

Social Media Narrative:

Issues in Contemporary Practice

hosted by The Rutgers Camden Digital Studies Center and Judy Malloy
and the Rutgers Camden DSC Class in Social Media Narrative:

Lineage and Contemporary Practice

Facebook, November 16 - 21, 2016

Transcript: Katrin Tiidenberg



Katrin Tiidenberg

November 17 at 6:05am

Thank you [Judy](#) for including me in this panel and this fascinating discussion.

My name is Kat Tiidenberg and I'm a researcher (which I suppose, is why I couldn't write the following without references, sorry). I study people's visual self-presentation and identity on social media. More pertinently for this discussion - I study people's self-storying via NSFW (not safe for work) selfies and sex blogs on Tumblr. I'm interested in what selfie-, and blogging practices do for my informants' everyday lived experiences, and in terms of wider normative narratives of aesthetics, sexuality, power, control, gender etc.

One of the interesting things I've found is that people, who are not activists or artists, but amateurs participating for the sake of entertainment, support, relationships and belonging, can still end up pushing back at some dominant cultural narratives. By posting sexy selfies within that particular community on Tumblr (the socio-technical affordances of the platforms and the cultural norms of the community are undoubtedly relevant for how these experiences play out), my informants can reject the "regime of order and the regime of shame" (Koskela, 2004, p. 206-207) that visual economy predominantly functions with. Occasionally selfie-practices can even lead to "self-storying as activism" (Crawley & Broad, 2004, p. 68), which means that a blogger will use her own body and her own selfies to push back at what our visual culture positions as photographable. This is a position of voluntary vulnerability that troubles the grand narratives of what is beautiful or sexy; who can be seen; who has the right to show what. So through what is seemingly a personal, maybe even a trivial practice, people can regain control not only over their own (sexual) story telling, but also the narratives of aesthetics or sexiness in a wider sense.

In conceptualizing these things, I join many others, who believe that narratives have a meaning making function. They are both means of knowing and methods of telling. Narratives of who we are, and are not reveal the constant flux of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong

(Riessman, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006). So our subjectivities gel and our practices take on meanings through stories that we tell (ourselves and others). I also believe that these stories are told in images, captions, hashtags, blog posts and that a “text” doesn’t have to follow the classical narrative structure to be considered a narrative.

The framework of visual narrative analysis (cf. Catherine Riessman’s and Gillian Rose’s work) highlights that narratives gain meaning not merely from their relationship to what they are about, but also from their connection to other narratives. Thus, in addition to the “how,” “why” and “what” of a story told in words, and the “how,” “why” and “what” of a story told in images, there are stories told in words about images, and stories told in images about words. It basically means incorporating a remix approach to methods that pays homage to Barthes’ famous claim that images are related to and dependent on accompanying text. A fruitful approach thus respects the intertextuality of images, captions, hashtags and text posts, as well as the relationality of body/selves and images.

Comments



Judy Malloy Good morning and welcome to Katrin Tiidenberg, a researcher and lecturer splitting her time between Aarhus University in Aarhus, Denmark and Tallinn University in Tallin, Estonia. Visit <http://www.narrabase.net/socmedianarrative.html#katrin> to find out more about her work



· November 17 at 7:56am



Judy Malloy Hi Katrin, Thank you for presenting your research! It is very relevant to this multi-faceted forum on social media narrative.

November 17 at 7:59am



[Katrin Tiidenberg Lexii Christine](#) I've moved your question here. It was

1. In regard to "Socially-Mediated Bodies As Practice: Studying Selfies in SITU", what are some ideas of new theories and methods that could be used to analyze the modern visuals?

November 19 at 4:38am



[Katrin Tiidenberg](#) So "Socially-Mediated Bodies As Practice: Studying Selfies in situ" was a conference presentation and more generally is a methods argument that I've been working on, and that should become a book chapter. I've written one other book chapter on methods of analyzing social media images (selfies) by using Visual Narrative Analysis. It's called "Great Faith in Surfaces: A Visual Narrative Analysis of Selfies," and it was in a book called 'In Search of ... "In Search of ..." New Methodological Approaches to Youth Research.' It has some pretty hands-on advice. If you're looking to experiment with different methods, I'll happily send it to you.

