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Predicting selfie-posting behavior on social networking sites: An extension of theory of planned behavior

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, a notable trend has emerged in social networking sites (SNSs). With the growing popularity of image-based SNSs such as Instagram, users increasingly communicate and present themselves by posting photographs they take of themselves (“selfies”). As the phenomenon of selfies becomes widespread across a range of SNSs as a unique means of self-presentation, an interesting question arises, what makes people post their selfies on SNSs. To delve into this rising issue, the present study investigates the antecedents of selfie-posting behavior on SNSs by applying and extending Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). A conceptual model, which is primarily drawn from the TPB and incorporates narcissism as an additional antecedent, is proposed and empirically tested. Results show that attitude toward selfie-posting, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and narcissism are the significant determinants of an individual’s intention to post selfies on SNSs. Further, one’s selfie-posting behavior on SNSs is significantly predicted by his or her intention to post selfies. Implications of the findings are discussed with suggestions for future research.

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1. Introduction

The past several years have been marked by the tremendous growth and popularity of social networking sites (SNSs). With the ease of access to these platforms via ubiquitous technologies (e.g., mobile devices), SNSs have become an integral part of people’s daily lives. SNSs have extended the users’ communicative capacities, making it easier for individuals to communicate and to connect with their social network (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). A notable phenomenon that has received considerable attention over the years is that individuals utilize SNSs as a means for self-expression and self-presentation (e.g., Mehdizadeh, 2010; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Through a mixture of content they post and share on SNSs, such as profile status updates, photos, videos, or comments, individuals can strategically construct and maintain their self-identities. Indeed, with the intention of impression management, individuals are found to display their positive and socially desirable self on SNSs (Buffardi & Campbell,

2008; Krämer & Winter 2008; Zhao et al., 2008).

With the recent proliferation of photo-sharing SNS platforms, such as Instagram or Pinterest, photo-posting and sharing activities on SNSs have gained immense popularity, making them a unique and fast-emerging phenomenon in digital environments. Of the myriad photographs shared online, one very popular type is when individuals take self-portrait photographs (“selfies”) and post them to SNSs. In 2013, the Oxford Dictionary named selfie as the word of the year, defining it as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media” (Oxford Dictionaries). Since Instagram’s first selfie hashtag (#selfie) in 2011, the volume of selfies rose by a remarkable 17,000% between 2012 and 2013 (Laird, 2013), with approximately 93 million selfies taken by smartphone users per day (Brandt, 2014).

Besides their skyrocketing incidence, selfies have received mounting attention from researchers and practitioners in psychology and communication as they represent image-based self-presentation on SNSs (e.g., Chua & Chang, 2016; Qiu, Lu, Yang, Qu, & Zhu, 2015). There has been a constant growing interest with regard to individuals’ needs and dispositions underlying online presentation on SNSs. Studies have examined various personality factors associated with self-presentation on SNSs including photo-posting,

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which include the Big Five personality traits (e.g., Eftekhar, Fullwood, & Morris, 2014) and narcissism (e.g., DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011; Kapidzic, 2013; Ong et al., 2011). Given that selfie-posting is associated with self-promotion through a selective collection of photographs of oneself (Mehdizadeh, 2010), selfies are regarded as an explicit form of self-portraits on SNSs projecting positive and desirable self-images. With this inherent nature, selfie-posting on SNSs has been found to be associated with narcissism by recent studies (e.g., Fox & Rooney, 2015; Sorokowski, Sorokowska, Oleszkiewicz, Frankowiak, & Pisanski, 2015; Weiser, 2015).

Despite the growing phenomenon of selfies as a means of self-presentation in social media environments, limited academic research has been devoted to the systematic investigation of key predictors of SNS users' selfie-posting behaviors. Drawing upon the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991) framework, the present study not only tests the applicability of the TPB in selfie-posting behavior on SNSs, but it also extends the framework by incorporating a personality variable, narcissism. Specifically, this study identifies and empirically examines four key predictors of selfie-posting on SNSs—attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and narcissism. Though the majority of the literature relies on self-reported measures of behaviors, this study gauges, within six weeks after individuals indicate their intentions to post selfies on SNSs, actual selfie-posting by analyzing the selfies posted on their SNS accounts (i.e., % of selfie-posting). Findings of this study provide empirical support for the TPB-driven model with significant social-psychological predictors of this relatively new form of self-presentation behavior on SNSs. Furthermore, by conducting a follow-up examination of the percentage of selfies posted on SNSs, the study aims to fill a gap in the literature by assessing individuals' actual selfie-posting behaviors. Besides being of theoretical interest, the results of the study provide managerial implications for incorporating selfies into a variety of persuasion domains ranging from the individual level to organizational and societal levels.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1. Selfie-posting on social networking sites (SNSs)

