



The Journal of *News Science*

Vol. 14, No. 3, Ser.55, Autumn 2025, P. 49-56

Journal homepage: <https://www.mjourcom.ir/>

DOI : <http://doi.org/10.22034/lrsi.2026.561463.1479>

Open Access

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Theoretical Foundation of Selfie-Based Advertising on Social Networks

Seyedeh Nafise Khorashadizade^{✉1}  | Reza Saberi ²

1. Corresponding author, PhD Candidate in Media Management, Faculty of Communications, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran. Email: nafise.khorashadizade@gmail.com
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Sciences, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran. Email: r.saberi@atu.ac.ir

Received: July 4, 2025

Accepted: October 25, 2025

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Interdiction:

In the contemporary digital media landscape, technological advancements and the proliferation of social networks have transformed photography from a tool for personal memory-keeping into an instrument for communication, self-presentation, and social validation. Among these developments, the selfie—born from the convergence of digital cameras and smartphones—has evolved beyond mere photography to become a form of visual representation, image-based messaging, networking, and emotional sharing. One of its most salient emerging capacities lies in the realm of marketing and advertising. Research indicates that selfies can serve as a powerful vehicle for both personal and corporate branding. When individuals share selfies that feature a product or brand, such acts can be perceived as personal endorsements and be widely redistributed across extensive follower networks. From this perspective, advertising-oriented selfies achieve

maximal impact when framed as engaging, interactive, and shareable narratives on social media platforms.

Despite the rapid growth of social media usage in Iran, the scientific and strategic exploitation of this advertising potential continues to face challenges, including non-specialist approaches, infrastructural deficiencies, and insufficient attention to novel advertising techniques. Moreover, the limited body of research on selfies in Iran has predominantly focused on psychological or cultural consequences, paying scant attention to the emotional mechanisms underlying selfies as communicative acts. Given this gap, the present study aimed to examine the scientific foundations of selfies in advertising, addressing the research void concerning the effects of selfie-based advertising on audiences. Because the efficacy of such advertising is not confined to visual appeal but requires a deeper understanding of underlying psychological mechanisms, the study sought to answer the following research question: How does exposure to selfie-based advertising influence audience attitudes toward a brand, and through what mechanisms and under what conditions does this influence occur?

Method:

Employing a meta-synthesis framework, this study reviewed existing theoretical and empirical literature on selfies to construct a comprehensive picture of their theoretical foundations and their role in social networks and advertising, subsequently conducting a qualitative analysis and synthesis of the findings. Using the keywords "selfie AND advertising," "social media AND advertising," and "social media AND emotional contagion" in Google Scholar, articles published within the last 15 years were retrieved. After an initial identification of 157 articles, a four-stage screening process (topic relevance, keyword alignment, text accessibility, and content-quality assessment) was applied, resulting in 24 articles that formed the basis for the analysis.

Findings:

The findings reveal that selfies on social media transcend personal moment-capturing to become a communicative–advertising and emotional mechanism that influences audience behavior, attitudes, and feelings at multiple levels. The literature review indicates that existing research can be categorized into three main themes: (1) the role of selfies in advertising, (2) typologies of selfies, and (3) the impact of selfies on emotional contagion.

First, regarding the role of selfies in advertising, various studies emphasize that selfies, through their direct and unmediated representation of the individual, constitute a form of "self-styled branding" that can consciously or unconsciously serve as personal endorsement for products. When such selfies are reshared on social media, they possess the potential to become viral narratives, thereby transforming into an effective tool for user-generated marketing. Compared to other content types, selfies elicit quicker responses, greater attention, and higher engagement rates.

Second, concerning typologies of selfies, three primary types are most prevalent in advertising: consumer selfies, product selfies (pack shots), and brand selfies. Data analysis indicates that consumer selfies—where the individual's face is shown alongside the product—generate the highest level of social engagement, as human presence enhances empathy, emotional attention, and social interaction. In contrast, brand selfies—where the individual's face is absent and the focus is on the product and brand-identity elements—elicit less engagement but significantly increase purchase intention.

Third, regarding the impact on emotional contagion, findings demonstrate that observing lived experiences and facial expressions in selfies prompts audiences to engage in emotional mimicry (consciously or unconsciously), which can generate waves of positive or negative affect. During periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this mechanism facilitated the rapid spread of negative emotions across social networks, contributing to the formation of a collective negative mood. Conversely, positive selfies can create pleasant emotional experiences and foster a sense of collective bonding and solidarity.

Conclusion

The pervasiveness and impact of selfies far exceed their relatively brief history. Selfies have transcended their technological origins to become a cultural, economic, and even political phenomenon. Given this breadth and intensity of influence, it is imperative that, while leveraging this technology for audience engagement—especially in advertising—the negative aspects of the selfie phenomenon, such as the contagion of negative emotions and their subsequent effects on audience decisions and brand perception, be further investigated. Such investigation would enable the formulation of specific ethical protocols for brand owners to mitigate adverse effects.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank anonymous reviewers.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article: Khorashadizade, S.N., & Saberi, R., (2025). Theoretical Foundation of Selfie-Based Advertising on Social Networks. *News Science*, 14 (3.),49-56. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22034/lrsi.2026.561463.1479>



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