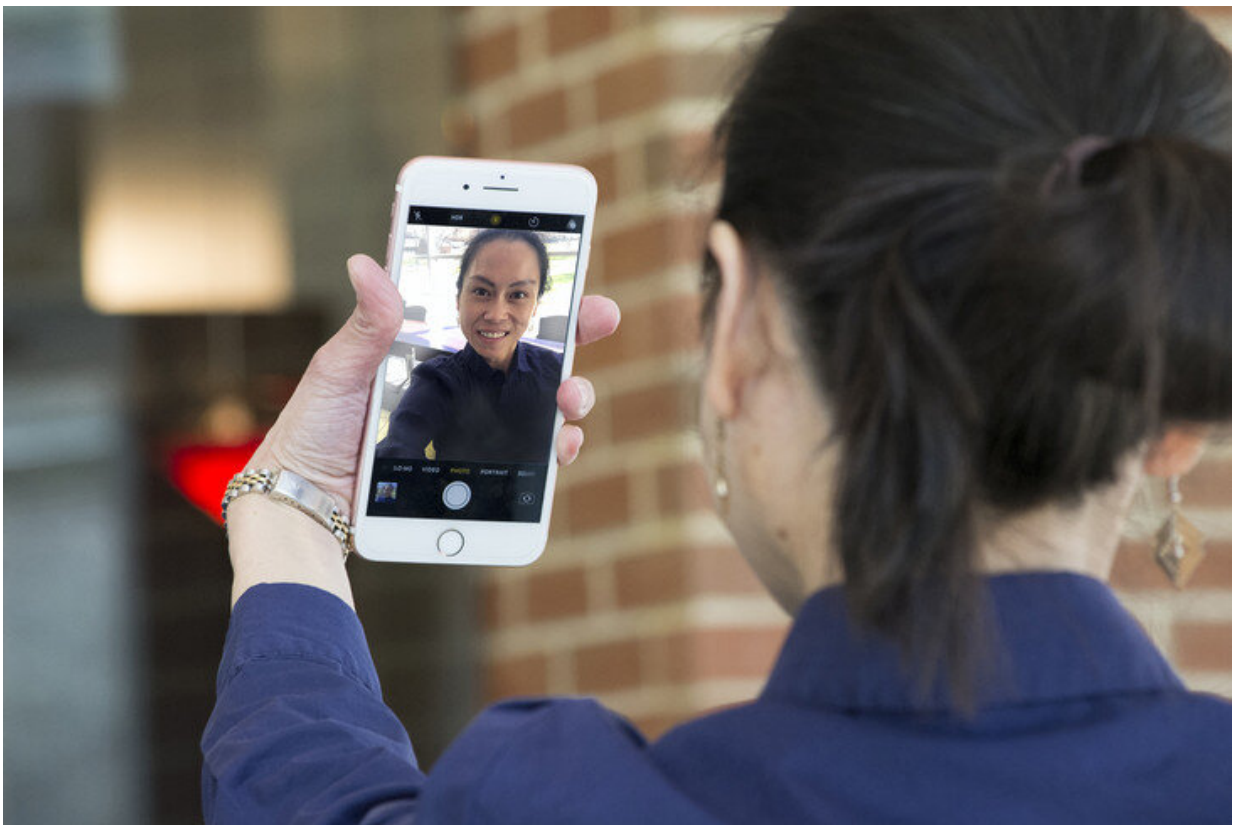# A picture worth a thousand words—examining the research on selfie marketing

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Penn State Harrisburg marketing and consumer research expert Chinintorn "Pom" Nakhata is examining how social media trends influence the habits of consumers and their self-perceptions, and how brands are involved in shaping these perceptions. Credit: Penn State Harrisburg

The rapid evolution of social media platforms has left their uses, and users, in a constant state of transition. In many research fields, analyzing data involving social media can be a daunting task—it is difficult to measure aspects of the internet when they change so quickly.

Social media sites, like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, have had a lifespan of less than 20 years. But social-media use globally and in the United States has soared, especially with millennials. Pew Research Center reported that 94 percent of American adults ages 18 to 24 use social media, with the median American citizen reporting that they use at least three major social media platforms.

Penn State Harrisburg marketing and consumer research expert Chinintorn "Pom" Nakhata is examining how social media trends influence not just the habits of consumers, but their self-perception, and how brands are involved in shaping it.

