissism (Fox & Rooney, 2015). Recently, a multi-disciplinary team of researchers have launched a large scale initiative, *Selfiecity.net*, that has compiled a large dataset, visualizations, and emerging studies on selfies internationally in New York City, Bangkok, Moscow, Sao Paulo, and Berlin. In popular media, however, the selfie and travel selfie have received considerable attention recently. However, much of the attention has attributed the phenomenon as a sign of the self-absorbed, narcissistic, ‘me’ generation. This limited view of selfies lacks the critical depth and awareness of the complexity of the selfie phenomenon, and the academic literature has started to address this.

The selfie “serves as a ‘real-time’ performance of self orientated towards an audience situated elsewhere...the selfie thus refers to the imbrications and construction of the self within a network of actors. This selfie-constitution depends on either including others within the selfie proper, or permitting people within one’s social network to view, comment on and share the image once it has been posted” (Levin, 2014). In this sense, the travel selfie can be viewed as a symbol and key feature

of the mobile society resulting from the continued convergence between travel and communication (Germann Molz & Paris, 2015; Hannam, Butler & Paris, 2014).

Selfies can be viewed as a logical evolution of the cultural desire of self-presentation within contemporary digital networks, and epitome of the “hybridness of the technical and social, and its hybrid performances of corporeal humans and affording ‘non-humans’” (Larsen, 2008: 143). Travel selfies are more than a narcissistic self-portrait, but instead are a ‘new form’ of digital tourist photography that “can be many different ‘things’ according to how they are assembled, made meaningful and performed in specific contexts” (Larsen, 2008: 143). They represent an intimate and personalized mediatization of the tourism experience (Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011), affording an added level of personal co-presence and sustained interaction over distance (Germann Molz & Paris, 2015; White & White, 2007).

For this study, a survey was administered to 131 university students (83f; mean age = 20.39, $SD = 4.09$). Initially, 20 participants enrolled as part of a tourism undergraduate classes pre-tested the questionnaire and then volunteers from these 20 students recruited further participants through their personal contacts using a snowball-sampling approach. Upon agreeing to participate, questionnaires were administered online through surveymonkey and confidentiality of data was assured.

The test instrument included two psychometric self-report questionnaires assessing personality traits according to the HEXACO model of personality and the Rosenberg self-esteem scale. The 6 dimensions of the HEXACO model of personality were assessed using the 60-item HEXACO-PI-R questionnaire (Lee & Ashton, 2004). In this questionnaire, participants are required to indicate their agreement with 60 statements on a 5-point Likert-typed scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Personality traits are assessed on 6 subscales reflecting Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotionality, Extraversion, Humility, and Openness to Experience. Previous investigations showed satisfactory psychometric properties and convergent validity of the subscales (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Internal consistencies in the present sample were satisfactory yielding Cronbach α s = .59, .66, .69, .62, .65, and .72 respectively. The 10-item Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) assesses self-reported self-esteem on a 4-point Likert-typed scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). Internal consistency in the present study was excellent yielding Cronbach $\alpha = .80$.

Participants self-reported attitudes towards taking selfies as well as selfie-taking and sharing behavior via online social networks were assessed using purposefully developed scales. Using a free-listing procedure (Borgatti, 1994), 20 students listed statements about their attitudes towards taking selfies, how and with whom individuals share selfies, and preferred travel selfies ‘backgrounds’. Based on items developed by means of the free-listing approach, participants were asked in the present study to rate their attitudes towards selfies on a 6-point Likert-typed scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). An orthogonal principal component analysis on the 54 attitude items using varimax rotation resulted in seven extracted factors with Eigenvalue > 1 (4 items that failed to benchmark on any factor were excluded from further analysis; benchmarks were defined as item loadings > .4). The factors (Table 1) were labeled *negative opinions towards selfies*, *in-group behaviors*, *pastime*, *travels*, *status symbol*, *privacy concerns*, and *impression management* (Cronbach α s = .89, .84, .78, .77, .69, .65, and .49). Using a similar approach as described above (in contrast to the above analysis an oblique promax rotation was used), 14 items assessing preferred selfie backgrounds resulted in two extracted factors with Eigenvalue > 1 (Table 2). One factor (labeled: traditional sights; Cronbach $\alpha = .89$) appeared to be reflective of individuals’ preference to take pictures with monuments and traditional touristic attractions. The second factor (labeled: change of environment; Cronbach $\alpha = .84$) comprised of items that are associated with experiences of foreign culture-specific impressions (e.g., local customs). Behaviors (i.e., social networks and contacts that selfies are shared with) were rated from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always* and sum scores were calculated for the two scales as a proxy for frequency of sharing on different networks and with different contacts.

