

# I “Selfie” Therefore I Exist: A Preliminary Qualitative Research on Selfie as Part of Identity Formation in Adolescents

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## Abstract

Selfie is a self-generated, self-selected picture to communicate transitory message about oneself on a particular moment in time taken to be immediately distributed to others via social media networks. The rapid growth of technology and communication leads to the massive use of selfie, leading to the importance for further investigation. For adolescents, selfie becomes an online tool to explore and discover their identity throughout identity formation phase. Using self-disclosure and looking glass self as theoretical perspectives, the writing aims to address its purpose to describe the reasons why adolescents take selfies, what selfie means to them and the meaning of others' responses on their selfies. Through textual analysis conducted upon written answers in a course exercise provided by 40 first semester students aged 18-20 years who participate in Introduction to Communication Technology course in Pembangunan Jaya University, this preliminary qualitative research concludes that they take selfie as an activity done in their spare time to express themselves and to record memorable moments. For them, selfie means as their means for self-expression and as mementos. Others' responses to their selfies gave them affective feeling of approval. As these findings resonate with identity formation in adolescence, theoretical implication is the need to continue exploring selfie as a means for the search of identity. Practical implication of these findings is to use selfie and its future consequences with adolescence, including the issues of online safety and privacy. This writing suggests in-depth exploration as well as investigating the meaning of selfie in other age groups.

**Keywords:** selfie, adolescence, social media, identity, identity formation, self-disclosure, looking glass self.

## 1. Introduction

Selfie is a self-generated, self-selected documentation to communicate transitory message about oneself on a particular moment in time, typically taken with the use of smart phones and/or webcams, for the purpose of immediate distribution to others via social media networks (Routledge, 2013b). According to Pew Research Center, as quoted by BBC News Magazine (2013), 91% of photos posted by teenagers in America are selfies – an increase compared to 79% in 2006. The same finding also reveals that a search on Instagram - a photo sharing online application - retrieves over 23 million photos uploaded with the hashtag #selfie and around 51 million with the hashtag #me. Routledge (2013a) highlights that according to Selfies Style contest launched by Fashion Conglomerate Westfield, six out of every ten women use their mobile devices to take self-portraits, most of which end up on Facebook as their social media network. Such prominent findings lead to the selection of Oxford Dictionaries to name 'selfie' as the word of the year in 2013. Quoting this decision, Brumfield (2013) mentions that in justifying their choices, Oxford Dictionaries editors reveal that the frequency of the word selfie in the English language has significantly increased by 17,000% since 2012 – hence it is worthy of such title. According to Routledge (2013a), publisher of Oxford Dictionaries believes that the word 'selfie' first appeared in an Australian chat room on September 13, 2002. Self-portraits tagged as #selfie began to appear on the photo-sharing site of Flickr and on MySpace back in 2004. The same finding also shows that the first definition of a 'selfie' gained entry on UrbanDictionary.com by 2005 (albeit spelled 'selfy'), before finally making it to the authoritative Oxford Dictionary in 2013 as a noun as well as a verb. According to Fausing (2013), the emphasis of selfie is not on creating a permanent projection of 'who we are' – this is best represented through an official, carefully crafted, self-portraiture. Selfie is more about informal and free representation of 'what is going on'. Routledge (2013b) explains how 'ie' at the end of this word makes selfie a diminutive, which generally implies affection and familiarity – hence associating it with the sense of immediacy and impermanence.

In the same year of 2013, the then Indonesia's president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono joined Twitter, used this medium to comment on issues including diplomatic-related ones and published his selfie in mid-December (Bastian and Soloway, 2013). During the same period of time, US President Barack Obama set social network abuzz as he, along with British Prime Minister David Cameron and Denmark Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt, was seen holding up a smartphone and posted a selfie during Nelson Mandela's memorial service (BBC News Magazine, 2013). Also in 2013, the 15<sup>th</sup> Jakarta Biennale, known as the biggest contemporary art exhibition in Indonesia, involving 18 participating countries and more than 40 artworks by local and international artists, dedicates one of its series of 16 simultaneous exhibitions all over the city under the title of Self Portrait Exhibition – showcasing the work of imagining and interpreting as well as deconstructing and even manipulating a self-portrait concept through various mediums such as illustration, painting, photo, video, graphic design and others (Hamdani, 2013).

