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**DIGITAL
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DIGITAL VISUALITY AND VISIBILITY

Key questions

- How does the evolution of digital society relate to visual culture?
- In what ways have selfies introduced new elements into social interaction?
- What does it mean that selfies are a 'technology of the self'?
- What are 'videos of affinity' and what is their social use?
- How can the social meaning of images and videos online be analysed?

Key concepts

The visual turn * postmodernity * videosphere * selfie * media panics * technologies of the self * performativity * affinity spaces * videos of affinity

This chapter is about how being on social media today is largely a visual experience. While early social media tools and platforms such as BBSs, Usenet, and the early web were largely text based, images and videos are key to today's digital society. On platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, we also enter our personal photos into flows that blend private and public boundaries. The volumes and variety of such content is enormous and growing. But the specific focus of this chapter is on visuality and visibility in relation to user-created content that fills functions of social expression and connection.

In her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997: 153), digital media researcher Janet Murray writes of how ‘the interactor, whether as navigator, protagonist, explorer, or builder’ makes use of a ‘repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance among the many, many possible dances’. This is her poetic way of saying that on the internet, people engage in a vast number of different subgenres where different *narrative pleasures* are developed. From one perspective, services like Instagram, and video sites like YouTube, are simply online archives where one can find virtually any type of photo or video. But there are some subgenres on there that are of specific interest in relation to the topic of this book — how people relate to each other, and the world around them, in digital society. Two examples of such genres are selfies and personal YouTube videos, both of which we shall explore in more detail in this chapter. The latter will be approached using anthropologist Patricia Lange’s notion of ‘videos of affinity’.

THE FRENZY OF THE VISIBLE

There is sometimes talk of a *visual turn* in the social and cultural sciences, meaning that there has been increased interest in how images and visuals, photos and videos affect how we experience culture, and how we interact with each other. Writer and film director Jean-Louis Comolli wrote (1980: 121) about how society is driven by representation:

If the social machine manufactures representations, it also manufactures itself from representations — the latter operative at once as means, matter and condition of sociality.

He felt, in other words, that society — ‘the social machine’ — is thriving on the production and consumption of images and depictions. He claimed even that this was the very basis of sociality. Images, paintings, symbols, and visualisations are what hold society together, and has done so since the very beginning. But Comolli (1980: 122) further argues that ‘the second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible’. This is the same point made by many theorists of the postmodern, such as sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who used concepts like *hyperreality* and *simulation* to argue that representation and reproduction were key mechanisms in postmodern society. The idea being that since the last few decades of the 20th century, there has been an explosion of visual culture, where pictures and video have assumed a dominant position. This is a consequence of the development of film and cinema, television, colour printing, advertising, video, computers, and so on.

Postmodernity

Postmodernity is what happened when modern society, as we knew it during the 19th and 20th centuries, entered into a form of cultural crisis during latter parts of the 20th century. Things like the 'grand narratives' of history, the idea that things could only get better, and the belief that there was always only one truth no longer seemed convincing to many people. Still, no viable alternative had emerged. This led to culture becoming ironic and artificial. Communications scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff (2013) claims that it was specifically a *visual crisis of culture* that made the postmodern condition emerge. While modern society had a strong tendency to picture and visualise things, the spoken and written word were still privileged as illustrations of ideas during that era. In postmodern culture, the increased focus on the visual challenges this hegemony. Mirzoeff (2013: 4) writes that:

While print culture is certainly not going to disappear, the fascination with the visual and its effects that was a key feature of modernism has engendered a postmodern culture that is at its most postmodern when it is visual.

In digital society, the interaction and communication between people through the use of images on social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat and through videos on sites such as YouTube are prime examples of this cultural tendency towards a prominence of imagery. Digital cameras and smartphones have thoroughly changed the role of visuals in everyday life, as well as in culture and politics. Sociologist Kiku Adatto (2008) says that we live in 'the age of the photo op'. Just as with other social forms, such as the communities and networks discussed in the previous chapter, the focus on capturing, watching, and sharing images and audiovisual content is not something entirely new. But rather, the pattern has been intensified in digital society.

