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SELFIE: THE VISUAL COMMUNICATION ON INSTAGRAM

Abstract. Social media sharing has become a strong trend among Kazakhstani women. Selfies are not merely pictures of oneself but an individual expression of the imagined virtual personality of the person. They are a means for social media communication, which invites for public recognition, liking and flirting. The purpose of the research was to explore the selfie as a self-presentation. It focused on the compositional characteristics of selfies of Kazakhstani women against the basic photographic rules and criteria. The need and rationale for the research stemmed in the lack of sufficient scientific research on the selfie phenomenon in Kazakhstan. The research methods the exploratory study employed were a qualitative visual content analysis with preset descriptors a research literature methodology. The results indicated that the implementation of the basic rules and principles for a successful selfie such as the Rule of Thirds, Eye-in-Centre Principle, light, distance, and angle is limited. The value of the research is twofold. First, it contributed to an understudied scientific field of visual communication with a focus on Kazakhstan. Second, it provided practical guidelines for taking appealing selfies either for personal use or promotion purposes.

Key words: Instagram selfie, Rule of Thirds, Eye-in-Centre Principle, visual communication, virtual personality.

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Селфи: Инстаграмдағы визуалды байланыс

Аңдатпа. Селфимен бөлісу қазақстандық әйелдер арасында күшті үрдіске айналды. Селфи – бұл жай ғана сурет емес. Олар виртуалды тұлғаның жеке көрінісі және әлеуметтік желілерде қарым-қатынас құралы болып табылады. Олар көпшілік алдында танымал болуға, ұнатуға және флиртқа шақырады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – селфиді негізгі фотографиялық ережелер мен өлшемдер аясында қазақстандық әйелдердің селфидің композициялық сипаттамалары арқылы өзін-өзі таныстыру ретінде зерттеу болды. Жүргізілген зерттеудің қажеттілігі мен негізділігі – Қазақстандағы селфи феноменінің жеткілікті ғылыми зерттеулерінің жоқтығына байланысты. Зерттеу жұмысының әдістері – алдын ала берілген дескрипторлармен ғылыми-зерттеу әдебиетінің әдістемесімен визуалды мазмұнды сапалы талдау болып табылады. Нәтижелер көрсеткендей, сәтті селфи жасаудың негізгі ережелері мен қағидаттары – «Үшінші ереже», «көзге орталықта» қағидаты, жарық, қашықтық және бұрыш секілді ережелер шектеулі. Зерттеудің құндылығы екі есе. Біріншіден, бұл Қазақстанға назар аудара отырып, визуалды коммуникацияның жеткілікті зерттелмеген ғылыми саласына ықпал етті. Екіншіден, жеке пайдалану үшін немесе жарнамалық мақсатта тиімді селфи жасау туралы практикалық нұсқаулар берілген.

Түйін сөздер: Инстаграм Селфи, Үшінші ережесі, „ортадағы көз“ принципі, визуалды коммуникация, виртуалды тұлға.

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Селфи: визуальная коммуникация в Инстаграм

Аннотация. Размещение селфи стало распространенным трендом среди казахстанских женщин, инста-див. Селфи – не просто разновидность автопортрета, это индивидуальное выражение

виртуальной личности и средство общения в социальных сетях. Это приглашение к общественному признанию, лайкам и флирту. Цель исследования – изучение селфи как самопрезентации через композиционные характеристики селфи казахстанских женщин в сравнении с основными правилами и критериями фотографии. Необходимость и обоснование проводимых исследований обусловлены отсутствием достаточных научных исследований феномена селфи в Казахстане. Методом исследования был качественный визуальный анализ контента с заданными характеристиками методологии исследовательской литературы. Результаты показали, что применение основных правил и принципов успешного селфи, таких как «Правило третьей», принцип «Глаза в центре», свет, расстояние и угол, ограничено. Ценность исследования можно рассматривать с двух точек зрения. Во-первых, исследование внесло свой вклад в недостаточно изученную науку в области визуальной коммуникации с акцентом на Казахстан. Во-вторых, в нем содержатся практические рекомендации по созданию эффектного селфи в личных или рекламных целях.

Ключевые слова: Инстаграм-селфи, «Правило третьей», принцип «Глаза в центре», визуальные коммуникации, виртуальная личность.

