Stories We Tell Our Selfies

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Abstract
Selfies have become a common social practice for a significant number of people throughout the world. While some criticise selfies as attention seeking or narcissistic, others have argued that they are a form of visual diary and a way for an individual to tell their own story. This would make them a kind of autobiography that, facilitated by the characteristics of new technologies, has its own internal logic and mode of speaking. When people curate the information they want to show, and decide on how it is presented, they are revealing their notions on what is important and worth sharing. So, by analysing selfies and images posted on Instagram as storytelling, we can also learn about cultural values. This paper shares the findings of an ethnographic research with Instagram users and tries to discuss how they use images to tell stories. It discusses the elements that compose the stories and the 2 specific ways that people are using to present themselves online. It also tries to reflect on how collaboration with other people, through likes and comments, affects the narration of these stories. Modern technology also allows selfie takers to manipulate their image by appropriating techniques that were once only utilized by the media and by leaders of the power hierarchy. Which prompts the question: how the practice can affect people's awareness of how discourses are constructed and can it challenge the current power relations?

Keywords: Selfies, social media, digital storytelling, visual diary, power

Introduction

Since 2013, selfies become a phenomenon and have been calling the attention of different sectors of society. They are often associated to pathologies, with the media being particularly full of examples that try to connect selfies to narcissism[1] (either of individuals or of society), to self-esteem[2] (low or too high), or even psychopathy[3]. Besides that, the media in general associate selfies with negative stories, denigrate selfie makers, associate them to young women, and try to regulate how, where and when to take (and not to take) selfies. On the other side, there are voices that highlight the potential of selfies as a form of empowerment. To some authors, selfies give the users a feeling of control (Nemer & Freeman, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015), especially for women (Murray, 2015; Simmons, 2013; Warfield, 2015) since there is a subversion of the male gaze and women can control how they want to be looked at. There are also critiques of this position (Ryan, 2013) that have affirmed that women are only reproducing in their selfies what they see in the media, and are therefore valorising themselves through their looks, which would be counterproductive to empowerment.

Scholars have also tried to grasp different dimensions of the practice, such as their reasons and meanings. Among the main theories, selfies have been regarded as: a means of self-representation (Kwon & Kwon, 2015; Suler, 2015); a way of performing the self (Tifentale, 2014); a manner to converse with other people in the online environment (Gunthert, 2015; Katz & Crocker, 2015; Kwon & Kwon, 2015; Meese et al., 2015; Nayar, 2014) a product of the society of spectacle and consumption, allowing common people to participate in this society (Iqani & Schroeder, 2015; Karhawi, 2015; Nayar, 2014; Schwarz, 2010; Williams & Marquez, 2015); and a form of visual diary (Cruz & Araujo, 2012; Iqani & Schroeder, 2015; Nayar, 2014) .

It is important to keep in mind that the phenomenon of selfies is not constituted of a single product. It is problematic to analyze selfies as if they are produced and shared with the same intention. Selfies are images taken with a certain number of techniques, but with regards to the intentions of people who share their selfies, it is possible to identify many reasons from self-promotion to raising awareness for a social cause. We cannot say that people who make selfies have the same, and only one, purpose. Sometimes the same person can share selfies serving different purposes.

In this article, and aligned with the authors who theorize that selfies are a kind of visual diary, I propose to analyse them as a form of storytelling. More specifically, as a way to tell a story of oneself. I use the initial findings of my ethnographic research

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[1] Such as *#Me: Instagram Narcissism And The Scourge Of The Selfie* in http://readwrite.com/2013/01/31/instagram-selfies-narcissism, *Me, My Selfie And I: Why Selfies Aren't Narcissism* in http://readwrite.com/2013/11/06/selfies-are-not-narcissism and *Sharing the (self) love: the rise of the selfie and digital narcissism* in http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2014/mar/13/selfie-social-media-love-digital-narcassism

[2] For instance: *The Good, the Bad, and the Unexpected Consequences of Selfie Obsession* in http://www.teenvogue.com/story/selfie-obsession

[3] See *Are Selfies a Sign of Narcissism and Psychopathy?* in https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201501/are-selfies-sign-narcissism-and-psychopathy

to analyse the elements of these stories and the potential implications of the practice to social relations.