Ever since photography and film were invented in the 19th century, their realism has fascinated people. As these have become widely used technologies, and as photos and videos have become increasingly easy to capture, reproduce, and circulate, (audio)visuals have become more and more prominent elements of society and culture. But today it is not necessarily the realism of imagery that fascinates us. Adatto (2008: 7) writes that: 'Today we pride ourselves on our knowledge that the camera can lie, that pictures can be fabricated, packaged, and manipulated.' She argues that in a mediated culture, people even come to develop an affection for the artificial element of what they see, as they start to appreciate images as images (see the discussion of memes in Chapter 2). This is even more valid, as we also live in the age

of image editing software, where ‘photoshopping’ has entered our vocabulary as a lexical verb. Easy-to-use tools allow anyone to alter images with fast results, for purposes ranging from humour to deception.

Adatto maps the history from TV shows like *Candid Camera* in the 1960s — where the camera was hidden — through *America’s Funniest Home Videos* in the 1990s and onwards — where most filmed subjects were aware of the camera’s presence. Today, on social media, a popular format for online photos is the ‘mirror selfie’ where the subject is not only conscious of the camera, but where the camera(phone) itself is clearly seen in the image — sometimes styled with smartphone covers that express identity.

The visual turn demands that new perspectives are developed to understand the new modes of expression, as the model of textuality might no longer be working. Philosopher Régis Debray sees the history of society in terms of ‘mediaspheres’ — the environment where messages are transported. Debray (1996: 26) argues that each ‘mediological period’ has its ‘collective personality or psychological profile’. We live now, he says, in the ‘videosphere’, an era of computer graphics and audiovisual content which is marked by an ‘instantaneity/ubiquity of messages’ (1996: 28). In this age, which has come after the logosphere of speaking and writing, and the graphosphere of printing, we are ‘rediscovering the values of the bodily’ (1996: 36).

EXERCISE

You have just read about how philosopher Régis Debray said that in the age of the ‘videosphere’, we are rediscovering the possibility of expressing things with our bodies after a long historical phase where words and letters have been dominant. In addition to this, one can also claim that the smartphone age means that visuals are increasingly captured in everyday settings and in places like bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. The traditional media photography shots of talking heads in news studios, or of styled and prepared presenters or actors, is challenged by a rich stream of personal and vernacular photos and videos. Now, look up some popular genres on YouTube with searches like (for example): ‘shopping haul’, ‘competitive eating’, ‘fails’, or ‘pranks’. Think about the role of the body in the videos you find. Why do you think things relating to bodily stuff are relatively prominent in so much social media content? Think of different explanations, such as beauty cult, sexualisation, gender ideals, shock, humour, politics of censorship, stretching boundaries, etc. Reflect upon what may be the ‘narrative pleasures’ of such videos. To what degree are we just watching random craziness, and to what extent are such videos bearing witness to important social changes?

WELCOME TO SELFIE CITY

As discussed in previous chapters, digital society has brought along changes in how people express themselves. This development is intensified as networks sprawl and technology becomes increasingly portable. One such new form of self-expression is the *selfie*, a photographic self-portrait shared on social media. Selfies have rapidly become popular and ever-present in the last few years. The coming into being of the selfie is based on hardware — smartphone cameras — as well as software — social media platforms — that sit at the centre of today's social world.

Visual culture researcher Brooke Wendt (2014) found that more than 130 million posts to Instagram — the most popular platform for sharing selfies — had been hash-tagged with the word 'selfie'. Adding a set of related tags (#I, #me, #myself, #self, #selfportrait), the number was as much as 439 million. The popularity of selfies might have to do with the more general tendency towards visual fascination, as described in the previous section of this chapter. It could also be interpreted as an expression of today's culture as being individualistic, focused on identity work, superficial, or even narcissistic. But the explosive growth of the phenomenon also has to do with the global saturation of phones with cameras, and with the large-scale introduction of front-facing cameras on such phones. In fact that feature, occurring for the first time in 2003, was originally intended for video calls but was soon adopted by users also for taking stills at arm's length. The first use of the word selfie is said to have been in Australia. In September 2002 a young man posted a photo of his damaged bottom lip, writing in a forum post on the site of public broadcaster ABC: 'sorry about the focus, it was a selfie'.¹

Of course, self-portraits as such, are not new. People have depicted themselves through various techniques and media since the beginning of time, and, naturally, even users of the very early cameras in the 19th century sometimes turned the lens towards themselves. But these photographic self-portraits were still mostly random events, at times simply taken to use up the last frame of a roll of film. As a recognisable and codified genre, however, the selfie is a product of digital media, and it has introduced several new elements into social interaction.