Although selfie is considered as a recent phenomenon of today's generation, it has a long history - as elaborated by Routledge (2013a). As far back as the Ancient Egypt, people of wealth and power have commissioned self-portraits for the purpose of glorification. The invention of mirror in the 15<sup>th</sup> century let artists to paint themselves. The camera in the 1860s launched a new era and the first selfie is believed to have been taken by the end of 1880s as the first shutter with self-timer was available at that time. Sharing pictures have started earlier, as the 1860s saw huge popularity for the sharing of *cartes de visite* – little photocards. Photo booths, which dates back as far as 1880s, also pushes this trend much as it does today. The first Polaroid was sold in 1948 and in 1970s, it also became the instant camera that encourages people to take more intimate photos. Nowadays, contemporary culture views selfie even further - as a quiet resistance to the barrage of perfect images bombarded by popular magazines, televisions and webpages (Gervais, 2013). Selfie allows audience to see images of real people with beautiful diversity and although flawless images still pervade Western media, the impact of the imperfect images that make their ways onto social media should not be overlooked. Bearing these evidences in mind, one could conclude, as Molloy (2013) does, that the year 2013 will always be remembered as the year of the selfie.

Affirming the abovementioned trend of selfie, a number of social scientists lump selfie as prevalent among today's adolescents (Sifferlin, 2013). During this particular stage of development, adolescents go through a period where experimenting with and developing their sense of self is part of emancipating in a healthy way from their nuclear family. Schultz and Schultz (2005) elaborates how adolescence are known by many as a turbulent and stressful period: with elements of conflict with parents characterized a forceful resistance to adult authority; mood disruption characterized by a volatile emotional life, mood swings, and episodes of depression; and risky behaviors characterized by reckless, rule-breaking and antisocial behavior that may harm themselves and others. Throughout this period of angst, one develops his or her sense of identity.

What is identity? Identity is a conceptual structure composed of postulates, assumptions and constructs relevant to the self, interacting in the world (Moshman, 2011). In reference to Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of personality development, Moshman (2011) elaborates how adolescence is marked with the centrality of identity formation – a challenging process, even under the best circumstances, because this process determines who one is and what one decides to become in the future, by experimenting with different roles and ideologies in order to determine the most compatible fit. A process model of identity formation in adolescents highlights two key processes – exploration of alternatives and commitment to choices. Exploration is a process of gathering information and testing hypothesis about oneself, one's roles and one's relationship; whereas consideration of multiple possibilities and consequences leads to choices that represent self-conscious long-term commitment. It is only when the adolescents are able to select some and discard others of these childhood identifications in accordance with his and her interests, talents and values that identity formation occurs. Hence, identity formation involves a synthesis of these earlier identifications into a new configuration based on but different from the sum of its individual parts. During identity formation, Moshman (2011) highlights that peer group plays strong impacts in the development of identity of an adolescent. The process of identity formation depends on the interplay of what young persons at the end of childhood have come to mean to themselves and what they now appear to mean to their peers who become significant to them. According to Schultz and Schultz (2005), those who emerge from identity formation stage in adaptive ways will develop a strong sense of self-identity, equipped to face adulthood with certainty and confidence. On the other hand, those who did not, will experience role confusion – not knowing who or what they are, where they belong or where they want to go. It should be taken into consideration that one's identity formation remains a never ending process throughout his or her lifetime (Kroger, 2004). The conception of identity, social and cultural contexts as well as conscious interpretation and adaptation choices play key roles in personality development that continues throughout the life span.

Routledge (2013b) argues that selfie, for adolescence – a period when identity formation and emancipation are key development tasks - is meaningful for exploration and identity experimentation. It is because, according to Routledge (2013a), selfie facilitates exploration of self and identity. One of the most effective ways to know ourselves is to see ourselves as others view us and selfies offer the opportunity to do so. Selfie shows facets of ourselves – the artsy side, the silly side or the glamorous side. Quoting a clinical psychologist and research fellow in University of California, Los Angeles, Dr. Andrea Latemendi, adolescents try to form their identity and selfie serves as a way to test how they look and, therefore, feel – in certain outfits, make-ups, poses and places (USA Today, 2013). Day (2013) explains how making selfies is like writing experience in a visual diary – so adolescents can look back and see how they look like at a particular time. In other words, selfie allows adolescents to carry out their exploration of identity in digital forms.

