Selfies: A Sign of Trouble, or a Force for Good?

These days, most social media users need only login to find an example of a selfie: a self-portrait. Instead of taking pictures of what we see, we turn around and photograph ourselves in that moment. This is changing the way we interact with experiences, and even people.

For the most part, we have accepted selfies as part of modern life. Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has embraced the selfie as something her supporters crave from her. In an interview with an Iowa newspaper, Clinton said that she is able to get some quality time in with people who have something to say and request a selfie. She admitted that it does lower the quality of interactions with large groups compared to before the ubiquity of selfies, but later qualified that by saying it was little different than the people who before lined up simply to be photographed with her. “I think the proportion is not that much different.” For some, the focus is on meeting someone famous and capturing the moment, not interacting with the political process.
Selfies Can Do Good

Even the President of the United States posts selfies, but he does more than simply record his memories.

President Barack Obama took this opportunity while visiting Alaska to discuss climate change in a video selfie, or “velfie,” with a large glacier. He is certainly not the first person to make use of selfies to raise awareness.

Some social media campaigns use selfies paired with hashtags like #IStandWithAhmed to show support for the oppressed or suffering.
“Ahmed” is a young American of Middle-Eastern descent whose home-invented clock got him arrested and searched because his teachers assumed he had a bomb. This engineer posted a selfie to support the young man. Other social change campaigns can be helped by the selfie, and video selfies have helped too. Remember the Ice Bucket Challenge? People loved posting their videos, and it was an immense success, raising over $100 million for ALS research. Peter Hutchison wrote for BusinessInsider.com explaining that video selfies allow for more expression of emotion and action than pictures alone can manage, sometimes evoking a stronger reaction from viewers.

Selfies Can Be Dangerous

However, not everyone is so enchanted with this new form of self-portraiture. From actor Cate Blanchett to Republican Presidential candidate Ben Carson, many people decry selfies as narcissistic and dangerous to Americans. There is some basis for their concerns.
This man thinks the large black bear behind him is a good photo opportunity. Source: http://npr.tumblr.com/

Selfie deaths have increased drastically as smartphone usage has skyrocketed around the globe. In response, many tourist attractions banned the use of selfie sticks, citing them as contributing to injuries and deaths of selfie-taking tourists.

Russia has even published a pamphlet on when it is not safe to take a selfie:
People have died from careless selfie-taking in these situations. Source:
http://www.popphoto.com/
Are selfies narcissistic?

Some research has shown that certain kinds of selfies posted on social media can correlate with narcissism and low self-esteem. Essentially, if your selfie is focused on you—and only you—it’s a bad sign. Selfies that demand attention to appearance with no other objective (like recording a memory or promoting a cause) can indicate a narcissist, most often when the selfies are posted as profile pictures. However, the correlations found between selfies and narcissists were described as small, and because this is the only study on psychological correlations with selfies, their significance needs further study.

Clearly, the selfie issue is a complicated one. On the one hand, some kinds of selfies do seem to indicate some self-esteem issues in our society. However, correlation is not causation: put more plainly, just because selfies might coincide with narcissism does not mean the selfies caused it. The research on the subject seems to suggest that it all depends on a person’s pre-existing motivation.
Are selfies annoying, or empowering?

Kim Kardashian is considered narcissistic by many for the volume of selfies she takes and posts. Source: [http://www.whowhatwear.com/](http://www.whowhatwear.com/)

It is easy to scoff at people who post endless selfies. It can be infuriating to see dozens of different poses in just one day, and we may well roll our eyes when we see yet another hashtag selfie campaign set to make us aware of yet another problem in the world. After all, too much of a good thing can be annoying, and selfies focused only on one’s own self-image are not something that include the people they are shared with.
However, I like to try to think of what the selfie taker is trying to tell me with their barrage of selfies. I can learn their mood, their goals, even their sense of humor from the pictures they post. Despite frequent misuse and links to mental illness, selfies clearly provide a new form of expression.

This is a vacation photo of Kate Middleton and her family. Perhaps another family member not pictured took this to document this memory.

Source: http://www.popsugar.com/

For decades, when we had new experiences or traveled to new places, we would take and share photographs of landmarks and landscapes, or ask others to take our pictures to show where we were. They would decide how they felt the picture would best be taken.

Now, we have taken that decision back, giving us control over the recording of our cherished moments. We turn our backs on the experiences we see, putting ourselves in the forefront of the picture with the experience in the back. This is representative of a shift in how we interact with our lives: we are the most important part of our experiences, and we want to remember it that way.
Furthermore, selfies have empowered a generation to share themselves in a way that connects them with the world, whether through the places they have visited or the causes they support. In sharing ourselves in that way, we encourage others to comment and reciprocate.

Overall it appears that the selfie is here to stay, and it has already forever changed our culture. No longer do we need photographers, camera operators, or even strangers at tourist locations to record our lives and our thoughts. For better or worse, the selfie is here to stay.