The Oxford Dictionaries named selfie as the word of the year in 2013, defining it as 'a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website'. Their editorial director Judy Persall explained that 'selfie' had already emerged as a tag on the social photo site Flickr back in 2004, but the word became widely used in mainstream media around 2012. She also explained that the usage of the -ie suffix likely has to do

¹ www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-19/selfie-beats-twerk-as-word-of-the-year/5102154.

with the term having been conceived in Australian English.² Communications researchers Katharina Lobinger and Cornelia Brantner (2015: 1848) argue that selfies have indeed ‘become their own genre of visual self-representation with its own conventions, representational techniques, and poses’. Photographically speaking, the recognisable attributes of selfies — such as the often visible arm of the photographer bearing witness to how the photo was made — make their production process visible. From an art perspective, selfies have a sort of meta-character to them, as they can be compared to what happens when a comedic actor partly breaks out of character to look directly at the film- or TV-camera to make a face.

EXERCISE

Communications researcher Aaron Hess talks about the selfie as an ‘assemblage’ — a grouping together — of four different elements. First, the self. The photos present a version of ourselves, whether staged or not. Second, physical space. The place where they are shot — at home, at school, at a restaurant, outdoors — also expresses something. Third, the device. The actual camera(phone), the perspective, the way we hold our arms, and so on, also affects the selfie. And fourth, the network. Selfies presume that a networked social media audience will receive it, and thereby it invites us to liking and sharing it. Now, go to selficity.net, the website of an exciting research project about selfies. Explore and play around with their archive of selfies from five cities across the world and think about them as assemblages. Try to find selfies that are more or less spontaneous versus staged. Can you identify the physical space of selfies, and how does that affect your interpretation of the photo? To what degree can the process of making the selfies be seen (visible phones, arms, angles, etc.)? Do these differences make selfies mean different things? In what different ways do selfies ‘ask’ for responses (likes, reactions, etc.)? Try to speculate about different things that might motivate people to take and share these pictures of themselves. In a sociological sense: What does the selfie ‘say’?

SELFIES AS SOCIAL ACTIONS

Selfies are no doubt a form of social action (cf. Chapter 2) that happens in some form of social context with some sort of intention. As you have seen, it is a crucial trait of

² <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/>.

selfies that they are shared through online social networks. One might therefore say that the selfie is social by definition. And as it is fundamentally social, it also has to do with people's need for affirmation — something that can only be fulfilled in interacting with others (Ehlin 2015: 22). In comparison with traditional self-portraits, selfies are also generally much more spontaneous and casual. The latter are predominantly taken and shared by people who we would not conventionally define as artists. Selfies, therefore, are a form of folk 'art', in the sense that they are created by and shared among 'ordinary' people.

The selfie is consciously social. It is created to be viewed, in the present, and when we look at a selfie, we are aware of this intention. Internet researchers Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015: 1589) write that it is part of the character of a selfie that it initiates a number of relationships. The most obvious of these is the one between viewer and viewed, but they also point to how selfies set in motion relational processes between images and the software used to filter and share them, between users and the architecture of social media platforms, and between the subject as simultaneously being photographer and the photographed.

Selfies offer many possibilities for people — human actors — to be active, in selecting, framing, filtering, and so on. But selfies also engage what Latour (2005) would call non-humans. The creation, display, circulation, and monetisation of selfies occur through a number of technological artefacts such as cameras, servers, algorithms, screens, and so on. Senft and Baym (2015: 1589) argue that once a selfie enters the internet, it instantly becomes part of an infrastructure that detaches it from its original time and place of production.