This "studying selfies in situ" idea is basically a next step from that. I am trying to find a way of analyzing selfies that doesn't yank single images or single experiences with images out of the flow that they are born in, born out of, and experienced in. But I want an approach that still allows for the depth of qualitative inquiry (so is not social network analysis or something equally abstracted).

So for me, studying selfies in situ, is sort of a second tier methods argument. It builds on my experience with studying selfies by using different more and less common frameworks to find the one that works for me. I started with Goffman (1959), which allowed me to approach selfies as performative. It also illuminated how selfies gain a lot of their meaning in interactions. I then moved to a late Foucaultian approach that looked at selfie practices as technologies of the self and revealed the potential for self-transformations through self-care and critical awareness. I then used Rebecca Coleman's (2009) Deleuze inspired theory of "bodies as becoming," which further emphasizes the profound relationality between images and bodies, and shows how images can produce particular kinds of bodies. Finally, to situate selfie practices in the wider normative and ideological discourses I used Foucault's concepts of critique and practices of freedom.

All of these frameworks helped me to move beyond just what is on the images, to how they are produced; why they are shared; how they are (expected to be) viewed; why other people's selfies matter; and how words, images and metadata integrate into (more and less) coherent entities of meaning. I even started - intuitively - talking about selfie practices and not selfies, but only recently did I think that it might be worth to actually apply practice theory to understanding selfies and bodies through selfies.

So "Selfies in situ" is an experimentation with practice theory. Although there is actually no coherent practice theory, rather there are many influential thinkers (including Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens and de Certeau) whose work can be described as representative of the practice approach. What practice approach authors have in common is that they tend to see the human body as the nexus of people's practical engagements with the world. So when practices are talked about, they are usually talked about as sets of interconnected elements that are embodied, emergent, purposive, situated, dialogical, as well as necessarily socio-material.

Building on Shatzki and Reckwitz we could operationalize practice as: forms of bodily activities // forms of mental activities // 'things' and their use // background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, emotion and motivations // and social, political, economic, cultural and

technological contexts.

So this means that a matrix of questions (the list above, i.e. what kinds of mental activities, bodily activities, things etc are part of various stages of selfie taking and sharing) emerges, where, to look at selfies in situ, we need to look at selfie practices via each of the questions in the matrix.

I hope it made sense. Thanks for letting me ruminate on methods, it's very satisfying 😊:)

November 20 at 2:07pm ·
edited January 9 at 4:43am



Deena Larsen Katrin Tiidenberg --I am faceblind. To understand this, grab a bunch of spoons or flowers or pens. Now name each one (Sue, George, Henry, whatever). Take no more than 10 seconds to introduce 15 items. Mix them up. Now pick out George. A bit difficult, no?

My perception of faces is no different than my perception of flowers, pens, stones, or anything else. Unless there is something really remarkable, I do not remember the face. I am confessing this because I have always wanted to know:

What is the fascination behind a selfie? I've taken lots of pictures, but never have I put myself in one. I usually don't put any people in a picture.

So now is your chance to explain to an alien just why people take selfies and what people's faces mean to them. Thanks!

November 19 at 9:02pm



Katrin Tiidenberg This is a really interesting question for me, because the most immersive of my studies about selfies has been with a community of NSFW bloggers on Tumblr, and majority of their selfies are faceless. Faces are obscured or sometimes the entire head is not in the frame (for safety / security or what has been poignantly dubbed “plausible deniability” by one of my informants). Yet they are still selfies. So I don't think a face is a mandatory element of a selfie.

But I suppose that is part of the whole larger argument of how we define selfies, or what makes a selfie a selfie. I've always claimed that selfies are container concepts. Depending on the context of platform, technology, sharing and audience, they can be a form of superficial self-admiration or cynical self-advertising, but they can also be a way to create relationships, build communities, mount protests, understand or accept oneself.