Selfies as storytelling

To analyse selfies as a way to tell a story of oneself implies that they are not a new phenomenon, since humans have always told their own stories. In the words of Rettberg (2014) "self-representations have always been part of our culture. We have drawn, carved, sculpted and painted images of ourselves for millennia; we have kept diaries, scrapbooks and photo albums; we have sung ballads and told stories about ourselves". (p.2)

The novelty here is that technological advances such as digital photography, mobile cameras, social media and the high speed internet are affordances that have given us a new way to do something that we were already doing. In this sense, selfies can be understood under the small stories paradigm, as proposed by Georgakopoulou (2016). According to the author, these are stories that

> involve fragmentation and open-endedness (…), exceeding the confines of a single posting and site and resisting a neat categorization of beginning-middle-end. They also involve multiple authoring of a post, as it becomes shared and distributed. There is also a tendency for reporting mundane, ordinary and, in some cases, trivial events from the poster's everyday life, rather than big complications or disruptions. (p.302)

Social media and technological advances made these kind of stories circulate further and become more visible and available to others. Nonetheless, to take the viewpoint of selfies as autobiographies, raises questions on the authenticity of these stories. Critics of the practice (Ryan, 2013) have affirmed that in social media people are performing in order to show the image they want others to see. Rather than showing their real selves, people try to project their ideal selves. If this is the case, to understand selfies as autobiography would be problematic. On the other hand, the spontaneous nature of selfies may indicate that they are an authentic form of self-expression. In order to go deeper in this discussion and to try to apprehend the role of selfies in autobiography storytelling, I will discuss the findings of my ongoing doctoral research on the use of images in social media.

Methodology

I had never posted a selfie prior to 2016. Whilst I had taken photos of myself, I had never posted them within social media. Even though I have nothing against the practice, I had never had the desire to do it. I am interested in selfies as a product of our age and I am seeking to understand the implications and potentials of the practice. Nonetheless, in order to be a part of the culture of the subjects I am researching, I needed to make selfies. So, I conducted an autoethnographic project, in which I created an Instagram account and, for 5 weeks, I posted different kinds of selfies, including selfies with objects, with somebody else (known as usfie), with a group, doing a duck face, taking the photo from a high angle, reflecting in a mirror, making a collage of selfies, and one I made using a selfie stick.

Instagram was chosen as the platform for the research because it is the main social media associated with selfies and it is credited to be the fastest growing major social media[4] platform, having around 500 million active users as of 2016, more than Twitter, Linkedin and Pinterest[5].

I made a journal in which I described the processes of making and posting selfies, as well as what happened after I posted them, including my thoughts and feelings. At the end of the project, I made an open coding to identify conceptual categories for analysis. My main findings were: making good selfies requires technical abilities, which needed to be learned and which are improved with practice; the whole process of staging, taking, choosing, treating and sharing a selfie takes longer than I had previously predicted; the social aspect is prominent since the comments and reactions of other people are a fundamental part of the practice; and the act of making some of the selfies was fun *per se*.

Besides the autoethnographic project, I am currently conducting ethnographic interviews with people who have Instagram accounts, in which I seek to understand diverse aspects of their use of Instagram images and also their opinions about people's general usage of social media. The sample has a diverse range of nationality, ethnicity, gender and age.
Finally, I am undertaking a participant observation of Instagram profiles from the interviewed people as well as others users. In this process, I am compiling data such as the kind of images they post, the accompanying hashtags and captions and the interactions their posts receive.

Findings

One of the first findings is that users of Instagram do not perceive selfies separately from their other photo practices. Selfies are only one more technique used in order to take a photo and are one among a diversity of types of images found on an Instagram feed. This implied a change in my research, since it no longer made sense to talk only about how people use selfies. So I am examining the use of images in social media, including selfies, to tell stories. None of the participants in the research posts only, or even mainly, selfies and this reflects the majority of users on Instagram. In fact, in my sample, portraits (a picture of the owner of the profile clearly not taken by him or herself) were the most recurrent type of photos posted, corresponding to 25% of the total pictures. Selfies, images of food, or of an object, each corresponded to 15% of the sample. There were also images of landscapes, buildings, other people and animals, each corresponding to around 5% of the sample (see figure 1).