Encoding/decoding

Using the words of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1972), the selfie is 'encoded' by its sender in a certain way (drawing on thoughts, aspirations, attitudes, posing, filtering, and so on), to be 'decoded' by its receivers in either preferred, negotiated, or oppositional ways. Such decoding can happen just in the mind of the receiver, or by responses in the form of actions that are digitally social, such as likes, comments, or remixes. In other words, taking and sharing selfies entails a whole complexity of looking and framing both inwards and outwards.

We might think of selfies in the first instance as pictures of lone individuals. Indeed, celebrities who are active on social media — and whose celebrity largely

rests on this fact — have contributed to shaping the genre. But the social aspects of selfies also go beyond the mere sharing of solo images. For example, taking selfies together with others — with one person holding the camera and one or more individuals sticking their heads into the frame — can be used as a means of showing which groups one belongs to. Political and religious leaders figure more and more often in shots with other authority figures, as well as with ‘ordinary’ people. Visually framing and sharing one’s relations with school friends, family, celebrities, or authority figures, in the form of selfies, is a type of self-presentation which is unique to digital society.

SELFIE PANIC

In December 2013, Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt took a selfie with UK Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama during Nelson Mandela’s memorial service. A news photo of her doing this sparked a series of intense reactions across media that became nicknamed ‘Selfiegate’. Miltner and Baym (2015) have analysed the debate and found that it included several different aspects of social norms: Who can take a selfie? When and where is it appropriate to take them? More generally, there has been a debate over the inappropriateness of selfies taken in some places and situations, such as at grave sites, the Anne Frank House, the Holocaust Memorial, at Chernobyl, in front of burning houses, hostage situations, together with homeless people, and so on. Have a look, for example, at selfiesatseriousplaces.tumblr.com or make a web search for ‘tasteless selfies’. Such selfies have been questioned since the often playful and humorous character of selfies fits badly with the seriousness of the settings, thereby giving the impression that the creator wants to diminish or ridicule them. Similarly, it has been questioned what the allure of the selfie might do to ‘serious’ politics. Some pundits have worried that selfies are ‘turning politicians into teenagers’,³ and that ‘the tyranny of selfies’ will transform the political climate for the worse.⁴

Such reactions have to do with selfies being a relatively new phenomenon around which no clear social norms have yet formed. A new genre like this might need new perspectives altogether to be fully understood. Still, it is natural that we initially react by falling back on norms that have been formed around other forms of photography. Media psychologist Pamela Rutledge writes that ‘the sheer volume and publicness of selfies defies any models we have’, so we tend to think that they ‘violate social rules of self-presentation and therefore something’s wrong’. She continues:

³ <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/04/are-selfies-are-turning-politicians-into-teenagers/>.

⁴ www.wyff4.com/politics/clinton-laments-tyranny-of-the-selfie/37310932.

If the people in selfies aren't famous or being paid to pose, then it must indicate a moral failing and they are labeled bragging, attention seeking, self-focused or narcissistic.⁵

Like Rutledge, social media researcher Anne Burns (2015) thinks that a 'common sense' understanding of selfies is that they are narcissistic. The very word 'selfie', she writes, hints at a form of egotism. Furthermore, people tend to understand selfies in terms of their subjects being vain and overly preoccupied with their appearance. McLuhan (1964: 41) anticipated this when writing about how people in the age of electronic media 'become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves'.

Part of why selfies have been seen as a social problem has to do with generational divides. Media technologies, platforms, and practices that are new to us often set in motion *media panics*. Therefore each generation of adults will question the media use of younger generations. Young people's media use is different from the forms that were known before, and therefore it can generate worry. Much like popular print media in the 19th century, film in the early 20th century, rock music in the 1950s, and so on, selfies today are seen by some researchers and commentators as potentially dangerous to society. Media panics are polarising reactions that blow the possible consequences of the new technology out of proportion. Drawing on sociologist Stanley Cohen's (1972) theory of so-called 'moral panics', media researcher Kirsten Drotner (1999) traces the history of media panics from the 18th century and up until the age of the internet. The panic reactions, Cohen writes, emerge when some phenomenon becomes 'defined as a threat to societal values and interests'. The nature of the phenomenon then tends to be 'presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion', as 'socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions' (Cohen 1972: 9).