Introduction

Sharing selfies has become a strong trend among Kazakhstani women. Thanks to Instagram the selfie has emerged as a new sub-genre of self-portrait in the twenty-first century. Selfies (self-portraits) have existed since the early twentieth century. Two of the most famous self-portraits are of Robert Cornelius (1839) and Hippolyte Bayard (1840). Nowadays, most people take pictures, especially selfies, with their smartphones. It is fast, convenient and easy to do. Smartphones have a frontal camera which makes the process straightforward because it allows easy monitoring while taking a selfie. Leading smartphone brands to have a unique built-in 'selfie' features in some of their top models. Thus, the user can improvise with the selfie by blurring the background of the selfie to put the focus on the face or making the skin look smooth, clean and shiny. Some smartphones features allow for making eyes more prominent, cheeks smaller and face thinner. All these features help create an improved image of one's self. Instagram itself has many different 'selfie' features, like 'chromatic delay', 'golden glitter', or 'bubbles'. There are applications which engage users in online entertainment. Snapchat, for instance, allows for adding bunny's ears, glasses, or wrinkles.

Over the past several years, social network sites, such as Instagram, have experienced a drastic rise in popularity globally and Kazakhstan, in particular. Selfies are the holy grail of social media (Financial Times, 2015). Instagram opened new ways for communication, socialisation, and marketing for both celebrities and ordinary people. In Kazakhstan, People use the social network for different reasons. Some search for needed information about products or services. Many companies use Instagram to raise awareness about themselves or their products. Kazakhstani women, as a specific example, use Insta-

gram to share their daily life: what they do, where they go, travel, even what they eat and buy. Thus, by taking selfies and posting them in their profiles, they, in a way, promote themselves. The popularity of the social network site is an indicator of success and popularity. Online social life engagement helps to generate a significant number of followers. For example, Gennadiy Golovkin has 3.5 million followers (@gggboxing); 3.9 million people follow the singer Kairat Nurtas (@kair_n). The media person, Bayan Alaguzova, has 3.5 million followers (@bayanmaxatkyzy). Non-celebrities (ordinary people) also have their number of followers, particularly women.

Social networks drastically influenced the individuals' obsession with their digital self (Athique, 2013). The selfie has become a socially mediated infotainment communication act incorporating aesthetics and symmetry. This thesis motivated the *research problem* of the selfie as visual communication. For such communication to be effective, a user should take a selfie following some principles or rules. Selfies can be very different, taken with different cameras, angles, and light conditions.

Nevertheless, most successful selfies, being part of photography art, have some rules, which make them liked more than others. Thus, the research starting point was the professional photography approaches, namely the *Rule of Thirds* and the *Eye-in-Center Principle*. They were selected because the selfie, as a product, falls into the photography production and culture.

The overarching *research purpose* was to explore the selfie as a self-presentation through the compositional characteristics of selfies of Kazakhstani women. The *need and rationale* for the current research was the lack of sufficient scientific research on the selfie phenomenon in Kazakhstani. Therefore, the research focused on the compositional aspects of

the selfies as well as the motives for sharing one's life online. The researchers asked two *research questions* To explore the selfie phenomenon.

What compositional rules and criteria do Kazakhstani female Instagram users implement in selfie-taking?

What motivates taking and posting selfies on Instagram?

The answer to the first question shed light on the extent to which Kazakhstani women follow any photographic rules when taking their selfies. The answer to the second question indicated the most common drivers behind sharing selfies.

Literature review

The Emergence of the Selfie

The selfie appeared on January 27, 2011, when Instagram allowed individuals to use hashtags. A selfie has become a new medium for self-expression and self-representation. It is “an embodied and re-articulated sociotechnical act that shapes constitute and imagines the self(i.e.). In other words, [...] the selfie re-turns us to imagined and live(d) self that blurs the image and imagining processes and tells us not about intentional authoring, but a deeper desire and ambiguity for and of identity performance in a social media era.” (Gómez & Thornham, 2015, p. 7) Stiegler (2015) described the selfie as a digital self-portrait of a single user or a group of people. It is a snapshot of a moment and capturing these moments has become a fixed part of the daily life in social media culture. There has been a significant rise in the uploading of selfies onto social media platforms. “1,000 selfies are posted on Instagram every second.” (Galuppo, 2017) Thirty years before the emergence of the selfie, the art historian Jean-François Chevrier talked about the explosion of the selfie-mania: “The most intimate place for narcissistic contemplation, the room with the mirror [...] becomes in this context the most common of places, where every distinction of the self is in the end abolished” (Chevrier 1986, p. 10).