Regarding the general reasons to post pictures, participants said that they post pictures to show: where they have been (a place or event); who they are with; when they feel that they look nice; and what they are feeling. During the interviews it was possible to determine that Instagram users try to manage the impressions they inspire in the viewers, about themselves. Participants said they wanted people to think that they are, amongst others: happy, unique, fun, cool, full of energy or a social/ exciting/

[4] According to sources like http://mediumwell.com/marketing-instagram and
http://www.recode.net/2014/12/10/11633686/instagram-hits-300-million-users-now-larger-than-twitter
[5] Source: https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/

successful/ outgoing/ confident person. It is interesting to notice how these desired impressions correspond to personal and cultural values.
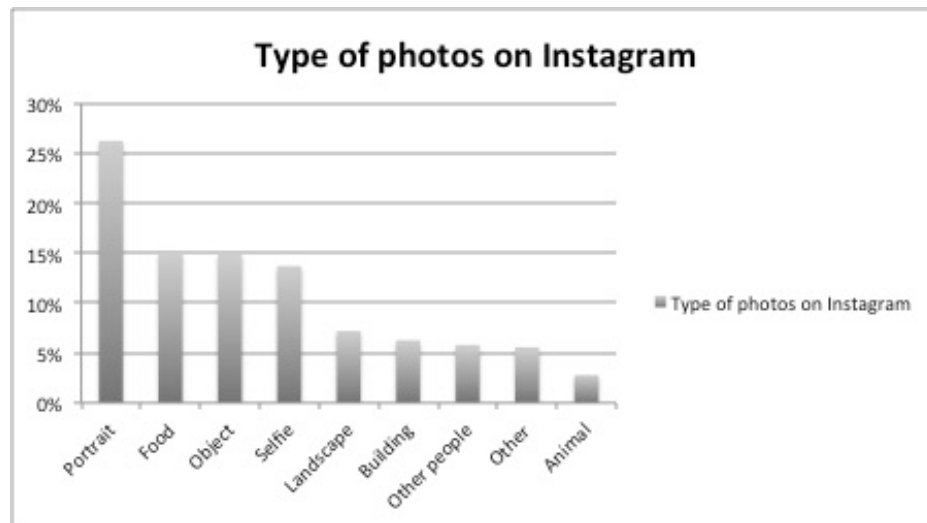

Figure 1: Types of photos posted on Instagram.

However, a post on Instagram is not made only by an image. There are other elements that can be present together with the images and the sum of these is actually what we can consider a small story. 3 main features were analysed and they are heavily textual: captions, hashtags and comments.

The captions are what users write when they post the image. They are not always present, but are common. They can be used to complement the description (for example: in an image of some food, the caption was "I received good feedback for cooking Persian food to my friends"), to make something more clear about the image (for example: in an image of a sketch drawing, the caption was "Drawn by my little brother. He said im a penguin cus my legs are short"); to add an emotion (for example: in an image with another person the caption was "Nostalgia. Glad to see you again"), and to create humour (for example: in an image of the participant in a market holding a big lobster, the caption was "I even caught it myself"). It is not only words that are presented in the captions, as the presence of emoticons is prominent. Barash (2017) explains that emoticons

> allow us to bring some of our tone and facial expressions to text communication media, creating a layer of rich context on top of the words written. At the same time, these communication codes allow us to abbreviate emotional expressions and squeeze more meaning into fewer characters. (p. 1102)

So emoticons are a way to enrich the stories by adding to the visual and textual elements.

Hashtags were other elements usually present in a post. They are mostly used when there is a desire to reach the outer world, because anybody can potentially see the image, when they search for a hashtag. They are usually about: a place or event (#hongkong, #work, #tedx); a feeling (#iloveit, #sad), a situation (#instatravel, #instafood, #fitness, #rainyday); an impression (#beautiful, #fun). There are also

some predefined and popular hashtags used by a large number of people like #nomakeupselfies, #throwbackthursday and #wokeuplikethis. Nonetheless, when the users are just talking to their followers, they usually dispense with hashtags or sometimes write unique hashtag phrases that are applicable to the image, like #iamsotiredicantdoanythingelse.

Likes and comments from other users are an important element of social media. According to the users and the observation, comments were usually positive, brief and filled with exclamations and emoticons. They can also come in form of funny statements or questions. Users said that they try to answer the comments usually thanking the commenter, answering the question or adding a sentence such as "you too". Sometimes, as pointed out by one participant, these are just "stupid thoughtless comments". In these cases, users don't even feel the need to reply and they just like the comment. The brevity of the comments or even the absence of words (when there are only emoticons) reinforces the phatic function of images in social media.