EXERCISE

Selfies have been said by some to be more commonly created by people who are narcissistic psychopaths (Fox & Rooney 2015). Other observers have argued that selfies can have many positive functions, such as helping in self-exploration, making connections, and balancing beauty ideals.⁶ Still, it has also been claimed that selfies are related to body dysmorphic

(Continued)

⁵ www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201307/making-sense-selfies.

⁶ www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201304/selfies-narcissism-or-self-exploration.

(Continued)

disorder,⁷ and news media have highlighted the phenomenon of ‘selfie deaths’ — following from people taking risks in trying to capture the perfect selfie in front of a train, on top a building, at bull runs, and so on.⁸ Now, think about selfies in terms of a ‘media panic’ possibly surrounding them. Try to find research or news reports that point out risks, dangers, or moral problems with selfies. Also, look for perspectives that emphasise the positive aspects of selfies. What do you think seems like an adequate perspective, and in what sense? Many of the fears that were connected to new technologies and behaviours of previous times seem quite ridiculous in hindsight, such as that train travel could make it impossible to breathe, or that listening to the radio would lead to bad results in school. Other fears, such as that of nuclear power, might have been more adequate. Try to imagine how the debate over selfies might be seen when looking back in twenty years’ time.

SUBVERSIVE TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

So, what is the purpose of selfies? Media and fashion researcher Lisa Ehlin (2015: 13) writes:

If I post a selfie (a shared social media self-portrait) I desire to reach out, enable contact. I watch myself anew in a form of endless self-fashioning. Images are personal, yet implicit.

But selfies do not only show what we look like, but also where we are, what we are doing, who we think might be watching, and who we want to be. Wendt (2014: 8) speculates that: ‘Perhaps, our preoccupation with Instagram is simple: it offers us infinite versions of ourselves, as though each picture promises a better version.’ In taking and sharing selfies, versions of the images can be created through the different filters included in photo sharing apps, which enable experimenting with different styles that allow us to see ourselves in new or different ways. This can also be associated with the possibility of viewing ourselves from the outside, as digital culture researcher Jill Walker Rettberg (2014: 27) describes how the raw and revealing character of selfies,

⁷ <http://mic.com/articles/86287/a-psychiatric-study-reveals-selfies-are-far-more-dangerous-than-you-think#.VlirMuhN4>.

⁸ <http://mashable.com/2015/09/21/selfie-deaths/#jUUIabtqkq8>.

alongside the practices of running them through retro — and other — filters gives the image ‘a distance that makes them new to us’:

We see ourselves and our surroundings as if we are outside of ourselves, through a retro filter or in the same poses and layouts as we see fashion models or homes in magazine spreads.

But the openness of the possibilities for being whomever we might want is limited. As with most other visual culture, selfies are definitely associated with the politics of gender. For example, one of the popular selfie poses is the mouth-pouting ‘duckface’, especially prominent among female subjects. This gendered pejorative term refers to selfie takers who ‘suck in their cheeks to highlight their cheekbones, which tends to push the lips out in a manner that appears duck-like’ (Katz & Crocker 2015: 1866).

The way in which selfies are used and talked about can contribute to maintaining compliance with gendered social norms, and also govern under what circumstances men or women can participate in social and political settings online. As selfies are part of society and people’s construction of identities more generally, not only gender but also other social divisions have an effect as well. Sociologists Apryl Williams and Beatriz Aldana Marquez (2015) have found that many white men don’t take selfies as they are seen as ‘unmanly’. Latino and black men, on the other hand, were more positive to taking and sharing selfies. Those research results point to selfies having a potential for self-empowerment, as well as for expressing alternatives to hegemony. More generally, selfies, while in part reproducing social stereotypes related to power, can also potentially be used to take control in various ways. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1988: 18) wrote about something called *technologies of the self*,

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

Selfies, or social media in general for that matter, can be seen as such a technology that we use for framing, filtering, presenting, and sharing ourselves. While selfies, on the one hand, are enforced by, and enforcing, social power and norms, they may also enable performances that resist such things (Losh 2015: 1649). In other words, that selfies might be seen as superficial photos that express things such as problematic beauty ideals does not exclude the possibility of them being powerfully progressive. Philosopher Judith Butler (1990), one of the originators of queer theory, has argued that identities are performances. Her concept of *performativity* suggests that nothing within our identities is fixed, so people maintain their gender identity, like any other aspect of

identity, by repeatedly performing it in similar ways. If people start doing things differently, society can gradually change. The problem is, however, as Butler argues, that the performances are not always conscious, and that some performances are repeated so often throughout culture and media that they appear ‘natural’ or ‘true’. Still, this is just an illusion and the seemingly fixed identities — gendered, racialised, and other — can be subverted and reinvented through the accumulation of alternative performances.

