



## #MeTravel: Travel Selfies, Narcissism, and Destination Marketing

Gamage, T.C.

Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

*While posting travel selfies on social media, many tourists strategically attempt to adjust them to better portray their images by excluding destination attributes, thus manifesting narcissism. Following the inductive research approach, based on in-depth interviews conducted with 27 tourists, this paper explores how travel selfies and tourists' desire for narcissism create challenges to destination marketing. The findings indicate a growing tendency among tourists to capture themselves in travel selfies while excluding unique and attractive destination attributes or shifting them to the side of the photograph, thus diluting the attention toward tourist destinations. This paper suggests several managerial implications for tourism practitioners on strategically marketing tourist destinations using tourists' selfie posting behaviour.*

**Keywords:** Destination marketing, Narcissism, Social media, Travellers, Travel selfies

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\*Corresponding author: [thilini@gmt.sab.ac.lk](mailto:thilini@gmt.sab.ac.lk)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7661-8390>



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## INTRODUCTION

User-generated content (UGC) on social media which reflects rich customer insights in the form of photos, stories, narratives, comments, and reviews has increasingly become critical to the success of the tourism industry (Pahlevan Sharif & Mura, 2019; Lam et al., 2020). It allows tourism practitioners to engage with potential tourists, increase their online visibility, enhance brand recognition and consequently lead to more substantial sales revenues. On the other hand, UGC influences every aspect of a tourist's decision-making process and travel experience (Gamage et al., 2021). For instance, when deciding the destinations to visit and hotels to stay in, tourists primarily rely on content from other tourists than commercial sources (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018). Consequently, UGC plays an increasingly vital role in tourism marketing (Zhang et al., 2021).

The most critical aspect of UGC that has affected the tourism industry in the recent past is the “*selfie*” phenomenon (Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022). A selfie is a photo of oneself taken, typically with a smartphone or a webcam held at an arm's length, and usually shared via social media (Faimau, 2020). It is common to see today at most tourist destinations tourists often use selfie sticks to capture the moments better, testifying to the allure of the travel selfie. Approximately 66% of tourists report that they take selfies at the tourist destinations they visit, out of which nearly 40% of tourists are millennials (Taylor, 2020). Therefore, selfies have become an integral part of tourism. Most tourism practitioners are encouraging and enabling tourists to take and share selfies on social media, thus giving prominence to the notion of selfie marketing. However, selfie posting behaviour is far less researched in the tourism literature (Tan & Yang, 2021; Chirstou et al., 2022), a void this paper attempts to fill.

Further, recent literature on selfies emphasized that a considerable proportion of users intentionally manipulate selfies by removing skin imperfections or enlarging the eyes of the user, thus promoting narcissism (Taylor, 2020; Chirstou et al., 2022). In social media research, the notion of narcissism is defined as creating and sharing self-promoting content via social media (Casale & Banchi, 2020). Although travel selfies have taken a central role in tourism (Tan & Yang, 2021), scholars have largely ignored the concept of narcissism in the context of travel selfies and its influence when marketing tourist destinations. The only exception is Chirstou et al. (2022), who investigated whether selfies taken by tourists shift the focus of the photograph to oneself only, excluding important tourist attractions from the photograph, underpinning a self-centered manifestation of narcissism. However, these researchers did not examine the concept of narcissism concerning travel selfies and their influence on marketing tourist destinations in detail, another gap in tourism literature that this study aims to fill.

This paper contributes to tourism literature and practice in three important ways. First, it provides further theoretical insights into the selfie phenomenon, which is becoming more narcissistic within the context of tourism (Taylor, 2020; Chirstou et al., 2022). Second, the present study delves deeper into the tourists' selfie posting behaviour and explores how it creates challenges to destination marketing. Finally, this paper offers tourism practitioners insights about strategically marketing tourist destinations by exploiting tourists' selfie posting behaviour.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Media, Travel Selfies, and Destination Marketing**

Due to the intangible nature of tourism products and services and tourism being a hedonic experience (Trinanda et al., 2021), UGC on social media has become a vital aspect of tourists' travel-related decision-making