By offering different aspects of self through images to be shared with others, we are sharing more of ourselves as we become more authentic and transparent – notions that, according to Routledge (2013c), digital connectivity encourages. By uploading selfies via social media networks, one is able to disclose his or herself to others – this known as self-disclosure or the process of revealing personal information about oneself to another (Chelune, 1987). It involves negotiating an appropriate balance between the helpfulness of sharing a part of ourselves with another and the inappropriateness or even danger of overdoing it – perhaps sharing too much too soon. A successful, useful or even meaningful self-disclosure means it should be carried out at the right time, in the right situation and to the right people (Argyle and Graham, 1999).

The right people, according to adolescents, are their peers. For adolescence, sharing their selfies is a call for peer reaction – one key element in identity formation stage. When a selfie is shared through social media networks, one can expect its peers to respond to it. Peer response, for adolescents, is important. When people like their selfie by giving ‘likes’ or positive commentaries, this can bring an adolescent a boost in confidence (USA Today, 2013). This resonates with looking-glass-self theory which highlights the element of imagined judgment from others (Cooley, 2011). Looking glass self, an archaic English term of a mirror, is used to describe how a person looks at his or her reflection as a metaphor for understanding the development of social self (Shaffer, 2005). In doing so, he or she imagines him or herself as others see him or her – like an image reflected back in a mirror. He or she then imagines what others think of them or how others evaluate his or her performance. Then, he or she experiences an affective reaction – if the evaluation is positive, the affect is also positive (such as pride and joy), yet if it is negative, then he or she experiences negative affect (such as shame or embarrassment). During the phase of adolescence, this contributes to one’s identity formation. Hence, living in digital world enables adolescents to use selfie as an online tool for participating and affiliating with others, which in return, opens door to feedbacks - which are keys to their identity formation. By accumulation such personal information over time, our understanding develops from the synthesis of all the things we know. Hence, selfie becomes an affirmation of existence. Quoting thinker Rene Descartes, *cogito ergo sum* or “I think therefore I exist,” for adolescents, it becomes “I ‘selfie’ therefore I exist.”

With this background, this research aims to investigate on selfie – because of its prevalence in the contemporary world which is saturated by social media networks and also due to the notion that selfie plays a role in one of the most important challenges during adolescence stage of identity formation. Since selfie itself is a recent phenomenon, previous works are still limited. Van House, Davis, Ames and Viswanathan (2005) in their study on camera phones as part of human factors in computing systems, use surveys to graduate students to find out that pictures captured by phone are used for the purpose of creating and maintaining social relationships, constructing personal and group memory, self-expression, self-presentation, and other functional purposes such as note-taking. In his case study, Chung (2009) delves into adolescence by using autobiographical portraits and examining visual, imagery data - leading to the conclusion that pictures about themselves serve as artistic representation that shows not only their physical characteristics but also their personality, knowledge, history and/or lived experience. Attempting to further develop this relatively new body of knowledge, this writing aims to address its purpose to describe why adolescents take selfies, what selfie means to them and the meaning of other’s responses on their selfies – drawing the links to theories of self-disclosure, looking glass self and adolescents’ identity formation. To do so, this preliminary research takes a qualitative approach best suited for such inquiries. The purposes of this writing are two-fold. On the practical level, findings would be useful as talking points on how adolescence uses social media network to further discuss about selfie and its consequences, including the issues of online safety and privacy. On the other hand, theoretical implication from this writing is to describe how selfie can be used a means for instigate how adolescence pursues their identity formation stage in this digital age.