Photos vs selfies

Selfie is not only a photographic image recognised as a self-portrait, which bears a formal resemblance to numerous canonical photographic self-portraits from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, the selfie is a product of a networked camera. The significant attributes of a selfie include its instant share via Instagram or other SM (Rawlings 2013) and connected data (managed automatically such as geo-locations, used and connected by individuals such as hashtags, or appearing after that such as the comments, “likes,” and re-sharing by other individuals). One of the main aspects of selfies is

publicity on social media. People do not make it for their personal use and consideration. By posting their selfies, Instagram users construct their identities and at the same time, express their belonging to a specific community. Therefore, making selfie is both a private and a public act.

Instagram

Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing social network site created in 2010 as a mobile phone application to fully use and benefit of front-camera and rear-camera build in phones (Ting, Ming, de Run, & Choo, 2015). Every image in this social media goes with several characteristics like text, caption, likes, and comments, save and options for image sharing within the network, and externally to other social media such as Facebook, Twitter. Users have a visual timeline of images, which he or she creates by him or herself. It can be incoherent by design because users share different moments, and they do not think about the overall timeline, except those bloggers or trendsetters who have specially created a plan for the timeline. Instagram has a hashtag option to help individuals find both photos and videos of each other. When posting an image, Instagram suggests individuals make specific and relevant hashtags, rather than tagging generic words like “photo”. Instagram has also got a “stories” option, which allows users to upload photos and videos to their 24-hour feed. Since January 2019, the stories option is being used by 500 million users daily. As to selfies, there are about 391,193,700 posts with ‘selfie’ hashtags in a today (Hutchinson, 2019).

Methodology

Research methods. The exploratory study employed qualitative visual content analysis with preset descriptors for answering RQ1. Visual analysis is a critical step in evaluating a picture and understanding its meaning. “Visual analytics research is highly interdisciplinary and combines various related research areas such as visualization, data mining, data management, data fusion, statistics and cognition science (among others).” (Keim et al., 2008, p. 156). It is vital to take into consideration the technical quality of the image, textual information transmitted with the image, and the image source. “Visual content analysis is the process of deriving meaningful descriptors for image and video data.” (Worring & Snoek, 2009).

The second research method employed to answer RQ2 was a research literature methodology. This method offers an indirect route to analyzing an object of research. However, with literature research, a researcher collects empirical data from reliable scientific sources. “The research literature

methodology a process of rigorous reading through, critical reflecting on, and sorting of various sources of scientific value with the aim to identify essential attributes of the topic under research.” (Filipov, 2019). This research strategy facilitated a different analytical perspective on the selfie as an object of the research compared to other approaches implemented in the analysis of photo content. Most of the research on the selfie phenomenon used research methods such as interviews, questionnaires, psychological tests, focusing on the personal argumentation of selfie practices.

Sample. The research collected a purposive sample of 30 selfies of thirty Kazakhstani female Instagram users, aged 24-36. Each selfie had to have at least 20 likes. The sample consisted of both public and private Instagram accounts. The *procedure* included contacting thirty private accounts to ask their permission to use a selfie of theirs for the needs of the research. Only after the private account owner granted written permission, a selfie was included in the study pool. Total twenty-two users granted the researchers permission in writing and a successful selfie of theirs (according to their evaluation). The researchers gave no instructions for selecting the provided selfies. The rest eight selfies researchers took from the public accounts of bloggers and influencers published on 5th May 2019. After that, the researchers developed two selfies, which served as benchmarks against, which the thirty sampled selfies were analyzed. The first benchmark selfie employed the Rule of Thirds. The second one was taken with the Eye-in-Centre Principle.

The *Rule of Thirds (RoT)* is a well-known photography principle that is used by all professionals. It provides essential guidelines for achieving overall balance and highlighting image elements (Peterson, 2003). Most cameras and smartphone cameras have

an option to view “gridlines”. These lines break an image down into equally sized rectangles so that there are nine sections. The rule states that the user should place points of interest (for example, eyes) in the intersections of the horizontal and vertical axis. Such composition makes a photo more balanced, with more tension and energy in it. There are researches, which argue that a viewer’s eyes naturally go to specific points of interest in an image, but it is not the centre. The Rule of Thirds is an essential, easy-to-use and immediate technique, which perfectly fits with selfie-taking.