(Mendes-Filho et al., 2018). Additionally, the perceived credibility of such content is considered higher than the content published by commercial sources (Gamage et al., 2021). Thus, UGC has become an important topic in tourism marketing research lately (Wang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Concerning promoting travel destinations, UGC, in the form of photos and videos, is considered the most prevalent marketing material through which potential tourists' attitudes and travel intentions can be shaped (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018). This phenomenon is fueled by tourists' increasingly travel-related photo-sharing behaviour through social media, resulting from rapid smartphone penetration and fast Internet connections (Zhang et al., 2021). Consequently, modern tourist experiences have always been intricately linked with taking selfies and sharing them with friends and followers (Weiler et al., 2021). However, analyzing it closely, it is apparent that, today, taking and sharing travel selfies have gone beyond remembering and prolonging travel experiences. Instead, it has become an exercise of entering social and mental contexts and forming a tourist's self-presentation (Taylor, 2020; Chirstou et al., 2022).

Despite the vast popularity of travel selfies, their social meaning has received scant scholarly attention. (Christou et al., 2022). Although they are just considered travel photographs at a superficial level, their popularity reflects a change in the use of travel photographs in recent years from memory tools to tools for identity construction and projection (Taylor, 2020). More specifically, they tell stories of individual personalities of tourists, thus contributing how tourists present their self-identity (Taylor, 2020; Chirstou et al., 2022).

### **Self-presentation, Travel Selfies, and Narcissism**

The self-presentation theory posits that in face-to-face communications, individuals attempt to develop a sense about themselves by creating an impression about themselves to others (Goffman, 1959). In such social

interactions, an individual decides and controls which information to make public and how it should be available (DePaulo, 1992). The self-presentation theory has become exceptionally significant in the marketing discipline and is connected to several different theories of consumer behaviour. For instance, the presentation of one's self through the lens of self-presentation theory highlights the consumers' attempt to express an image or impression to others through their product and service choices (Zeng et al., 2019). Although this theory has originated in the offline context, with the emergence of the Internet and social media, scholars have expanded it into the online context (de Vaate et al., 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021).

The evolution of visual content-sharing social media apps such as Instagram and Snapchat and front-facing camera technology enable individuals to present themselves to others easily (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). The photo- and video-editing features on social media apps allow users to present themselves attractively by modifying their appearances, thus promoting narcissism (Hollenbaugh, 2021). The term "*narcissism*" comes from the Greek mythos, in which a dashing hunter named Narcissus fell in love with his reflection in the water. His appearance seduced him that he made futile attempts to physically capture his image reflected in the water and eventually drowned after falling into the water. As described by many scholars and psychologists, the notion of narcissism is a personality trait marked by boastful pride and arrogance. It is seen as a factor in undesirable results in an individual's interpersonal, professional, and social domains (Hart et al., 2017). Narcissists tend to seek attention and are very preoccupied with their appearance (Hart et al., 2017; Casale et al., 2020). When looking at it from a social perspective, there are severe negative consequences of narcissistic behaviour such as reductions in empathy (Lange et al., 2016), increases in selfish behaviours (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), and high levels of aggression, carelessness, and manipulation toward others (Cascio et al., 2015). Additionally, narcissism is

linked to vanity and egotistic love of one's idealized self-image and physical characteristics, resulting in a propensity for self-promotional behavior (Casale et al., 2020).

Tourism is becoming more narcissistic as a growing trend among tourists to travel for self-presentation is witnessed via social media. Tribe and Mkono (2017) viewed travel selfies as an indication of tourists' narcissism. As Christou et al. (2021) resonated, there is a growing "*tendency to capture oneself (or mostly oneself) in a travel selfie while excluding destination attributes or shifting them to the side of the photograph*" (p. 289). However, except for very few studies, narcissism has received less praise in tourism literature (Tan & Yang, 2021). Consequently, tourism literature lacks a comprehensive framework that can provide detailed descriptions of how travel selfies and tourists' desire for narcissism create challenges to destination marketing. Based on the preceding, this paper advocates the need for following the qualitative approach to obtain a nuanced understanding of how travel selfies and tourists' desire for narcissism create challenges to destination marketing.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Sri Lanka was chosen as the context for this paper as it is one of the popular travel destinations, especially among the Indians, Chinese, and Europeans. It is home to several natural tourist attractions and authentic tourist experiences central to travel photography primarily due to its unique geographical location, tradition, and cultural practices. Given the limited understanding of the notion of narcissism in the context of travel selfies (Tan & Yang, 2021; Christou et al., 2021), a qualitative approach was deemed more suitable for this study. In-depth semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of tourists who have shared travel selfies via social media were employed to explore how travel selfies and tourists' desire for narcissism create challenges to destination marketing. In-depth interviews were considered the most

appropriate research instruments to be utilized in this paper as it allows respondents to divulge their feelings and perspectives while elaborating on their actions in naturalistic settings (Legard et al., 2003). A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was applied to identify and select prospective respondents (Marshall, 1996).