EXERCISE

It can definitely be claimed that viewing the selfie as merely an effect of consumerism (fashion, make-up, shopping, lifestyle, etc.) and narcissism is a simplistic perspective. If one does not see people as inherently self-absorbed, but rather as having vulnerable selves, our view might change. Lisa Ehlin (2014: 73) suggests, in line with Butler’s perspective, that ‘the selfie opens up for an ability to mimic and play with social roles, pointing towards potential subversion through awareness and agency, rather than self-objectification’. Now, try to look at a number of selfies that you find online. It might be a good idea to include seemingly superficial and ‘standard’ selfies, as well as selfies that appear to have some sort of more ‘serious’ message. Try to look at these from the perspective of them being potentially subversive. In what respects can you argue that these photos are expressions of consumerism and narcissism? In what ways can they be read as opening up for feminist, queer, or other critiques? Can selfies that at face value look like gendered or racialised or sexualised stereotypes also be about criticising such norms as well as about self-discovery, parody, and so on? You can try to challenge the ‘meaning’ of other user-created visual content online in the same way.

VIDEOS OF AFFINITY

Affinity spaces is a name for a type of social setting that sometimes takes shape online. The term was coined by linguist and educational psychologist James Paul Gee (2005), who suggests that rather than communities (see Chapter 5), we should talk of spaces of affinity in order to capture current forms of digitally social affiliation. In affinity spaces, people come together because of a feeling of similarity or like-mindedness. Gee says that such ways of relating to, and connecting with, each other have become increasingly prominent in today’s digital world. Affinity can be defined as feelings of connection between people. Anthropologist Bonnie Nardi (2005: 99) writes:

A feeling of connection, as stated, is an openness to interacting with another person. Affinity is achieved through activities of social bonding in which people come to feel connected with one another, readying them for further communication.

Affinity in this sense is based on other things than broad categorisations such as nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, and so on. In her research on YouTube, Patricia Lange has, among other things, been interested in how the visually enhanced communication through YouTube videos relates to establishing affinities. In a study mapping the patterns and principles by which video creators get the attention of viewers, she introduced the notion of *videos of affinity*. She underlines the social aspects of communication by means of YouTube videos, specifically focusing on how videos are used socially to generate feelings of connection between people. In her two-year ethnographic study, she looked closely at videos that seemed to try to establish some sort of ‘communicative connection’. Lange (2009: 71) writes that:

Videos of affinity attempt to maintain feelings of connection with potential others who identify or interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the video.

In order for the creator of a video to be able to ‘interpellate’ (address) the potential others, he or she needs to capture their attention. However, Lange continues, attention does not come for free. Rather, it is an achievement that requires work, and the point here is that this work is done visually — through video. The definition of videos of affinity is that they are focused on the present, that they aim to create feelings of connection, and that they fulfil the function of maintaining a certain communication channel as open and active. The videos seem to say: I am (still) here! This is what I look like! I am in this room! This is my life at present! You can still subscribe/like/comment on what I do! We continue to be connected! In that sense, these videos are social actions that foster communities or networks.

Is YouTube a social medium?

YouTube is a huge video archive with more than a billion users who watch hundreds of millions of hours of video every day, and who upload 300 hours of video every minute.⁹

(Continued)

⁹ www.statisticbrain.com/youtube-statistics/.

