RETHINKING SELFIES: EMPOWERING THE MARGINALIZED THROUGH SELF-PORTRAITS

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Background

More than just a self-taken, static photo shared on social networking sites, selfies are considered nonverbal, visual communication that implies one's thoughts, intentions, emotions, desires, and aesthetics captured by facial expressions, body language, and visual art elements. Previous studies have investigated selfies in light of adolescent development (e.g., how teenagers use selfies to seek attention; see McLean, 2014) and prestigious user groups (e.g., celebrities' self-promotion; see Wallop, 2013). Although these studies generalize selfies as a relation between narcissism and public attention, between (re)construction of self-esteem and optimized (or selective) self-presentation, and between self-promotion and social capital, selfies are *produced* and *experienced* by people in sociocultural terms. It is difficult to understand selfies without taking into account the deeper sociocultural context in which they were created, used, and interpreted (e.g., in a non-Western culture). What happens, then, when selfies, as "fashionable" sociotechnical artifacts, are introduced to and adopted within user groups of sociocultural specificity, such as marginalized groups?

We draw on a six-month ethnography performed by the first author, including user observations and 56 in-depth and semi-structured interviews in the favelas of Vitória, Brazil, to study slum residents' selfie practices. The fieldwork focused on four Community Technology Centers (CTCs): two LAN houses (Life Games in Itararé and Guetto in Gurigica) and two Telecenters (one in Itararé and one in São Benedito). We used ethnography to emphasize how marginalized people experience and understand selfies, which puts them at the center of the research and posits that people themselves define their valued lives. We argue that practices of understanding, interpreting, and experiencing selfies are embedded in dense sociocultural contexts. For marginalized users who are suffering in a relatively severe living environment, selfies are not a shallow way to show narcissism, fashion, and self-promotion and seek attention; selfies,

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rather, empower the users to exercise free speech, practice self-reflection, express spiritual purity, improve literacy skills, and form strong interpersonal connections.

This research contributes to a growing social scientific literature on selfies by rethinking selfies as empowerment and fostering a non-Western and nonconventional mode of knowing on people's daily use of technology. This approach sheds light on the role of technology in various dimensions in people's lives.

Escaping From Censorship and Expressing Their True Selves

The smartphones that participants used to take selfies belonged to either themselves or a friend. They called their smartphones *xing lings*—a term that refers to Chinese imitation and pirated brands, which were smart only when WiFi was available and when users could afford the expensive data packages. Thus, the most used feature on our participants' smartphones was the camera. The observations in the CTCs revealed that Facebook has become users' main social media platform where they shared selfies.

The interviewees mentioned that they were afraid of posting on Facebook regularly because they might be watched or chased or face retaliation by the drug lords who controlled the slum. Their fear was understandable considering what was happening around them. The favelas of Gurigica, São Benedito, Bairro da Penha, and Itararé emerged in a complicated socioeconomic context in which people in the city were suffering from an unequal distribution of wealth and a housing shortage. Moreover, drug dealers were active and controlled these areas. Drug lords divided the favelas into personal territories by informal treaties and agreements and tried to establish and maintain order in their own territory. Drug lords followed a feudal system in which each drug lord was responsible for offering the local population in his or her territory the resources, supplies, and services for their living, such as gas, electricity, and protection against outsiders and rival gangs. In doing so, drug lords became the only authority in this area, respected and appreciated by the local residents. During the fieldwork for this study, the favelas were in an unstable and warlike situation because of constant conflicts between current controllers and newcomers—drug lords who escaped from the "pacifying" mission in Rio de Janeiro.

Despite their fears, most of the interviewees still posted selfies on their Facebook page as a tactic to express their feelings and opinions in an implicit and safe way. These interviewees found it difficult to express their true feelings and be favela dwellers at the same time. They felt oppressed wherever they went: If they hung out in the favelas, they felt that the drug lords in control were watching them. If they went outside of the favelas, they felt discriminated by the society and targeted by the police. Instead, they considered Facebook as a safer place to express their true feelings, thoughts, and personalities while escaping from the drug lords' censorship. Andre, age 17, describes the context for his posting of a selfie on Facebook:

> "Today I had to walk through a shooting in Itararé. The police cars were flying by . . . you should have seen it. . . . I'm just very grateful I'm still alive, but at the same time I'm furious to have to face this situation almost every week. Today I posted a photo of myself expressing my gratitude of being alive. . . . I can't say

much more than that because I'll have trouble with people involved in this shooting."

For André, taking and posting selfies had nothing to do with narcissism or attention seeking. To the contrary, as a resident of a dangerous area run by drug lords, André did not seek public attention at all. His selfie was a strategic way to show his grief about the shooting he witnessed, his disappointment about his current living situation ("furious to have to face this situation almost every week"), and his expectation for a better life ("my gratitude of being alive"). His selfie practice was embedded in a socioculturally dense context and cannot be reduced to a simple act of self-promotion.

Ricardo, age 17, a frequent user of Life Games LAN house, usually used his selfies to let his mom know where he was and give her a sign that he was safe:

> "My mom works the entire day and I have nothing to do after school. . . . I love playing soccer on the streets, but it is dangerous due to the [drug] street managers wanting new people in their team. . . . I always post photos of myself to show my mom where I am and that I'm OK . . . . she always checks her Face [Facebook] at work during her breaks . . . there's a computer there they can use."