The respondents were chosen systematically and theoretically using the following selection criteria. First, each respondent should be an active user of visual content-sharing social media apps (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, WeChat) who have shared at least ten travel selfies during the last six months. Following Gamage et al. (2021), active usage was described as using the visual content-sharing social media app for at least an hour per day during the previous six months at the time of data collection. Second, when selecting the respondents, enough diversity is ensured by choosing the respondents representing diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, age categories, and gender, ensuring precision and rigor in the qualitative study. The respondents were approached from famous tourist destinations in the western and southern provinces of the country. The western province was selected as it includes major commercial cities and tourist attractions in the country (Ekanayake & Kuruppuge, 2017). The south coast was selected since it is renowned among tourists as one of the finest stretches of coastlines globally (Deyshappriya & Nawarathna, 2020).

Based on the prior literature review, an interview protocol was developed to elicit responses concerning tourists' opinions and viewpoints about how travel selfies and tourists' desire for narcissism create challenges to destination marketing (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The interviews began with a few general questions to identify the respondents' demographic profile and photo-sharing behaviour. As the interview process delved more profound, the respondents were requested to pronounce their preferences, motivations, and experiences on creating and sharing travel selfies via social media and how they

perceived it had made challenges when promoting travel destinations. Some typical questions included: *“Where and on which occasions do you take selfies during the travel?”*, *“How will you feel about manipulating travel selfies to portray self-image?”*, *“How would you think about exposing one’s self in travel selfies by excluding important attributes of the destinations they visit?”*, *“How far do you think manipulating travel selfies enable narcissism”?*, and *“How will you feel about promoting narcissism through travel selfies, and creating challenges when promoting travel destinations?”*.

Before commencing the interviews, the interview protocol was pilot tested with three academic experts specialized in digital marketing. This led to a few modifications, primarily regarding the order and wording of the questions. Since there are no clear standards for the sample size to be taken into account in qualitative research, the saturation strategy recommended by Eisenhardt (1989) followed in determining the sample size. The data collection ended once the same ideas repeatedly manifested with no new ideas emerging while reporting similar instances. Accordingly, 27 interviews were conducted that included a heterogeneous sample of tourists of various ages (ranging from 19 to 65) and different ethnic and cultural (5 locals and 22 international tourists) backgrounds.

According to Eisenhardt's (1989) recommendations, two interviewers conducted all interviews to control interviewer bias. Additionally, all the interviews were in English, and both interviewers had prior experience studying and practicing travel selfies, social media, and tourism marketing. All the interviews varied between 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted from January to March 2022. Further, all interviews were digitally recorded after obtaining respondents' permission/consent with observational notes taken by the interviewers. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim within a day after completing the interview. On average, each transcript of an interview produced



about twelve typed pages. In addition, the member checking technique is utilized to evaluate the data's internal validity (Birt et al., 2016). Accordingly, the interview transcripts were sent to the respondents via e-mail requesting them to review them to ensure whether the interviewers appropriately understood the data based on what they stated during the interviews. The insights obtained from the 27 interviews were further augmented by investigating secondary data obtained by looking at the sample travel selfies created and shared by the respondents. By avoiding the drawbacks of relying on a single measure, using multiple sources during data collection enabled data triangulation when exploring how travel selfies and tourists' desire for narcissism create challenges to destination marketing. (Golafshani, 2003).

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Thematic analysis strategy was used to analyze the interview data following the six-step procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) through a critical realist viewpoint. Critical realism allows for recognizing respondents' knowledge as reality while considering the sociocultural context in which this knowledge about narcissism in travel selfies is studied (Fletcher, 2017). First, the analysis began with the research team (i.e., the author and the two research assistants) familiarizing themselves with the data by frequently reading interview transcripts and listening to recorded interviews. Then, initial codes were created, including both semantic and latent codes allowing for the comprehension of surface meanings and deeper underlying conceptualizations. During this stage, the research team regularly met to discuss the coding of extracts from interview transcripts. Following the coding of the data, initial themes were developed which were then modified and reviewed to ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected the qualitative data collected. All the research team members were actively involved in this process and met regularly to discuss and review emerging themes. After reviewing the emergent themes, each theme was defined in a manner so that it can fully capture the essence of

the data it captures. Theme development and refinement were conducted iteratively, and themes and definitions were modified and refined multiple times.