Nakhata and her team, including Alexa Fox, Todd Bacile and Aleshia Weible, analyzed data related to college students and their use of image-focused social-media platforms Instagram and Snapchat. The goal of the research is twofold: understand how millennials use social media platforms in relation to their self-perception, and understand how marketing and advertising play a role in the everyday use of these platforms.

"I love social media," Nakhata said, "and I use it every day multiple times. I'm also interested in the phenomenon of selfies."

This is what led her to research in the area of "user-generated content." User-generated content is the baseline of selfie marketing—it pertains to the lives of everyday individuals. Social media users utilize their own content to interact not just with their friends and family, but with brands as well.

Instagram and Snapchat are popular in different ways. Instagram holds a stronger sense of permanency with the images that are posted, especially when it comes to selfies.

Nakhata said, "With Instagram, many times people take lots of photos of something special, like they are going out to dinner, or they have dressed up to receive an award, and then they choose the best one to edit and make it look like their life is perfect."

In contrast, said Nakhata, Snapchat is temporary, and users tend to communicate directly with their friends in a more intimate way, without attempting to create an aesthetic for their experiences.

Nakhata explained, "Since pictures on Snapchat either disappear immediately with direct snap, or disappear after 24 hours with stories, people tend to send pictures exactly as they are."

This distinction of how users interact with the platforms is important, providing insight to individual self-concept. In the research, Nakhata and her colleagues focused their attention on narcissism through self-presentation theory.

In a 2018 article published in the *Journal of Consumer Marketing* the researchers wrote, "Self-presentation theory posits that an individual develops a sense of self by creating an impression to showcase to others … In such social interactions, an individual controls which information to make available and how it should be made available …"

Self-presentation theory informed Nakhata's research on narcissism in social media, because it allowed platforms to be structured into two categories. Where Instagram allows users to present their ideal self-concept, Snapchat is centered in actual self-concept. The fact that a single individual uses different platforms to present different identities

shows that, depending on different environmental circumstances, emotional/social changes, or interests, identity should not be viewed as stable but "constantly negotiated, reassembled, and reproduced," the researchers said.

Nakhata explained that we naturally do this outside of social media as well.

"If you want people to think you are professional, you dress formally, you may wear glasses to show people that you are mature, or smart," she said.

The researchers used controlled interviews with participants in the study to determine what elements of this natural tendency translated to social media for individuals, and they discovered that the more narcissistic characteristics the participants presented, the more they interacted with social media in this way.

The complications come when you introduce marketing into this ecosystem, said Nakhata. Corporations and organizations want to create advertisements directly. But the rise of "influencer culture" has given these brands power to use the trends of users to introduce consumerism into their lives. Selfie marketing certainly plays a role in that; this is because, as Nakhata reiterated, we trust people more than brands. We want to see what a regular person looks like wearing the clothing or jewelry that we are considering buying.

"Anything that a consumer posts is more trustworthy. People want to see others experience the product to decide if they want to get it, and we trust that more (than a traditional advertisement) because it's genuine," she explained.

In these cases, social media is a tool for marketing campaigns to reach a

wider audience, but a tool that must be used responsibly. Many millennials use the internet as a kind of community— to stay connected with their friends and more generally, to belong. There is an attachment to being a part of the group, being liked, tagged, and to being relatable. Nakhata's research speaks to the power of influence with visual, user-generated content when used in different contexts.

When brands use influencers to advertise for them, we often are unaware of how disingenuous it can be, said Nakhata. It is possible for the highest-paid influencers to make $1 million per paid Instagram post. Many influencers make thousands of dollars to present a life to their followers that seems natural and honest, and the monetization of identity is something that brands can use to sell a "perfect" life.

However, Nakhata clarified that brands will have to become more creative if they want to reach those users who are lower in narcissistic personalities, especially on more temporary platforms like Snapchat, where people don't want a perfect lifestyle sold to them. There is a shift to more genuine campaigns that are attempting to reach everyday people by showing the imperfect.

"If the product is more everyday, like coffee or fast food or casual clothing, it is better to create an actual self-campaign," she said.

Nakhata expressed that her desire is primarily in developing a greater understanding of how we use social media, and how our uses impact consumer behavior and marketing campaigns.

"We change ourselves to match social media, but social media also changes how we view ourselves," she said, "and I'm interested in understanding consumer attitude and behavior in this area."

  **More information:** Alexa K. Fox et al. Selfie-marketing: exploring

narcissism and self-concept in visual user-generated content on social media, *Journal of Consumer Marketing* (2017).

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