According to Frosh (2015), the primary purpose of this type of communication is "the production, expression, and maintenance of sociability" (p. 1623). David (2015) complements: "rather than informative, they serve to start a conversation, salute someone, just say goodbye or acknowledge the fact of listening" (p.93). So, we can see that images within social media are a way to tell a story and they also act as a way to converse, in which the fact that the communication is taking place is more important than the content of the conversation.

The interactions with other people are a characteristic of digital storytelling. According to Barasah (2017) one of the features that differentiate digital stories from other forms of storytelling is that they are hyperlinked and very interactive. In his words: "the unique affordances of digital storytelling are the ability to connect disparate pieces of story via hyperlinks and the high level of interactivity it offers to participant" (p.1097). Compared to other forms of biography, like books and diaries, the authors can have an immediate response from their viewers. Since this interaction with other people is a premise of social media, we can pose the question: how does the collaboration with other people, through likes and comments, affect the narration of visual stories?

In order to start addressing this issue, I identified 2 different practices related to the kind of story that the user wants to tell. The first one is when they post a carefully curated image, in which the photos are usually beautiful, posed, and edited. There is a desire to attract followers by the aesthetic sense. The accompanying captions are well thought and written and the posts have hashtags that try to attract viewers. The second practice is when the photos are like a visual journal: the user is more interested in telling a part of their day. The photos feel more spontaneous, and they are not necessarily beautiful but are highly informative. Some common examples of this practice are photos of a ticket in hand, to show they have been to an event; the food they have eaten or coffee cup shots; an opened book; photos with friends. There are even photos when nothing extraordinary happened, for instance, an image of a computer screen to show they have been studying. The accompanying captions are informal or often even absent.

Each user can have a mix of these photos in their feed. Nonetheless, I identified 2 ways that participants use to differentiate between these 2 practices. One is to post on their feed the curated photos and use the Instagram story function as visual diary. This function was introduced in the middle of 2016 in an attempt to compete with Snapchat: the photos or videos posted in *My Stories* disappear after 24 hours. These photos or videos will not automatically appear in the followers' home screen. They can be sent to specific people, otherwise followers need to click in a separated place in order to see them. Users can also easily add text and stickers to the images and are able to check who saw their posts. The second way, found among users in Thailand, was to separate the visual diary from a curated profile. In this way, some people actually create 2 different Instagram profiles. One is their visual diary account, set to private mode (whereby only people they allow will see the posts). These have fewer followers, which are usually their family and friends. The other account is a curated one, set to public mode, has more followers and the whole profile is more carefully designed. Some use the same colour tones and filters in all the images and may even plan how the photos in a feed are laid out in relation to each other.

The analysis of these practices take us back to the discussion of whether online profiles are a real depiction of who a person is, or whether they are an ideal projection of who they want to be. At first, we may think that the visual diary presents the real self and that the curated profile is a constructed identity, an idealization. Nonetheless, even the visual diaries are curated. Users choose what, when and how to post and what to omit. In this sense they are always performing and this is not exclusive to social media. We are always performing when we tell stories. To Papacharissi (2017):

> Performativity is essential to narrativity. People cannot tell stories without performing. I understand performativity as the process of consciously and subconsciously choosing words, tone, approach, and gestures—however subtle or obvious those choices may be—as we tell stories. We thus cannot narrate without performing; and we inadvertently produce some kind of narrative through performances of a planned, accidental, or habitual nature. We tell a story by how we dress, how we talk, and how we conduct ourselves. (p.1071)

Transferring this to social media profiles, we can state that, more or less consciously, we are telling stories about ourselves through the images we choose to share, as well as how and when we post them.