## **2. Method**

With selfie defined operationally is a self-generated, self-selected documentation to communicate transitory message about oneself on a particular moment in time taken with the use of smart phones and/or webcams, for the purpose of immediate distribution to others via social media networks, research question of this writing are: (1) why adolescents take selfies, (2) what selfie means to them and (3) what others responses on their selfie mean to them. The period of adolescence itself is operationally defined as 18-20 years old (Papalia, Old and Feldman, 2008). This qualifies this writing to be categorized as a qualitative research as it is designed as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009).

One way of doing qualitative research is through personal documents – any written record created by subjects in writing on personal opinions and lived experience (Berg, 2009). It is because writings can reflect the subjective views and perceptions of their creators – offering intimate information and insights on how subjects perceived the world around them. Considering selfie is indeed a visual diary, the use of written personal accounts would be most appropriate since it enables an intimate level of openness. It then allows this writing to fall under nonreactive or unobtrusive research, which according to Neuman (2011), the process of interpretation is done without disrupting the people.

This preliminary query chooses subjects from Pembangunan Jaya University – first semester students, aged 18-20 years old, who participate in Introduction to Information and Communication Technology course, taught by a team of lecturers from Department of Information System and Department of Visual Communication Design. This particular course is chosen due to its learning objective that matches with the research purpose as well as its participants – a typical first semester student would fall under the category of adolescence.

The selection of subjects is as follow. For extra points in this course, subjects volunteers to do a course exercise using Google Docs online form to be filled at the comfort of their own time and space. This form begins with the purpose of the research as well as information regarding research ethics of confidentiality and anonymity. Subjects received no experimental manipulations or interventions due to the voluntary nature of this exercise. After filling out information regarding their names, age, gender and social media networks they use, subjects are requested to pick a selfie of their own and then elaborate why they take these selfies, what those selfies mean to them as well as the meaning of the responses from others toward their uploaded selfies. Until the course ends, this procedure leads to a pool of 40 students out of a total of 154 who participates in the course.

After 40 responses are collected and automatically compiled into a Google spreadsheet, tool used to examine written text is textual analysis. In accordance to steps in Neuman (2011), the process of revealing the content such as meanings is done by systematical organization, integration and examination to search for patterns and relationships amongst specific details by connecting particular data to concepts, advancing generalizations and identifying broad themes or trends. This is done through the process of selective coding – by scanning all data, carefully looking at text and converting it in a very systematic manner into measures of significant words, symbols or messages as well as identifying selectively for cases that illustrate themes. Reliability of such approach, according to Berg (2009), depends on accuracy, which is attempted by continuous checks and rechecks for data accuracy with the help of lecturers of this course. In terms of validity, as suggested also by Berg (2009), the author analyzes the data with the help of lecturers of Department of Psychology as peer reviewers.

## **3. Results**

Based on the data gathered, below are the findings of this research, based on details regarding subjects and their responses.

### 3.1. Age

Characteristics of subjects sampled in this research are as follow. The majority of the subject is students of 18 years old.

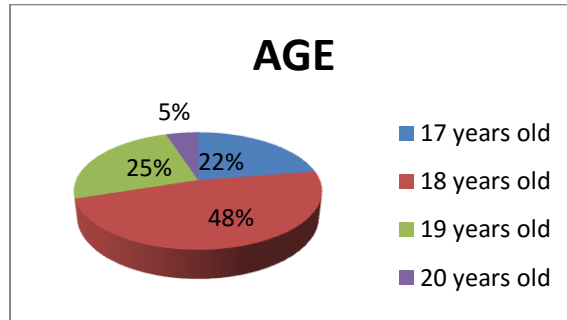


Figure 1. Age

### 3.2. Gender

Genders of the subjects of this research are as follow. Out of a total 40 subjects, the majority of them are female students.

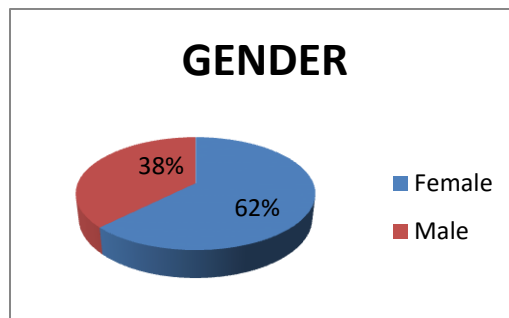


Figure 2. Gender

### 3.3. Social Media

For the purpose of uploading their selfie, they are using the following social media channels. It is to be noted that students are allowed to mention more than one channel in their answers. The finding shows that Facebook is the most favorite social media they choose.

