CREMATED remains, xylophones and lawn chairs are not allowed in the Magic Kingdom, and now selfie sticks aren’t either. Disneyland banned the so-called narcissisticks this summer following similar prohibitions at the Roman Colosseum, Palace of Versailles and Sydney Opera House. The cited reason was public safety concerns as well as basic propriety.

But this year selfie sticks were also forbidden at the Coachella music festival and Comic-Con — hardly known as bastions of decorum. And you can be arrested for using them in Russia, where the government has recently begun a public awareness campaign about the danger of taking selfies (with or without a stick) after a series of fatal accidents resulting from self-portraits in precarious poses — like in front of oncoming trains.

Since the advent of front-facing cameras on cellphones, selfies have been a matter of eye-rolling and vague embarrassment even among those who take them (often making a pouty lip “duckface” if female or asymmetrically setting the eyebrows if male). Now, though, it seems a line has been drawn at mounting a camera phone on a perspective-enhancing stick — as if to confine selfies’ intrusion into society to at most arm’s length.

Psychologists, technologists, behavioral economists, art historians and futurists differ in their interpretations of the selfie and the risks people are willing to take socially and physically to snap them. But there is general agreement that selfies are a
form of expression that may reveal more than the taker intended, no matter how flattering the filter used.

Much of the research on selfies reveals that (surprise!) people who take a lot of them tend to have narcissistic, psychopathic and Machiavellian personality traits — which may explain why they are oblivious when they bonk you on the head with their selfie sticks. This is not to say that everyone who takes a selfie is a psychopath, but it does imply a high need for self-gratification, particularly if they are posted online for social approval.

“People forget that narcissism is not just about being an egomaniac — it’s also driven by underlying insecurity,” said Jesse Fox, an assistant professor at Ohio State University’s School of Communication who studies the personalities of selfie takers. “They need to get ‘likes’ to get validation.”

Other research suggests people are more likely to post or text selfies when they are emotionally aroused, as when they are sexually excited, angry or anxious. Interestingly, nonarousing emotions like contentment are negatively associated with sharing selfies or other content.

Moreover, studies show that regular users of social media tend to score lower on measures of belonging and meaningful existence if they are precluded from posting content and feel ostracized if they don’t get “likes” (the digital version of thumbs up) when they do post content.

Rameet Chawla, an app developer, reported similar findings a couple years ago when he created an app to automatically like within five seconds the pictures posted by everyone he followed on Instagram. He did this after friends seemed put out that he never liked their photos, many of which were selfies.

Just a few months after secretly deploying his app, Mr. Chawla discovered that 50 percent more people were following him on Instagram, and that he was also getting more invitations to parties and business opportunities. Instagram has since blocked his app.

“It’s such a low barrier to press ‘like,’ but I think people — I’m no exception —
get obsessed with likes," said Mr. Chawla, who lives in New York City and whose Instagram feed is exclusively selfies. “It’s an addictive drug. You get a taste of it, and then you want it more and more. People can tell you the precise moment they broke 100 likes.”

Of course, that is nothing compared to Kim Kardashian, who regularly tallies more than 800,000 likes for her selfies. And yet it’s pictures of her daughter that tend to top one million likes. This seems to support research by a group of behavioral scientists in England who found that people tend to report greater affinity for those who post more pictures of their friends and family than themselves.

That said, selfies can also be seen as simply another form of communication. After all, a text is only 160 characters but a picture is worth a thousand words. And many in the technology field argue that selfies are a source of empowerment because they grant individuals a high degree of control over how they present themselves to the world.

“We are so bombarded by media telling us how we should look and how we should be,” said Jacquelyn Morie, an immersive technologies entrepreneur and virtual reality researcher at the University of Southern California. “With selfies you have this authority and autonomy that you don’t have in other parts of your life.”

With body-slimming, skin-smoothing and age-defying filters and apps, people can make themselves look better than their true selves. The American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery reports a marked increase in demand for cosmetic surgery as people become disappointed comparing their selfies with the images they see in the mirror.

Of course, selfies can also create a historical record of one’s life, if maybe a little better than reality. They show the world what you are doing and who you are with and how incredibly fun it all is. You often hear the refrain, “Pics or it didn’t happen.” This implies the corollary, “Selfies or you don’t exist,” which may explain some people’s compulsion to document their actions even if doing so diminishes their experience and engagement in the real world.

Ms. Morie said selfies are essentially avatars and foresees a day when they will
be constructed even more to our liking (superhero physiques, fairy-tale tresses). As we conduct more of our life online she suspects they will become more how we see ourselves than our real selves.

The basic need to be acknowledged, or even adored, is perhaps why so many have become their own Hollywood directors, attaching cameras to sticks and sometimes drones to enhance the production value of their lives. The recent selfie-stick bans have been interpreted by some who study the selfie phenomenon as more a cultural movement in favor of authenticity and self-possession than the elimination of an annoyance or possible safety threat.

There’s also the argument that rather than conferring power, selfies transfer control to viewers because in the end they are the ones who decide whether to post an encouraging or derogatory comment, press “like” or ignore your existence all together.

As with any self-portrait, no matter how candid, crafted or artfully wrought, “the viewer of the selfie is free to interpret the work not governed by the intent of the person who took it,” said Asma Naeem, an art historian and assistant curator at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. “So you can certainly say it is the viewer who has the power and gains knowledge in the exchange.”

In addition to viewers’ interpretations, you also can’t control what happens to the image itself. Several artists have appropriated selfies posted by random people on social media and incorporated them into works that have been sold for as much as $100,000.

And as facial recognition software continues to improve, frequent selfie takers may also be giving away their very identity. The more you post pictures of yourself online, the better companies, government agencies and criminals are able to identify you, not only online but sitting in a restaurant or walking down the street.

“You can change your name and Social Security number but you can’t change your face,” said Jennifer Lynch, a senior staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which, along with several other privacy advocacy groups, walked out of government-sponsored meetings in June on facial recognition technology. “We
couldn’t get basic agreement on the need to protect people in even the most abusive hypothetical situations.”

Bad news for devotees of the duckface.

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