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Research comparing the behaviours of subscribing versus commenting on YouTube channels has indicated a division between ‘social’ and ‘content’ activities within the system (Wattenhofer et al. 2012). This means that it is largely not the same users who are social on YouTube, that mostly watch YouTube as one traditionally watches TV. The same study found that 25 per cent of the users had one or more reciprocal subscription link. This can be compared to the 100 per cent of Facebook ‘friendships’ which are mutual by definition.¹⁰ A study of Twitter found that the mutual connections percentage of that service was at 22 per cent, so roughly, then, YouTube is about as social as Twitter (Kwak et al. 2010).

In other words, videos of affinity are not meant for everyone. Even though anyone can watch them — as long as they are posted as public videos — they typically are interesting only for certain groups of people who desire a connection — who feel an affinity — with the topic, attitude, values, or maker of the video. Lange (2009: 83) writes that these videos often lack any traditional form of content. Such videos are often neither original nor very ‘interesting’ — in the most common sense of the word. Instead, they tend to be stereotypical, stylised, and draw heavily on in-jokes and other jargon.

Historically, we can think of the genre of home movies — analogue or digital — traditionally recorded by fathers during specific rituals, such as graduations, birthdays, weddings, and Christmases, often simply as a means of remembering the occasions. In some sense, these are videos of affinity: they connect the family members, relatives, and friends who get to watch them. Home movies are also mildly interesting to a wider audience — not counting the genre in its own right created through the wider dissemination of bloopers and fails captured (accidentally or not) in such settings. The proliferation of affordable digital cameras and cameraphones, however, has made it possible to capture more personal things and smaller everyday moments. At the same time, the internet and YouTube have changed the ways in which the videos are distributed. Instead of small-scale home viewing, there is potentially massive global sharing. Personal media can be spread by, and to, heterogeneous and dispersed groups of people. Lange argues that this can disrupt the traditional father-driven — patriarchal, middle-class, nuclear family-oriented — forms of home movie making, by showing different locations, identities, and values. Still, young video bloggers and

¹⁰ However, the site also has a somewhat obscure ‘follow’ function, www.facebook.com/about/follow.

other non-conventional creators are unfortunately and undeservedly often criticised for sharing pointless stuff.

So videos of affinity are not primarily about documenting things in order to be able to remember them in the future. Instead, even though, from a technical perspective, they are recordings of something that has already happened, they fulfil the function of getting across the feeling that a particular moment — which might be large or small — is shared between the creator of the video and its viewers, subscribers, likers, and commenters. This ‘work of connection’, as Nardi (2005) would call it, might seem meaningless when taken out of context, but is very important in keeping a field of communication open within certain groups.

ONLINE VIDEOS AS SOCIAL ACTIONS

Lange (2009: 83) says that a video of affinity is not a ‘cinematic end point’, but rather ‘a mediated moment in an ongoing social relationship’. The point of the videos is not their particular content, but their role of maintaining connections between people simply through keeping channels open. And videos of affinity do this largely through visual means, as they tend to revolve around evidence of the live body of their creators.

So even though the creators of the videos may be talking to the camera throughout, the creation of affinity — as Lange shows — relies on a number of aspects of visuality and visibility that are conveyed in the videos. Videos of affinity, often shot in home environments, tend to be spontaneous recordings — or maybe carefully staged to appear spontaneous. They are about sharing informal experiences, and often include laughs, the making of crazy faces, and editing with comic effects. The body is often at the centre of these videos, as they will likely be shot at quite close range, enabling close inspection of the facial attributes and expressions of the speaker. Nardi (2005: 114), referring to social presence theory, writes of how bonding and commitment is best promoted when people meet, and see, each other in person ‘with the body in full view’.

In line with this, videos of affinity quite often feature their subjects eating or drinking in front of the camera. Having an apple, drinking water, coffee, or a cup of tea, while addressing the viewers, enhances the casual character of the videos. One will quite often see video bloggers discussing things such as whether they are tired, hungry, bored, whether they had (or need) a haircut, and in other ways providing social ‘proof’ of their (recorded) bodies. In other words, videos of affinity are social tools — drawing on visibility — that lack any traditional artistic, narrative, or informational content. Instead, they simply ‘show’ the online presence of individuals in order to establish communicative connections with others. In this sense, like selfies,

they are uniquely and natively digital and visual social phenomena. Lange argues further that, while YouTube videos are often analysed around a simplifying division between professional versus user-created content, a focus on affinity allows us to see more interesting dynamics across such categories.