The *Eye-in-Center Principle (EiCP)* is also a basic and easy to use rule implemented in modern photography. A selfie-taker place one of their eyes on the horizontal line, which splits an image in half (Bruno, Gabriele, Tasso & Bertamini, 2014). It does not matter which of the eyes shall be centred. What matters is, the eye should not be shaded. The Eye-in-Center Principle is used in famous portraits (da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*), and photographs (Steve McCurry’s *Afghan Girl*) might be not the most popular rule, but it is a significant one. The Principle provides for creating a vivid and appealing piece of art, which people can use to take their selfies.

The researchers conducted the *data analysis* against the rules visible in the selfies. However, the researchers added three additional descriptors: *distance (arm’s length or selfie stick)*; *angle*, and *light conditions* in the selfie. The researchers divided all 30 selfies into three different groups: group 1 – Selfies following rules and criteria; group 2 – Selfies following a particular rule and criteria; group 3 – Selfies not following rules and criteria.

Results and findings

RQ1. What compositional rules and criteria do Kazakhstani female Instagram users implement in selfie-taking?

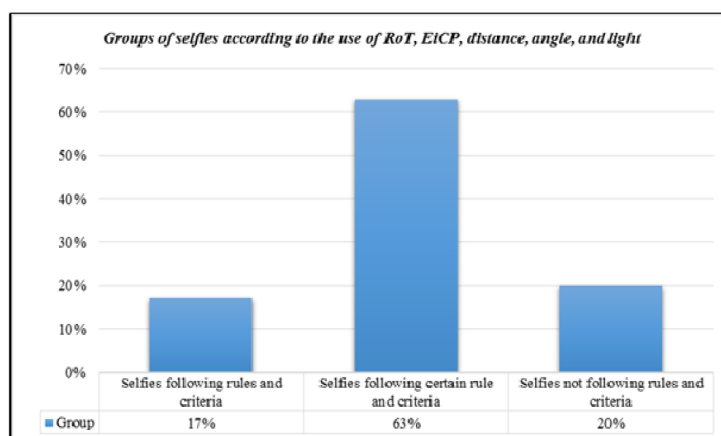


Figure 1. Groups of selfies

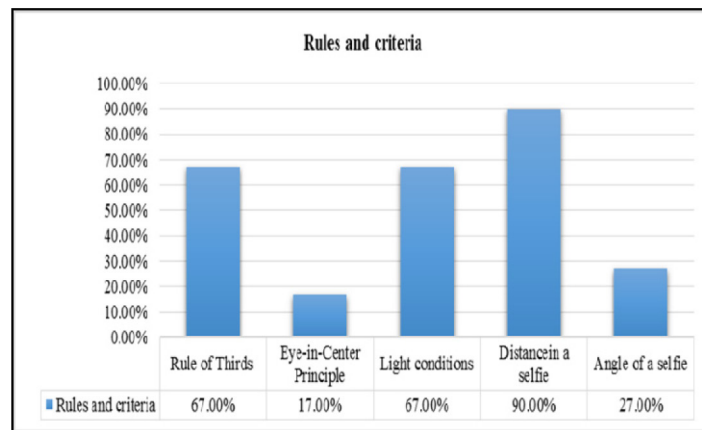


Figure 2

The predominant part 63% (n=19) of the Kazakhstani female Instagram users implement to a certain extent some of the criteria for an attractive selfie. Some of the selfies did follow either the Rule of Thirds or the Eye-in-Centre Principle. However, they failed with the angle, light, or the distance or vice versa. Seventeen per cent (n=5) considered both the Rules and the criteria when taking their selfies. Four of these selfies were of public accounts of bloggers and influencers, and one was of a private one. There were 20% (n=6) selfies taken without any consideration of any of the basic rules, namely *RoT* and *EiCP*. The Instagram users, who took their selfies, hardly considered the other vital factors such as *angle*, *light*, and *distance*.

Two criteria – *distance* and *light conditions* and one rule – the Rule of Thirds were most present in all the selfies, which partially or fully implemented the rules and criteria for an appealing selfie. It was 90% (n=27) of the selfies in which the person took care to eliminate the monkey-face effect.