Table 1. Principal Component Analysis of Attitude Items

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Λ	7.11	5.17	4.34	3.96	3.16	2.50	2.36
Taking selfies is not cool	.823						
Taking selfies is pointless	.818						

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Taking selfies is weird	.812						
Only people seeking attention take selfies	.784						
Selfies are embarrassing	-.744						
Selfies are annoying	.726						
Selfies are good for capturing memorable experiences	.677						
Selfies are a good way to stay in contact with friends and family	-.560			.537			
Only people with high self esteem take selfies	-.541		.481				
Selfies are antisocial	.523						
People take selfies to show that they have a social life	.457						
Shy people don't take selfies	.425						
People take selfies because everyone else does	.407						
People take selfies to show off		.740					
Selfies are too mainstream		.688					
Selfies are shared to gain likes and comments on social media		.641					
Group selfies are better than individual selfies		.638					
Selfies are addictive		.634					
People take too many selfies		.618					
Taking selfies is an obsession		.594					
People take selfies to make others jealous		.522					
Selfies are trendy		.514					
Selfies allow people to share what they are doing in real time			.701				
Selfies are a good way to show how you are feeling			.600				
People share selfies to show what they are wearing			.572				
People take selfies when traveling because they have too much freetime			.555				
People share selfies to gain social status			.534				
Selfies provide evidence of what a person is doing			.505				
People take selfies when they have too much free time			.436				
Selfies are a good way to show that a person visited an important attraction or landmark				.646			
Travel selfies are a good way to capture memories of a trip	-.406			.613			
People take more selfies when traveling				.571			
Selfies are usually shared through social networking sites				.559			.404
Selfies are a good way of showing off that a person is on vacation				.555			
Instagram allows for better selfies				.548			
Travel selfies usually include famous sites					.644		
People with low confidence don't take selfies					.589		
People don't take selfies because they don't have the right camera or smartphone					.578		
Taking selfies can make a person more confident					.534		
People take selfies because it is easy					.506		
People take selfies when there is no one else to take their photo					.497		
It is unsafe to share selfies publically						.661	
Selfies are a privacy issue						.608	
Selfies should only be shared to close friends and family						.455	
For some cultures and religions selfies are not appropriate						.429	
Some selfies should remain private							.628
People do not share selfies in which they look bad							.614
People take selfies when they feel good about themselves			.432				.541
People take selfies to see how they look			.411				.432

Note. I = Negative opinions towards selfies, II = In-group behaviors, III = Pastime, IV = Travels, V = Status symbol, VI = Privacy concerns, VII = Impression management; λ = Factor eigenvalues after rotation.

Table 2. Principal Component Analysis on Motive Preference

	I	II
λ	6.97	1.15
Unique places	.879	
Famous sites	.866	
Natural landscapes	.833	
Monuments	.825	
Weather	.694	
Local culture	.635	
Recognizable landmarks	.602	
Travel companions/friends	.440	
Local people		.885
Hotel		.881
Food		.687
What you are wearing		.639
Restaurant		.579
Animals/plants		.461

Note. I = Traditional sights, II = Change of environment; λ = Factor eigenvalues after rotation.