Social media continues to enjoy widespread popularity thanks in part to the rapid growing usage of photo-sharing SNSs. Here individuals can upload photos of whatever they wish, including themselves, and share them with other users. Millions of photos are posted and shared on SNSs daily; Instagram, for instance, hosts over 55 million photos and generates 1.2 billion likes each day (Sciberras, 2015). The proliferation of digital cameras on mobile phones and a wide range of photo applications have enabled people to document nearly every aspect of their everyday lives. As a new form of social interaction online, posting and sharing photos can help people fulfill their needs for interaction with others (e.g., Eftekhar et al., 2014; Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015) and such ego-related gratifications as self-expression and self-presentation (e.g., Kapidzic, 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Lang & Barton, 2015; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011).

SNSs provide an arena where individuals can manage their self-presentations, strategically constructing and controlling their identities (Zhao et al., 2008). According to Goffman's theory of self-presentation (1959), individuals develop and use social performance tools to manage others' impressions of themselves. In online social environments where individuals have greater control over self-presentation compared to face-to-face contexts (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), self-selected selfies (which they can edit and retouch with photo-editing applications) posted on SNSs are

products of how individuals wish to be perceived by others in a way that is in line with their ideal self (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008).

Recently, a considerable amount of research has examined predictors of self-presentation behaviors on SNSs, especially with respect to individual-difference factors. Regarding personality traits (e.g., Big Five), extroversion is consistently found to be one of the most relevant personality traits (e.g., Krämer & Winter 2008; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014) to self-presentation behaviors on SNSs, while agreeableness (e.g., Lang & Barton, 2015), conscientiousness, and neuroticism (e.g., Eftekhar et al., 2014; Seidman, 2013) are often considered as important influencing factors. Factors related to one's evaluation of the self, such as self-esteem (e.g., Stefanone et al., 2011) and narcissism (e.g., Bergman, Fearington, Devenport, & Bergman, 2011; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; DeWall et al., 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Ong et al., 2011), have been identified as playing a crucial role in the explanation of individuals' self-presentational activities on SNSs. Given the use of SNSs as a strategic means for identity construction and impression management, it is feasible to regard an individual's selfie-posting behavior as a volitional and intentional activity that aims at enhancing his or her self-identity within social media environments.

2.2. Theory of planned behavior

A useful theoretical framework for explaining an individual's behavior is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991). According to the TPB, the immediate determinants of individuals' behavior are their intentions. Intention is predicted by three independent dimensions: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). *Attitude* is defined as an individual's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of performing a target behavior (Ajzen, 1991). *Subjective norm* refers to an individual's "perception that most people who are important to him or her think he/she should or should not perform the behavior in question" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 302). Empirical findings from a wide range of domains have suggested that attitude and subjective norm toward various behaviors make significant contributions to the prediction of intentions (e.g., Doane, Pearson, & Kelley, 2014; Mishra, Akman, & Mishra, 2014). Such findings are in support of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The concept of *perceived behavioral control*, an additional construct to the TRA, reflects the degree to which an individual perceives he or she has control over performing the target behavior. The TPB is, thus, an extension of the TRA, the extension being that in addition to considering attitude and subjective norm it also takes into account an individual's perception of volitional control over their behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The TPB has been applied extensively in a variety of contexts to predict behavioral intentions, such as knowledge sharing (e.g., Kuo & Young, 2008) and adoption and use of technology (e.g., Crespo & del Bosque, 2008). To improve the predictive capability of the TPB, other factors have been added to the standard TPB variables. These others include motivations, background factors, and past behavior (Ajzen, 2011). The result is an extended model of the TPB that encompass factors identified as significant predictors of various behavioral intentions and behaviors. Among prior studies that have particularly focused on SNS adoption and use, Pelling and White (2009) observed in their study of young adults' engagement in high-level use of SNSs (i.e., addictive tendencies) that participants' behavior and intention to use SNSs were influenced by attitude and subjective norm. In addition, a person's self-identity, the extent to which an individual believes his or her SNS-use behavior reflects his/her self-concept, emerged as a significant predictor of the intention to engage in high-level SNS use as well as a direct determinant of SNS use behavior. Later, Chang and Zhu (2011)

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