The themes were identified using an inductive approach throughout the analysis ensuring that themes were data-driven (Gamage et al., 2021). However, derived themes were later interpreted and contextualized in light of prior research examining selfies and narcissism more broadly. Because inter-rater reliability was not considered acceptable in qualitative research, the research team resolved any disagreements among the members through active and extensive discussions, thus, allowing the members to arrive at a consensus validating the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes, codes, and quotes were confirmed again before finalizing the findings by reviewing the interview transcripts and listening to recordings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The thematic analysis resulted in three themes encapsulating tourists' understandings and experiences about travel-related photo-sharing behaviour, promoting narcissism through travel selfies, and how it challenges destination marketing. Pseudonyms were used to identify the respondents, ensuring confidentiality, and the pertinent respondent information (i.e., gender, age, and nationality) is provided in parentheses (e.g., B2: male, 27, Chinese).

### **Expanding Travel Selfies as a Means of Sharing Travel Experiences**

Regardless of age and gender, most respondents described that taking and sharing selfies have become a part of their everyday routine, whether traveling or not.

*“I often take selfies in my everyday life, not only while traveling but especially whenever I feel I look good” (D4: female, 21, Chinese)*

They rationalized this behaviour by stating that *“selfies are meant for that”*. As some respondents echoed, selfies will serve as a memory booster in the future since they allow individuals to show lovely photos of themselves and share their life experiences with others.

Focusing mainly on travel selfies, most respondents claimed they take and share travel selfies when they feel good about themselves, particularly about their look, or when experiencing positive emotions such as *“joy”* and *“happiness”* during a trip.

*“When I'm on vacation, I am usually in a good mood, and I feel happy and full of energy ...so I prefer to cherish such moments by taking a nice selfie and sharing it with my friends and family”* (J10: male, 27, UK-English).

Explaining the reasons that triggered their travel-related selfie-taking and sharing behaviour, more than half of the respondents emphasized that by posting travel selfies they wanted to verify to others that they were there.

*“I usually share travel selfies on Facebook and Instagram to prove to my friends that I went to see this beautiful place”* (X24: male, 41, German).

Some respondents further emphasized that posting travel selfies enable them to share life experiences with friends and family and could motivate them to travel to these destinations.

*“After seeing the selfies I took at Galle fort and south coast during my last visit, my sister's family accompanied me in this visit. They were mainly motivated to visit here, as the selfies I posted were breathtakingly beautiful”* (G7: male, 53, Indian)

## **Objectification of Travel Selfies as a Tool for Promoting Narcissism**

Discussing what they would like to focus in travel selfies, most respondents who belong to generations Y and Z indicated that they prefer to include their faces or themselves in each travel selfie. The face is identified as the expressive tool for most female respondents. For example, one female respondent stated, “*selfies of tourist attractions are more live to look at when they include people in them*” (P16: female, 34, Russian). Another female respondent added, “*When taking selfies, including your face, your face needs to communicate something. Facial expressions and maintaining eye contact are essential for travel selfies to be creative*” (A1: female, 19, Indian). Although most female respondents were confident in portraying their faces with a natural look in travel selfies, there were some contrasting viewpoints too. As a female respondent in her mid-twenties said, “*Usually, when I take a selfie with a selfie stick while focusing on a tourist attraction, I look to the side or look away and let my hair flick to show a bit of movement*” (L12: female, 24, Spanish). These quotations confirm the prior research findings (e.g., Tribe & Mkono, 2017; Christou et al., 2020) that implied how tourism is becoming more narcissistic due to the growing trend among tourists to travel for self-presentation via social media.