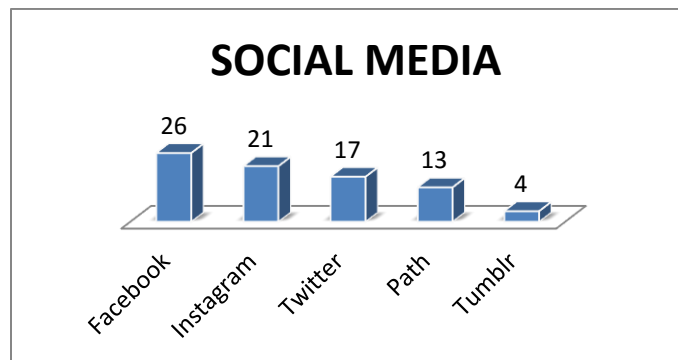


Figure 3. Social Media Network

### 3.4. Why Adolescents Take Selfie

The following are answered chosen as they highlight the predominant theme emerging from the findings. Regarding the themes emerging from the answers provided by the participating subjects, there are three main themes captured: selfie is an activity done in their spare time, selfie is done to express themselves, and selfie serves to record memorable moments.

The first theme identified is that adolescents use selfie as an activity done in their spare time as a way to kill time as it is regarded as a leisure time activity for adolescence. Below are three sample answers which best illustrate the theme identified:

*I happen to have plenty of leisure time so I snap one or two selfies* (female, 18 years old).

*Oh, well, I just did it because I had nothing else to do* (male, 17 years old).

*I was bored. So why not take pictures of myself?* (male, 17 years old).

The abovementioned answers reflect how adolescence uses selfies in their leisure time. It reflects the centrality of their own personal being in adolescence, which resonates with the understanding that identity becomes the emphasis of who they are. So in spite of spending their time to commit on productivity as such, they dedicate their leisure time for themselves, for taking pictures of themselves, for putting themselves into the center. It reflects how exploration of identity, taking shapes in capturing facets of themselves, is front and center during this age group – which resonates with identity formation of adolescence.

The second theme identified from the findings is that subjects use selfie as a means to express themselves. Below are three sample answers that resonates the notion of self-expression:

*To say that this is me and I am pretty awesome, that's why I do selfie* (male, 17 years old).

*To express myself because I feel good at that time* (female, 20 years old)

*Selfie is about self-expression to me* (female, 19 years old)

The abovementioned answers are in line with the importance of self-expression for adolescence and how expressing themselves becomes part of their identity formation. Exclamation of one's identity as someone 'awesome' is an instance on how this student forms his identity and explains to others who he is. To express her emotion of feeling good is also a way of expressing herself, as she is disclosing private information about her inner being to others.

Lastly, the reason why adolescent subjects take selfies is because they would like to record memorable moments. Answers that best illustrate such theme are as follow:

*I like to remember how I looked like months or even years ago, selfie allows me to flashback through time* (female, 20 years old).

*I did it for fun, to capture a moment when I wear a nice makeup and outfit* (female, 19 years old).

*I want to share with my friends how I change overtime.* (male, 19 years old).

The abovementioned reasons resonate concerns to record memorable moments and how it intertwines with identity formation as part of adolescent's developmental task. This is apparent from the use of word 'change' in the answer provided. Reasons offered by these students also look at identity as a construction comprising of special moments such as wearing 'a nice make up and outfit'. Through their journey, these students share their milestones with their peers or friends – another facet of identity formation in the phase of adolescence. This resonates with the looking glass-self perspective that highlights the importance of the evaluation of others to the development of self. Exploration of alternatives occurs through various alterations they choose over a period of time, or as exemplified in the answer, 'months or even years ago.'

