Chapter 40

Self–Objectification vs. African Conservative Features in the Selfies of Black African Women:
A Study of Nigerian Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Though popularly construed as a universal phenomenon, selfie taking is gendered and culturally determined. This could be evidenced by the fact that the two socio-cultural forces of conservatism and traditionalism continue to tremendously shape African women's style of taking and sharing selfies on social media. Based on a content analysis of 200 selfies generated and shared by Nigerian women on Facebook and Instagram, this chapter illustrates this reality. It argues that Nigerian women are generally more conservative than liberal in their use of selfies for self-presentation, self-imaging and self-expression in public spaces. Over 59% of their selfies have conservative features. However, despite the prevalence of conservative myths and gender related stereotypes in the Nigerian society, the phenomenon of nude or objectified selfies remains a clearly notable sub-culture among Nigerian women. Over 41% of Nigerian women's selfies contain such objectification features as suggestive postures; suggestive micro-expressions and fair/excessive nudity among others.

INTRODUCTION

The act of taking and sharing selfies on social networks is arguably considered a universal tradition, as it transcends ages, races, cultures and genders. As a remarkable revolution in self-portraiture, self-representation and self-expression in the digital era, the tradition has become part and parcel of virtually everybody's life, particularly those equipped with the necessary gadgets: a smartphone, a (sex) selfie stick, webcam and internet connection. From simple students through entertainment divas to influential politicians, people from all walks of life have embraced this culture. Such a popular culture stems from the

fact that the act of taking and sharing selfies is very much inline with the two neo and fashionable trends of publishing/ "broadcasting" oneself to digital audiences and appropriating the social networks through citizen journalism. As Klomp (2014) rightly puts it, publicizing oneself to digital audiences through social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the like has simply become "a norm" which enables people irrespective of age, walks of life, race, culture and gender to communicate themselves in a completely new way. The advent of the new media and other digital technologies has thus engendered a situation where in, audiences have ceased to be mere consumers of media contents. They have progressively become "pro-sumers" (producers of online contents) and citizen journalists. Using selfies has thus become just an integral aspect of striving to be a part of social/online communities.

However, despite its globalization and universal nature, the use of selfies, is, in many respects, culturally and gender determined. Gender-based variations in the use of selfies seem to be the most evident of these two categories; no doubt the tradition is popularly described as being gendered in nature or gender-driven. According to a transcontinental study conducted by SelfieCity, it was discovered that women use selfies more than men. The study equally revealed that women tend to take more expressive, provocative and sexy poses than men in their selfies. This is illustrated by the fact that, on average, the head tilt of a woman's selfie is 150% higher than for men (12.3° vs. 8.2°). This signifies that many awful women take selfies holding their cameras way above their heads, mostly to fit their bikini in-frame (Brownlee, 2016; Rettberg 2015; SefieCop, 2016; Tifentale & Manovich 2015). Based on this observation and related indexes, it has been argued that selfies have become a veritable site of women self-objectification. In fact, it has become a common culture among feminist scholars to equate selfies to "the male gaze gone viral" or to an experience through which, women think that they must look hot and feel "fuckable" for them to be visible or achieve social acceptability (Dine 2011, D'Eon, 2013; Kite & Kite 2014). Such a situation has further informed the coinage of a variety of pejorative (women-unfriendly) neologisms, one of which is "selfie-objectification". Derived from a combination of "selfie" and "self-objectification", the portmanteau term ("selfie-objectification") refers to the act of presenting oneself as an object, especially of sight or other physical sense, through a photograph that one takes of oneself, for posting online. This process manifests itself in three steps: (i) capturing photos of oneself to admire and scrutinize (ii) ranking and editing those photos to generate an acceptable final image, and (iii) sharing those photos online for others to validate (Kite & Kite, 2014).

Given the fact that the use of selfies is also culturally determined, there is a high probability that Black African women's models of employing selfies differ to some extent, from that of their counterparts from the western world. Despite the increasing influence of westernization or Americanization on the Black Continent, the two concepts of conservatism and traditionalism still continue to govern many aspects of the lives of Africans. In fact, conservatism still shapes many Black African women's philosophy of life, beauty and sexuality. Segoete (2015) shares corollaries as she enthuses that religion and culture are the major custodians of morality across the Black African Continent. Their agents and institutions tend to perpetuate the shaming and ridiculing of women who dare challenge the status quo, notably through the adoption of western liberal ideologies on sexuality, fashion and beauty. In line with this, women who do not conform to the conservative dictates of society are summarily, wantonly and often impulsively considered rebels, loose and lacking in virtue. A good number of African women internalize these conservative, religious and traditionalist precepts in their social enterprises (notably in the way they appear, dress, speak and interact in public). This is not to negate the thesis that the two forces of modernity and globalization have facilitated the westernization of many among them, so much so that, some of them may not perfectly be influenced by African conservatism.

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