When I was analyzing image-related conflict on Tumblr, one of the things I found was that for people who do not take selfies, selfies were mostly carriers of capital. It can be aesthetical capital, subcultural capital, social capital. For these people selfies are objects or artifacts with certain value, kind of like any other image. They can be compared, collected, stolen or reposted for popularity, entertainment or revenge. However, for people who take and post selfies, they were primarily

expressions of their identities and their bodies, and only after that carriers of certain capital – most often a token of belonging. So in a sense we could argue that while you interpret selfies differently from other people, who are not faceblind, there are additional divisions between how people interpret selfies based on their experience with, and ideological positions regarding (some people are very adamant about narcissism and use selfie shaming as a way to make identity claims about themselves) selfie practices.

I think selfies gain their meaning in context of who, why, how, where and with whom, takes, edits, saves, posts, sends or deletes them. Through selfie practices and surrounding practices of hashtagging, commenting, captioning and liking, people can (this is not a conclusive list):

- interact (I was here, I met with them, I have seen this);
- manage their impressions (I'm the kind of person who does yoga, goes to the theatre, reads Foucault);
- engage in self-reflection and self-care (from combatting body dysmorphia to claiming the right to be seen);
- compare themselves to other people (and social comparison is one of the basic human ways of understanding the world and our own position in it);
- express themselves (creatively, politically, emotionally).

Looked at this way, a picture of my scribbled notes, a half eaten sandwich, or a lipstick smudge on a coffee mug, which I've posted on Instagram with a self-reflexive or a self-revealing caption, are all selfies. Because they represent me at that particular moment in a way that I want to be represented. But they become selfies not by what is on the image, but through an intertextual assemblage of meaning between the image content, the caption, the hashtags, the comments, the stream they're posted in, other content within that stream etc.

But then of course there are some pictures that are selfies simply by the power of what is on the image. So if it's a face, a shoulder and a slice of an outstretched arm indicating that it is holding a phone, we interpret it as a selfie without any additional info or additional layers of "text".

Now (finally) coming to your question of what's so special about face pictures - there is some research that has shown that in general people do seem to like looking at pictures of faces. Face selfies garner higher viewership, generate more likes and more comments than other kinds of everyday snapshots. For example Bakhshi, Shamma & Gilbert (2014) found that faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to receive comments on Instagram, but the number of faces, their age or gender didn't have an effect. This isn't selfie or photography specific. Faces are an important tool of non-verbal communication, and thus an important source of cues for communication, there is a lot of research on this from neuroscience, psychology, human communication, art history etc. So selfies just reflect an existing fascination with faces, perhaps making it more visible because of the intensity and scope of it (and the intensity and scope we can link to face-imaging moving from time and skill consuming paint-portraiture to photography, to digital photography, to mobile device based photography to networked and easily shareable photography).

thank you for the interesting question!

November 20 at 2:06pm

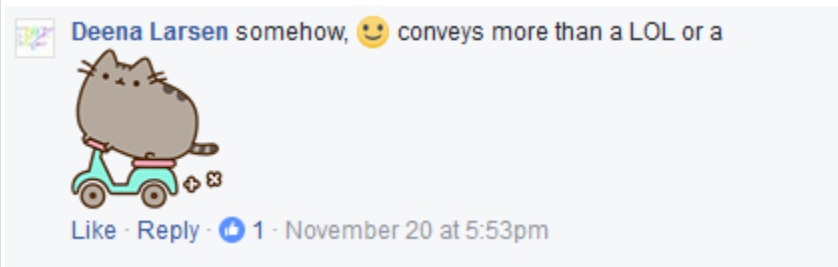
edited January 9 at 4:49am



Deena Larsen Thank you so much for your reply. This clarifies a lot in my life. Faces also convey emotions for most people). See the emojis as well.

"I think selfies gain their meaning in context of who, why, how, where and with whom, takes, edits, saves, posts, sends or deletes them." So this is really about most pictures anyway. A documented life.

November 20 at 5:51pm



Samantha Procida Hello, [Katrin Tiidenberg](#)! Your research sounds really interesting! I was wondering if you believe that this counterculture trend in self celebration and sexual agency is contributed to a specific generation? And, do you think it will one day move beyond just Tumblr?

November 21 at 3:21pm



[Katrin Tiidenberg](#) .Thanks Samantha.

It's not generational in terms of who the practitioners are, because already among the people that I studied the age range was quite wide. I think when I started fieldwork in 2011, my youngest participant was 20 and my oldest was 60. It's interesting to think whether the practice itself, or the purpose it serves / the needs it meets / the meanings it takes on, might be different based on age, but I can't really answer that based on my data, because it wasn't meant for making generalizations like that.