### 3.5. The Meaning of Selfie

Regarding the second research questions, the following are answers provided by the students regarding what selfie means to them:

*Selfie represents who I am as reflected from the style or pose I choose.* (female, 17 years old)

*Selfie allows me to create my own story about myself* (female, 19 years old)

*For me, selfie is self-actualization, it is how I become the whole me* (male, 19 years old)

*In reality, I am rather shy and quite awkward when I have to talk to others. My selfie becomes my means to communicate to others who I am. It feels like I can say to my friends, "Hey, this is me."* (female, 19 years old)

The answer above showcases that selfie is used to construct, and reconstruct, and perhaps also deconstruct, their own identity – symbolized by ‘style or pose’ to create ‘my own story’ as part of ‘self-actualization’ so they can become ‘whole.’ This represents that one of the meanings of selfie is self-expression.

This represents how identity formation is a continuous project for these adolescents. Among these responses, one answer stands out as the subject offers an insight on how selfie serves as a means to be who she aspires to be – more articulate, sociable and expressive. In a sense, selfie becomes the ideal self she strives to be. These answers again reflect the notion of identity formation as well as their exploration and experimentation.

It should be noted that these answers also resonate with self-disclosure perspective. Selfie allows these adolescents to reveal their personal emotion to others. It enables one subject to say to her friends ‘this is me’ reflects how she uses selfie to disclose her feeling to her peers. Selfie, in this case, also means as a memento – something to remember by.

### 3.6. The Meaning of Responses from Others toward Their Selfie

The last research question delves into how adolescents derive meaning from the response of others toward their selfie as it is uploaded to their social media network. The following are answered chosen as affective response from peer response, highlighting the link with the looking-glass-self theory. These answers emphasize how peer response from their closed knit network brings out affective notion on the subjects.

*I feel that I, well, exist...* (female, 18 years old).

*I feel good because I feel that my friends pay attention to me, have interests on me and say good things to me* (female, 18 years old).

*I am happy when my friends like my selfie. I am also okay if they don't like it. Everybody is entitled to his or her opinion* (male, 18 years old).

*If any of my friends give me negative comments, I immediately delete my selfie* (male, 17 years old).

The answers reverberates the looking-glass-self point of view, particularly on the notion that an individual experiences an affective reaction to the imagined evaluation of the other and these affects are related to the imagined evaluation of others. If the others’ evaluation of the actor is positive, the affect is positive, but if the others’ evaluation is negative, the affect is negative. These ideas are reflected in the answers on how good they feel upon receiving positive commentary. A student’s response to ‘delete’ his selfie also affirms the looking-glass-self emphasis on the roles of others in the development of self. One answer stands out regarding affective reaction upon receiving peer response. One 18-years-old female student mentioned how responses from her peers toward her selfie make her feel that she exists. This again is in line with what looking-glass-self offers toward understanding the development of self – that the very core existence, in this case, lies on the fingers of her friends.

#### 4. Discussion

Through textual analysis on the responses provided by forty 18-20 years old students, it can be concluded that they take selfie as an activity done in their spare time to express themselves and to record memorable moments. For them, selfie means as their means for self-expression and as mementos. Others' responses to their selfies gave them affective feeling of approval. These are all couched on the notion of identity formation and how it develops in their period of adolescence – with links to self-disclosure and looking glass-self perspectives.

Since this is a preliminary research, this will continue to be developed further. One way to do so is to include interview to selected individuals to capture a more elaborative answers on how they do selfies and share them through social media network. Another way to develop this research further is to take the quantitative approach and use the findings to build a survey in order to capture a larger pool of subject. Going beyond a case study scope and extend the subjects to the wider audience is also another research development to be pursued.

This writing suggests for follow-up in-depth exploration on selfie in adolescence as well as other age groups. It is because selfie is not restricted to adolescence only. It would be interesting to find out how the issue of identity, as reflected in taking pictures of ourselves, revolves in a different age group. Comparative analysis between adult selfie takers as well as adolescences is also interesting to ponder.

All in all, the development of information communication technology, particularly social media, has pushed the boundaries of investigation on the issue of self and identity. The future opens up more and more doors to be opened as the venue to articulate our identity, to exercise self-disclosure, to engage with others as reflected in looking-glass perspective and to construct and re-construct ourselves over and over again.

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