Results were analyzed using a series of multiple regressions with the HEXACO and Rosenberg scales as independent and attitude and behavior variables as dependent variables. *Negative opinions towards selfies* were negatively related with emotionality and extraversion ($\beta = -0.201, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$ and $\beta = -0.321, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$) whilst *travel* was positively predicted by agreeableness ($\beta = .239, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$; no other attitude subscale showed significant relationships with personality). The multiple regressions with the behavioral variables as dependent variables are included in Table 3. Both emotionality and openness to experience predicted preference for taking selfies with traditional sights ($\beta = 0.271, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .07$ and $\beta = 0.263, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .07$) whilst only emotionality was significantly positively related with change of environment ($\beta = 0.252, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .06$). The number of contacts that selfies are shared with was negatively predicted by humility but positively by extraversion ($\beta = -0.298, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .07$ and $\beta = 0.227, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .04$). The number of networks that selfies were shared on was only predicted by a single factor yielding a negative association with humility ($\beta = -0.224, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .04$). This suggests that more extroverted individuals share their selfies with a wider social network, and that higher lower levels of humility result in more ‘broadcasting’ via social media.

Table 3. Multiple Regressions of Personality Traits and Self Esteem on Selfie Taking Behavior

	β	T	p	η_p^2
Traditional sights; $R^2 = .39$				
Agreeableness	0.029	0.326	.745	.001
Conscientiousness	0.026	0.277	.782	.001
Emotionality	0.271	3.041	.003	.069
Extraversion	0.133	1.367	.174	.015
Humility	-0.022	-0.231	.817	<.001
Openness to experience	0.263	2.942	.004	.065
Self esteem	-0.099	-1.003	.697	.008
Change of environment; $R^2 = .30$				
Agreeableness	0.019	0.211	.833	<.001
Conscientiousness	-0.093	-0.939	.350	.007
Emotionality	0.252	2.731	.007	.057
Extraversion	0.101	1.004	.317	.008
Humility	-0.092	-0.934	.352	.007
Openness to experience	0.128	1.382	.170	.015
Self esteem	-0.087	-0.849	.349	.006
Sharing with other individuals; $R^2 = .34$				

	β	T	p	η_p^2
Agreeableness	0.023	0.251	.802	.001
Conscientiousness	-0.028	-0.288	.774	.001
Emotionality	0.084	0.923	.358	.007
Extraversion	0.227	2.273	.025	.040
Humility	-0.298	-3.071	.003	.071
Openness to experience	0.066	0.718	.474	.004
Self esteem	-0.039	-0.381	.704	.001
Sharing on social networks; $R^2 = .22$				
Agreeableness	0.067	0.721	.472	.004
Conscientiousness	-0.044	-0.435	.664	.002
Emotionality	0.096	1.018	.311	.008
Extraversion	-0.002	-0.023	.982	<.001
Humility	-0.224	-2.235	.027	.038
Openness to experience	0.051	0.542	.589	.002
Self esteem	0.035	0.339	.735	.001

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient; η_p^2 = effect size; all Variance Inflation Factors < 2.

To the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first to provide evidence about associations of behavioral and attitudinal aspects of selfies (and specifically travel selfies) with personality traits. More emotional and extraverted individuals appear to have more positive attitudes towards taking selfies in general whilst more agreeable individuals showed more positive attitudes towards taking selfies during travels. Positive associations of emotionality behaviors were consistent with our expectations as previous investigations indicated positive relations between emotionality and self-presentation behaviors in social online networks (e.g., Seidman, 2013). We did not have any specific hypothesis regarding associations of selfie-taking behaviors with humility because this personality facet has so far been only little investigated due to the comparative novelty of the HEXACO model of personality. However, the negative association between humility and selfie-taking behavior seems plausible and may be an expression of a lower desire for self-presentation of high-humility individuals. However, behaviors as well as attitudes were unrelated to self-esteem, thus conforming to previous evidence showing no association between self-esteem and self-presentation (Kramer & Winter, 2008). In summary, our data show that positive attitudes towards taking selfies are mainly driven by emotionality and extraversion whilst selfie taking frequency and number of contacts they are shared with appear to be additionally related to low humility.

While this study is very much in the exploratory stage, the findings do suggest that the 'travel selfie' is a phenomenon deserving more critical examination. It is not just a 'selfish' act, but a complex assemblage of socialities, performativities, emotionalities, mobilities, and technologies that has evolved from the continued convergences of travel, digital culture, and communication technologies. Understanding this increasingly pervasive form of digital tourist photography is necessary to understand how tourism is experienced by and mediated through mobile technology.

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