Drawing on the importance of taking photographs when traveling, some respondents also highlighted that while attempting to objectify the natural surroundings and attractive features of travel destinations, it is vital to bring out emotions within travel selfies to attract active reactions (i.e., views, shares and comments) from social media users. Consequently, it was discovered that most respondents had started using particular features of social media platforms (i.e., ephemeral content shared on Instagram, such as Instagram stories) to adapt the aesthetics of the photograph to complement the style and narrative that the individual wants to portray on social media. As respondent D4 (male, 47, Chinese) stated: “*Over the years, I have tried a variety of angles and camera*

*positions to learn how to take perfect and incredible travel selfies. I also prefer to add some creative elements (i.e., filters, colour complements, photo frames) to them to create rhetorical narratives whenever I share travel selfies. By doing so, I have actually got good compliments.”* These findings align with Taylor (2020) and Chirstou et al. (2022), who emphasized that self-presentations through travel selfies involve more than just focusing on the individual. It includes utilizing different techniques and methods to manipulate the aesthetics of the image to make it more attractive.

### **Travel Selfies and Attraction-shading Effect**

Sample travel selfies shared by the respondents clearly illustrate that the vital destination attributes cover a tiny space in the selfie compared to the majority of space covered by the faces and bodies of tourists. As a clear example to prove this point, a sample of two travel selfies obtained from respondents after gaining their consent is presented here (see Figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1:** *Sample travel selfie provided by a respondent*



**Figure 2:** Sample travel selfie provided by a respondent

As seen from the above travel selfies, tourists' faces and bodies become the focal point of most selfies, and tourist attractions while the important attributes of the destinations were shaded by the bodies and faces of the respondents. When asked about what made most of the respondents manipulate travel selfies creating an attraction shading effect, some admitted that it was unintentional. However, most of them emphasized that they wanted to expose the public to a “nice” photo of them instead of promoting travel destinations. In addition, as three respondents stated, they thoroughly believed that travel selfies are good tools for self-presentation and self-promotion. As respondent R18 (male, 44, Iranian) stated: *“I honestly don’t believe that we can expect enthusiastic reactions from social media users by just posting a photo of a travel destination. Such photos are not live; we can make them alive by adding our faces to them.”* These views connect with the self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) and support the claims in prior literature that travel selfies are effective tools for self-exposure and self-promotion (Taylor, 2020; Chirstou et al., 2022).

The findings clearly emphasized that tourists do not intentionally promote travel destinations through travel selfies. Instead, it can happen spontaneously while sharing their travel selfies on social media. This suggests

that tourist destinations must proactively co-create value with tourists to motivate them to share their images creatively.

## **CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This paper has set forth to close many gaps in tourism literature and practice by better exploring the notion of narcissism in travel selfies and its influence on destination marketing. As the findings indicate, mostly among generations Y and Z, travel is being undertaken for self-presentation via social media, and travel selfies created and shared by them are becoming more narcissistic. This study also uncovered that popular tourist attractions of travel destinations are pushed to the side of travel selfies since the focus is on the tourists and the promotion of their travel status. Therefore, destinations face the challenge of the attraction shading effect where their important tourist attractions and destination attributes are left out of the travel selfies of their visitors. This may negatively influence the promotional potential of travel destinations via social media.

The findings of this paper have several important implications for tourism literature and practice. This paper contributes to tourism literature by providing further theoretical insights into the notion of narcissism in the travel selfie phenomenon, which has received less attention in tourism literature (Tang, 2020; Tan & Yang, 2021). Further, the present study contributes to tourism literature by delving deeper into the tourists' selfie posting behaviour and the challenges it creates when promoting travel destinations. In addition, based on the findings, tourism practitioners can consider introducing life-size, transparent picture frames in front of popular tourist destinations, such as natural attractions and historical architectural sites, and encourage tourists to use them when taking photos. In this way, tourism practitioners can strategically ensure that important attributes and attractions of the destinations will not be

missed from the pictures of tourists, even in the case of travel selfies. Similar to any other research, this paper, too, has limitations. The most significant limitation of this paper lies in the exploratory research design used, focusing on a small sample; thus, the results cannot be generalized. It is also important to mention that the qualitative analysis did not consider the possible influence of the socio-economic status of respondents on travel-related photo-sharing behaviour; this would have added something interesting to the results, knowing that traveling requires specific financial means. A potential area of interest that could be considered in future research may be the emerging trend of shifting from travel selfie photos to travel selfie videos. Ethnographic research methods could be employed in investigating this trend so that more meaningful interpretations of the travel selfies and their impact on destination marketing can be derived.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares no potential conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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