LAYERS OF VISUAL SOCIALITY

Now let's try to make a closer analysis of the ways in which visual communication among users of digitally networked media can work to establish social connections. One useful way of doing so is to turn to the theory of linguist Roman Jakobson (1990), who famously defined six factors (1–6) of 'speech events' together with six functions (I–VI) of language. He said that in any speech event, there is always (1) an 'addresser' sending some sort of (3) message to (2) an 'addressee'. A video shared online, for example, might be addressed to certain groups of viewers that share the interests of the creator, but this does not preclude that many people who are not the addressees of the content may still watch it. The video will be decoded in different ways, depending on whether it is meant to speak to you or not.

The addresser uses the (I) *emotive function* of language to express his or her attitude towards what he or she is speaking about. Jakobson writes that this function works to create the impression of a certain emotion. Then, there is the (II) *conative function*, which is directed towards the addressee as in 'Please click below to subscribe to my channel!' or 'Post your questions in the comments below!'. The message itself fulfils what Jakobson calls the (III) *poetic function*, which depends on how the addresser uses language (convincingly, playfully, rhetorically, etc.)

Furthermore, the message is always sent in one (4) context or another, which the addressee can grasp and which helps in interpreting what is said. This has to do with the (IV) *referential function* of language in the sense that what is expressed always refers to something. A video of someone having tea and talking about school represents someone having tea and talking about school. The addressee will need to know of the contexts of 'tea' and 'school' — what they mean culturally — in order to understand. There must also be (5) a code — some sort of language or 'language' — shared, at least to some degree, by the addresser and the addressee. The fact that both addresser and addressee know what words, symbols, and things mean fills what Jakobson calls the (V) *metalingual function*. Finally, there must be (6) a contact — meaning some sort of channel of communication through which the addresser and the addressee can enter and stay in communication. Messages serving primarily 'to initiate, extend, or terminate communication' or 'to check whether the channel works ("Hello, do you hear me?" [...] "Are you listening?")' (Lange 2009: 75) fill a (VI) *phatic function*.

EXERCISE

You have read about Roman Jakobson's theory about 'speech acts' and the functions of language. Look up videos online that you feel might be defined as 'videos of affinity' in Patricia Lange's sense. Now look at one such video in terms of it being a speech act and try to unravel it. How is the addressee using the emotive function? What emotions are expressed and by what (visual) means? Can you identify the conative function being used? Is the addressee of the video talked to directly or indirectly? Videobloggers, for example, might make a habit of talking to their viewers and subscribers as 'you guys' or something similar. Can you decipher who 'you guys' are meant to be? What contextual factors does one need to have knowledge of in order to make sense of the video? In what ways is the video filling the phatic function? You can continue like this, and will probably be able to find other ways of applying Jakobson's terminology as well. After you have done this, try to analyse one or several selfies in the same way.

FURTHER READING

Rettberg, Jill Walker (2014). *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Feminist new media theorist Jill Walker Rettberg's book about seeing ourselves through technology argues that selfies, as well as other forms of digital self-expression (not only visual), must be taken seriously. This means that they should be understood in a broader context of culture and power. For example, she discusses 'filters' in cognitive, cultural, and technological terms, and discusses how filter and algorithm literacies have become an important part of everyday life.

Wendt, Brooke (2014). *The Allure of the Selfie*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

In this handy little book, visual culture critic and photographer Brooke Wendt analyses self-portraits on Instagram to examine the hold that selfies currently have in society. She defines what a selfie is, situates it historically, and covers several key topics such as poses, hashtags, and filters.

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Lange, Patricia G. (2007). Publicly Private and Privately Public. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 361–380.

Lange, Patricia G. (2009). Videos of Affinity on YouTube. In Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Eds.), *The YouTube Reader* (pp. 70–88). Stockholm: National Library of Sweden.

These two papers by Lange are important to the field of YouTube studies. In the first, she explores how participants on YouTube create and maintain their social networks by configuring who has physical and interpretive access to their videos. She makes a conceptual distinction between ‘publicly private’ and ‘privately public’ behaviour. The second paper is an introduction to the notion of ‘videos of affinity’.