Self in Selca, Self-Portrait Photography, As a Model, Photographer, and Consumer

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Selca refers to self-portrait photography which is popular among young adult Korean consumers. This study investigated consumer’s self-concept and self-presentation through in-depth interviews. Findings indicate that consumers are engaged as a model, photographer, and consumer and maneuvers their way through turbulent self-images that consists of idealized reality and realistic ideality.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1010248/volumes/v39/NA-39

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Selca is a compound word of self and camera, meaning self-portrait photography in Korea. In this photography, consumers simultaneously play multiple roles: the object of consumption, the creator of the object, and the consumer of the object. To take selca pictures, mostly one stretches one’s arm and faces the lens toward oneself. The rapid spread of selca relates to the advent of digital photographing including a diffusion of affordable digital cameras or cell-phones with cameras and the popularity of user-generated contents of Internet social media. This study is to understand how Korean young adults create and view their selca pictures and to conceptualize the meanings of these self-images. The value of our study lies not only in the fact that selca is newly emerging consumption practice but also selca is a context where the complex and dynamic nature of self-concepts is manifested.

Consumer researchers with sociological orientation focuses on the Me, self-perception as object and the empirical self (Robert E. Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). Consumers purchase products in order to highlight or conceal some aspects of self. The consumer-object relationship is well conceptualized by the theory of extended-self (Belk 1988). Belk made the ontological connection of self and possession on the basis of Sartre’s (1943) three states of existence (i.e., being, having, and doing). Self-presentation is related to the Me state. At the Me state, people are more sensitive to the self-relevant aspects including how their actions and appearance look to others or evaluation of self.

Data were collected through videotaped, in-depth interviews. Ninety selca enthusiasts were recruited to participate in our interviews. Participant’s age ranged nineteen through twenty seven. Descriptive characteristics of the participants, transcripts and observations were analyzed with a constant comparison approach. The interview contents reported in this manuscript, which were initially translated into English, was back-translated by two bi-lingual researchers in this subject area, which was to confirm the accuracy and reliability of the translation.

Our data revealed a few distinctive characteristics of selca. Most characteristics of self-taken photos are related to the fact that the subject of a photograph is the photographer. Our young adult consumers prefer selca to regular photography, because it captures how they see themselves rather than how they look. Self-centeredness appears to be undeniably a distinct feature of selca: Participants stated that they should be the central feature even in a selca picture with friends. Whether it is a testament shot or a shot with friends or alone, Selca-taking involves a great deal of directing.

Selca involves self who is both the creator and the object of the consumption and selca captures realities and imagery. Our attempt was to untie the complexity of self-images in selca by analyzing how participants accounted for real and unreal aspects of selca and then integrating the ambivalent accounts. Specifically, three themes emerged: (1) construction of self-centered reality, (2) objectified ideality, and (3) extension of self through selca.

Construction of Self-centered Reality. Consumers direct the photographer’s effort to setting up environmental conditions within the boundary of reality. Self-centered reality is constructed through different kinds of strategies: selection, learning, and revelation. (1) Selection refers to which part of body or what state of mind participants decide to present. (2) Learning about oneself through selca indicates selca practice as autotelic activities. (3) Revelation refers to that selca captures what other people cannot capture in the person. Two types of self-centered reality also emerged depending on which self-consumers choose to present through selca: model self-centered and photographer self-centered reality.

Objectified Ideality. The unreal side of selca embodies the ideality of self-concept. The ideality reflects ideals of beauty and a desirable human character of the society as well as various personal goals. Three strategies emerged as to concretizing the ideality of self: magnifying, negotiation, and multiplying. (1) Magnifying is a way of transforming a reality to an ideality. Many selca techniques are means of exaggerating features that participants want to idealize. (2) Negotiation refers to management of conflicts in taking selca. For example, the two techniques discussed above, high-angle shots and low-angle shots, are incompatible when it comes to a picture of the entire body. (3) Multiplying is to reinforce what is magnified in selca. Many regulars' strategy of possessing many good selca pictures can be understood as a way of multiplying desirable selves. By doing so, the good-looking person in the photos became an existent entity.

Extension of Self through Selca. Consumers juggle between realistic self-awareness and idealized self-images in selca. The discrepancy the participants dealt with is about not only their own selca but also others’ selca. Interestingly participants claim that their own selca is true, whereas other people’s selca is not true. The dual standard for selca was commonly observed. Participants accept the self-deceptiveness of selca of others to some degree, although they were much more tolerable to their own selca.

Another interesting observation was participants looked back on past selca pictures as actual self at that time. As the memory is reconstructed, a sense of reality at a certain point of time in the past is reconstructed. Gratification people get from good selca pictures is instant, compared to film camera. Therefore, consumers get tempted to take one more picture to get more gratification. The instant gratification spontaneously results in the next action, which creates the iterative process of photographing-viewing-gratification. Consumers embrace the idealized self-image and the realistic ideality whether physical or mental is transformed to the higher appraisal of self (i.e., self-esteem).

We understand selca as a quest for an authentic sense of self. Consumers engage in active and individuated productive consumption, acquiring a sense of authenticity. Through juggling between the reality that individuals define and the objectified positive self images, consumers construct a sense of authentic self. Self-directing and self-deception are features of selca practice as an authenticating act. The popularity of selca in Korea should be understood in its cultural context. In Korea, interdependent self concepts are traditionally dominant and consumers are self-conscious about displaying their effort for self-enhancement. This strong sense of self-consciousness was also observed in the selca practice. At the same time, young generations are exposed to and embrace individualistic self concepts, which are often understood as Western influence. The self-centeredness of selca accords with the individualism of the young generations. By extending self to the hybrid form (e.g., actual and ideal) of self-image, consumers can safely pursue self-enhancement and present self in an acceptable way. Selca embodies how this individualistic self concept is acculturated in a traditionally collectivistic culture by creatively using technological advancements.
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