The light conditions in 67% (n=20) of the selfies were carefully selected. Therefore the selfies were bright, and the focus objects were visible. The same percentage of the selfies (63%) employed the Rule of Thirds Rule. Thus the selfies had compositional balance and highlighted the object of interest in them. The least considered rule and criterion were the Eye-in-Centre Principle and the angle. The result was lower dynamics and expressiveness of the selfies.

To sum up, the sampled selfies demonstrated partial use of the two basic photographic rules. The most visible criteria distance and light were highly taken into consideration, whereas the angle was the least considered one.

RQ2. What motivates taking and posting selfies on Instagram?

The motivators for taking and most importantly sharing a selfie root in the human needs for attention-seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment (Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016), self-presentation, attention-seeking, communication, archiving time, entertainment, habit, escape, and status-seeking (Barry, Doucette, Loffin, Rivera-Hudson, & Herrington, 2015; Kearney, 2018). Pounders et al. (2016) argued that participants were intended to share selfies to boost their self-esteem, which may occur through the number of likes the photograph receives. Not getting a sufficient number of likes or comments on a post may badly influence on users' feelings (Porch, 2015) and low self-esteem (Scissors et al., 2016). Curiously, girls (compared to boys) cared more about receiving likes than comments on SM and paid close attention to the number of likes they received (Chua & Chang, 2016). Female images get more comments (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010) and feedback connected with appearance (de Vries, Peter, de Graaf, & Nikken, 2016) compared to males.

A second motivator for selfie sharing is one's virtual identity. A selfie tells followers 'look at me' (Stiegler, 2015) in a public sphere with the purpose to get attention and to further produce oneself as an object in a pleasing and action provoking way. Virtual identity is becoming a vital and integral part of today's life. People get acquainted, communicate, date, work, and live a full life online. It is essential to have the right profile to make the right impression. As researchers observed, the exchange of textual information on the web is decreasing, whereas the circulation of

visual images, made and used easier due to mobile phones getting equipped with cameras, is on the rise. The growth in the significance of visual means for virtual communication relates to the increasing preference of Instagram as such a medium. Some studies argue that before photography's primary function of the 'analogue era' was memory preservation. However, today, it is no longer the case. Nowadays, its primary duty is to communicate as well as to create an imagined personality (Garry & Gerrie, 2005). Selfies continue to be one of the most popular methods of digital communication. Some authors defined the selfie "a symptom of social media-driven narcissism," (Pearlman 2013), a "new way [...] of communicating with one another through images" (Rawlings 2013), "the masturbation of self-image" (Marche 2013), a "virtual 'mini-me'" (Clark 2013), and etc.

Discussion

Selfies are means of self-expression, creation of a positive image, an instrument of promoting one's self, a need love and attention, and a way to express belonging to a particular community (Cep, 2013; Leary 2013). Therefore, knowing how to implement these photographic rules and criteria for effective communicative action is of high importance. Selfies are not merely pictures of oneself. They are the individual expression of the imagined virtual personality. They invite for public recognition, liking and flirting. Likes of a selfie feed the insatiable hunger of one's ego. With such high stakes, the Kazakhstani women have to know how to take successful selfies by applying the Rule of Thirds,

Eye-in-Centre Principle; to carefully consider the light conditions, various angles of taking a selfie at the proper distance. The results of the research indicated that the implementation of these rules and criteria remains limited.

Selfies made at an arm's length, or selfie-stick distance makes a face look beautiful. The closer the arm holding the phone, the more the face in the selfie gets distorted. It looks a little bit convex, with a big nose – the *monkey-face effect*. The angle of taking a selfie is also essential. Selfies taken from above is a better approach because the face looks thinner and smaller, and eliminates the double chin. Light settings are essential for a successful selfie, which help avoid washed-out and gloomy results of over- and under-exposed selfies, respectively. The Rule of Thirds delivers symmetry and professional looks to a selfie. However, the Eye-in-Centre Principle creates the sense of the *following eyes*. Thus it keeps the attention to the selfie longer in comparison to other principles. Failing to consider these basic rules and criteria can have painful effects on the most vulnerable part of the Self – the ego.

Conclusion

The research opened many lines for further research. Some of the directions lead to the powerful visual effects selfies have on the customers when conducting SMM promotions. What are the psychological and emotional impacts of likes/dislikes of Instagram users' selfies? How to conduct effective visual communication in the age of Instagram?

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