Discussion

So far we have seen how people are using Instagram to tell stories about their lives. It is the role of scholars to reflect on the implications of this practice in society. Within a Cultural Studies framework we should examine how this practice has the potential to challenge power relations. Firstly, telling our stories publically can be seen as a counter narrative to the story that is told about us, for example by state surveillance apparatus that record several moments and data about ourselves, without our control or even our awareness. In the words or Nayar (2014):

the selfie represents a parallel surveillance culture to the organized surveillance by the state corporate entities because it subjects itself to the public gaze. If the CCTV can generate a story about me, then I would rather generate the story I *want* the world to see. It is also important that the very acting of self-shooting implies the presence of a community of watchers/viewers with whom the selfie is to be shared. What the selfie represents then is an on-camera *performance* of the self for the world we know will see it. (p.80)

Secondly, as we have seen, one of the consequences of telling our stories in a platform that can potentially reach the world is that people are able to present themselves in positive ways. Historically, the media do not significantly represent those who deviate from the standard patterns of beauty or behaviour. If we take Foucault's approach to power, we can say that the media is full of discourses on how to behave and even how to look. Power, in professor Weedon's (1987) interpretation of Foucault is: "a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects" (p.113). Thus, the use of images as a way of driving social change is a challenge to the media's power to dictate behaviour and looks patterns.

Thirdly, besides, social media instigate the circulation of a series of techniques for taking and manipulating photographs that used to be restricted to professionals or to students of photography. Not only are there apps and software that make it easy for people to take and edit their photos, but some also teach selfie skills, such as attention to background and accessories, use of lights and choice of angles to reinforce or hide features. When people take a selfie in order to try to look good, they will experiment with light, angles, hair and make-up. They may also apply filters and retouch features. These are precisely some of the techniques embedded within mainstream images. In doing this, selfie makers can increase their knowledge of how the media works and how official stories are constructed. Whilst many people know in theory that media images are retouched and manipulated, this practice enables them to do this for themselves. To gain knowledge by experience contributes to making people more aware. Therefore, when people share their ideal self they are behaving in similar ways to the media.

On the other hand, one can argue that the creative skills required to produce and share content take place within the same parameters and constraints set by the dominant discourses. So, images on social image would be only reproducing beauty patterns. This raises another issue of whether people just reproduce what they see or whether they can produce new forms. According to Deuze, Blank and Speers (2012):

> It is indeed a fascinating paradox that much of the media's creativity takes place within the parameters and constraints set and to some extent controlled by the same institutions that historically have set the parameters within which most people would have understood their reality: corporations and the state. It begs the question whether people inevitably end up reproducing the system they seek to subvert, or if they can in fact tactically gain a foothold exactly because they are part of the system . (para.3)

Even though it might take some time to see the real effects of the use of images in social media, the fact that people are producing content and trying to reposition themselves within power relations is *per se* an act of agency and resistance. After all, even with lots of criticism from some scholars, the media, and other entities, people are still using social media to represent their stories. It is in defiance of those who try to establish the rules for self-representation. People are experimenting in what can be done, regardless of the voices telling them what they can and cannot do, or how they should do it. I am not suggesting that everybody that uses social media is consciously being empowered. As previously stated, people have different uses and intentions for sharing their images. What I propose is that the use of images in social media has in itself the potential to transform social relations and this will depend on the use people give to the technologies they have and their interactions and struggles in the digital and real worlds.

Conclusions

Selfies have become a global phenomenon to which it is hard to be indifferent. The construction of the discourse on the practice has led to an almost love or hate relationship. Nonetheless, I argue that we should move beyond the Manichean perceptions of good/bad or empowering/narcissistic and reflect on how these practices can potentially affect our social relations. In this paper, I propose to understand the practice of posting selfies and images on social media in the perspective of storytelling. In response to criticisms that digital stories are a superficial and thus inferior form of storytelling, Barash (2017) affirms that "just because we can tell stories more quickly does not mean that those stories are somehow poorer in meaning than novels or oral stories. It means that our communication and storytelling capabilities are evolving" (p.1102). Under this light, we should discuss how the fact that people are using technology to curate, edit and tell their own stories, can impact their perceptions of how official stories are told.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to those studying selfies and the use of images within social media. The analysis of the initial findings of an ethnographic research with a diverse sample of participants, makes it possible to see how people are using social media as a form of visual storytelling. This article discussed the elements of the story which, in addition with the image, include captions, hashtags and reactions from other people. It examined how the interaction and collaboration components affect the telling of the stories. Finally, it reflected on how the practice of telling one's own story can affect power relations in our society. Further researches should seek to examine the impact of the practice on the individual's awareness of how stories are told by powerful institutions such as governments and the media.

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