Looking at the limited quantitative data available about taking and sending sexy selfies (e.g. Pew has a study on Couples, the Internet and Social Media from I think 2014, where they address it) it shows that it is a growing trend across many age groups (but the percentages were higher among the younger age groups) and it was a growing trend both among singles and married people. But that study was more focused on sharing sexy selfies with specific others, and not on posting them, so the context is different. Still, I think that it is highly likely that there are other digital spaces beyond the one I studied, where people do this. There are some explicitly sexual spaces like Fetlife, some dating platforms or apps; there are some people, who try to use Instagram for it (sometimes through private accounts), even though it's content policies are not conducive to it.

But I do think that in some ways Tumblr (and that particular community's culture) have a specific set of socio-technical affordances that allow localized subversion (i.e. posting nudes in ways that goes beyond simple titillation).

In terms of Tumblr's governance techniques and technical affordances the following surely play a part:

- lack of censorship of sexual content,
- the fact that the platform supports posting and reposting of different formats of content, so allows for multimedia storytelling,
- the interface supports interaction around this content,
- and it allows participating in a pseudonymous way.

In terms of the culture's norms the following are relevant:

- the sexually explicit, adamantly body positive, tolerance and social justice driven attitude (i've called it the "anti establishment Lite" attitude)
- the language used is that of affection and the interactional style that accelerates assumed intimacy.

So I suppose there's cause for cautious hope that with selfie practices and with safe spaces that people carve out, some sort of a paradigm shift regarding bodies, norms and visual economy is in the cards, but at the same time we're still in a place where revenge porn is a thing, where leaked, hacked or accidentally misaddressed sexy selfies cause scandal, or end careers, so I guess a fair amount of optimism is needed for that hope.

November 21 at 5:44pm

edited January 9 at 4:55am

[Judy Malloy](#) Hi Kat

As I began to archive each segment of the panel, due to the spontaneous question and answer format, there were abrupt endings, and a need for a closing voice.

But here, because you have been so generous with sharing your research in detail, it seems most important to send readers to the questions and to your in depth responses on the issues of NSFW (not safe for work) selfies and Tumblr-situated sex blogs.

I'd also like to remind readers that as they encounter the content from this Social Media Narrative; Issues in Contemporary Practice panel, there are many places where it is important to click-out the "See More" or "View 8 more comments" content. Indeed, as the archiving of this panel progressed with some frustration, I began to feel that in-depth discussion was not being encouraged by Facebook's algorithms.

Contingently, and inconveniently, I have a question. If you have time, as regards your looking at NSFW content in terms of performative actions -- and your observation that "a blogger will use her own body and her own selfies to push back at what our visual culture positions as photographable" -
- in your research are some of creators of NSFW selfies knowingly working in the tradition of

feminist performance: Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Smith, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, for instance?

It is a week past the time of the panel, so if you prefer, we can leave this question open.... Thank you very much for sharing your work and for your thoughtful responses!

November 29 at 9:44am



[Katrin Tiidenberg](#) Thanks Judy. Feminism and explicitly feminist self-presentation and self-reflection have been really interesting to witness in the NSFW selfie community. Many of my (male and female) informants have told me that their Tumblr experience has been educational for them and feminist though is one of the most commonly cited areas in which people feel they've gained information, knowledge, insight, a new perspective etc. And some people came to the space with very strong pre-existing thoughts on different feminist issues. I think it's fairly safe to say that there's a certain overlap between the NSFW selfie communities and the SJW communities on Tumblr, or at least that some of the content moves loosely across those boundaries (although perhaps unidirectionally, i.e. feminist or queer content, in particular slogany artsy stuff moves from SJW blogs to NSFW blogs, whereas nudes don't necessarily move back across).

And some women definitely approach their selfie practices as a performance and their personal politics illuminates the performative choices they make. I think their performances are probably less sharply message-driven feminist performances than the artists you mention, but there is enough of an explicit "F*** your system" elements and messages in them (from messages on t-shirts, to menstruation related stuff, to humor and parody).

November 30 at 4:46am