Selfish Selfies

This is a feature which was prompted by a recent meeting Safe Communities Portugal had with the ANPC in which we discussed the subject of people visiting the scenes of forest fires and other incidents or road accidents to take photos, often obstructing the work of the emergency services. This is a problem that appears to respect no national boundaries, being prevalent in many countries including Portugal. In fact it is such a problem in Germany that Fire services there recently made a video to illustrate the dangers of this with a very powerful message at the end. It can be viewed on our website.

I have called this article "Selfish Selfies" simply because the thoughtless action by those involved can put not only their lives at risk, but also the lives of the emergency services who have to rescue those who whilst taking a selfie have become a victim of a serious accident.

"Morbid Tourism"

It is an unfortunate fact that during the peak of last year's fires in the municipality of Marinha Grande. A mayor warned the population at the time to avoid "morbid tourism" that "resulted in a countless number of people visiting areas of fires hindering and disrupting the work of firefighters." In a recent meeting between Safe Communities Portugal and the ANPC CDOS Operational Command centre in Castelo Branco, who had to deal with several major fires in 2017, there was concern expressed that the gathering of onlookers caused an unnecessary distraction to their work, and could potentially place lives at risk in case of difficulties.

In the devastating Grenfell Tower fires in London in 2017, which left at least 65 dead and dozens more injured, some people stopped to snap photos of themselves with the 24-storey tower in the background whilst it was burning. A few were even caught smiling in their selfies in front of the tower. Social media users have since blasted them for being 'disrespectful' and police officers reportedly had to stop tourists coming out of the nearby metro station from taking disaster selfies.

Deaths through taking selfies

According to a study by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, selfie deaths are on the rise. Since 2014, more than 127 people have died taking photos of themselves, with casualties increasing by almost 50% from 2015 to 2016, with no signs of slowing down in 2017.

And it seems that some countries are riskier places to take selfies in than others. According to the study, India recorded the world's highest number of selfie deaths, accounting for more than 60 per cent of reported fatalities. According to the same study the top countries countries for selfie deaths apart from India are Pakistan – 9; USA – 8; Russia – 6; with Portugal in 9th place. The case in Portugal occurred when two persons died after falling from a cliff at Cabo Da Roca, while taking selfies. The couple from Poland were travelling with their children when the incident occurred

In 2015, Russian authorities even launched a campaign warning that "A cool selfie could cost you your life."

The reason? Police estimate nearly 100 Russians had died or suffered injuries from attempting to take "daredevil" selfies, or photos of themselves in dangerous situations. Examples include a woman wounded by a gunshot and people taking pics on top of moving trains.

In early 2017 three young Indian men died while trying to take a picture of themselves hanging out of a moving train car. A few days earlier, a man fell nine floors, phone in hand, attempting to snap a photo of himself against the Manilla skyline. While these are all tragic individual accidents, people are starting to see a trend.

Why do people put their lives at risk taking dangerous selfies?

People who frequently post selfies are often targets for accusations of narcissism and tastelessness. But with social networking apps like Snapchat becoming more and more popular, selfies are only proliferating, such as case in the USA involving a near miss on a railway track, which through sharing on YouTube reached 38 million viewers. He later posted an explainer video in which he called himself a "dummy" and the selfie attempt a "stupid mistake."

So what's going on here? What is it about the self-portrait that's so resonant as a form of communication? And why, psychologically, might someone feel so compelled to snap the perfect selfie that they'd risk their life, or the lives of others (animals included)?

But why would people risk their lives for a selfie? It may be related to a concept called competitive social comparison, in which people tend to compare themselves with others online and try to outdo friends with pictures to show their lives are more interesting, all without necessarily thinking about it, said Zlatan Krizan, an associate professor of psychology at Iowa State University.

"There's this general phenomenon where we raise the bar for ourselves of what would be a fun selfie to take and share with others," Krizan said. "Nobody wants to be outdone."

In a sense, a selfie is proof that you really were at a particular place, having fun, Krizan said. As the standard of what people find interesting or impressive goes up, people may engage in risky activities to take an interesting selfie, he said.

What we can all do

Simple - Refrain from visiting ongoing scenes of accidents and disasters. Onlookers are not welcome, as it disrupts the work of the emergency services, puts lives at risk and is disrespectful to the victims concerned.

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