For Ricardo, being on the streets without adult supervision was dangerous, because the drug traffickers were always looking for new recruits to expand their cartel. Using selfies became a fast and efficient way to communicate with his mother and provide her with visual evidence that he was safe. CTCs were a safe, trusted, and friendly place where slum residents felt it was easier to disclose their true feelings and deepest thoughts. Although free WiFi was available in the Telecenters, users did not upload their selfies directly from their xing lings, because they were generally unaware of the open WiFi network or how to use it. They usually first transferred their selfies to desktop computers in the CTCs via a USB cable and then uploaded the photos to Facebook. However, the CTCs were more than just physical places to upload selfies. In CTCs, participants felt more relaxed, comfortable, and happier. Maria, age 15 explains:

> "I come here to hang out with my friends, not just to use the computers. . . . I go to the bathroom and take photos with my friends. . . . I don't have a large mirror like that one [in the bathroom] at home, so here I can fit everyone in one photo. . . . I love the Telecenter, here I feel safe and in these photos [selfies] I can show my happy side, my real self . . . because in the dangerous streets, unfortunately, I'm always showing my worried and anxious side."

For Maria and her friends, taking selfies in the CTCs enabled them to show a "happy side" of their unhappy lives. Hanging out and taking photos with friends in a safe (and nicer) place comforted and encouraged them, making them stronger and braver to face their unhappy and unsatisfactory lives ("dangerous," "worried," "anxious"). These users understood selfies as a digital product to empower their unsatisfactory off-line lives. They used selfies to escape from the powerful drug lords' control of their everyday lives, to implicitly express their objections to inequity and violence, to enhance their reflections of their true selves, and to gain self-comfort and self-encouragement.

Overcoming Illiteracy

Illiteracy was one of the most serious issues that favela residents faced. Nineteen interviewees were functionally illiterate and could not describe their selfie practices in writing.[2] However, illiteracy did not stop them from coming to telecenters and LAN houses. Roberto, age 21 and illiterate, was a frequent user of the Guetto LAN house and knew his way around the online world. He came to the CTC to play Flash-based games and to *gastar* on Facebook.[3] On Facebook, he mainly used photos, especially selfies, to communicate with his friends. For him, taking selfies became a tactic to overcome his illiteracy and the barriers to communicate with others (see Figure 5). With selfies, Roberto did not need to rely on traditional text-based computer-mediated communication that requires sufficient reading and writing skills; this enhanced his capabilities to socialize:

> "I can't talk to people using the keyboard, so I upload my photos. . . . I say hi, good afternoon, good-bye . . . all on my photos. I wish I could read and write, but I guess I'm too old for that."

Illiterate slum residents also used selfies rather than text messages and e-mail to facilitate communication with their families. For some, taking and posting selfies was a learning process in which they could improve their literacy with others' help. This process is evident in the experience of Alice (age 15). Alice shared a xing ling with her older sister, and they learned most of the device's functionality from the telecenter staff and from their friends' help. Although Alice was enrolled in seventh grade in a public school in Itararé, she was illiterate. Alice had a written sheet that listed Facebook's URL and her log-in information. She also usually relied on her friends to help her use the social networking site.

When she first came to the Telecenter in April 2013, Alice did not understand the words on the sheet or how to press the corresponding keys on the keyboard to log in. She was unable to read anything on her screen or chat with others, but she managed to "like" and share her selfies, say hi (*oi*), and laugh by typing "kkkkkkkk." She was mostly interested in knowing what others commented on her selfies. By the end of the fieldwork, Alice was able to understand some comments on her selfies such as *linda* (beautiful), *gata* (hot), and *feia* (ugly), edit her selfies, have longer chats, and *gastando* with her friends on Facebook.[4] She said:

> "I'm terrified of my school. . . . I feel dumb there and no one is willing to help me. . . . I come to the telecenter to hang out with my friends here. This is a meeting place, but more importantly I can hang out with other friends who are working, at school or in LAN houses and telecenters. . . . We can all talk on Face [Facebook]. . . . They can see my photos and see what I'm doing, what I'm

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[2] According to Schlechty (2000), functional illiteracy refers to reading and writing skills that are inadequate to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level.

[3] *Gastar*, which in English means "to spend" or "to waste," is a term used by teenagers in Brazil to describe the activity of hanging out, chitchatting, making comments, and mocking someone.

[4] *Gastando* is the gerund form of the verb *gastar*, which is defined in footnote 3.

dressing. . . . If I don't come to the telecenter I can't get on Face and I feel lost later at the *pracinha* [public square]. . . . I need to understand what people are talking so when it's six p.m. and we go to the *pracinha*, I'm already aware of what is going on."

Teenagers like Alice usually started their conversations on Facebook, because they could not always be physically together. When later they met in off-line places such as the *pracinha*, they would continue their conversations. Originally, Alice was motivated to share her selfies on Facebook, read comments and write feedback so she would not be left out of her circle of friends and the continuing off-line conversations. For her, selfies were a way to be included in social circles and engaged in off-line communities.

Discussion and Conclusion

As claimed by some (e.g., Barakat, 2014; McKay, 2014), selfies are perceived as a shallow way for teenagers and celebrities to show narcissism and fashion, seek attention, and practice self-promotion. However, findings from our study do not support this conclusion. Our ethnographic study revealed that practices of understanding, interpreting, and experiencing selfies are embedded in dense sociocultural contexts. The selfie users observed and interviewed in this study were living in marginalized areas (i.e., the favelas of Bairro da Penha, Gurigica, Itararé, and São Benedito in Brazil) that were under constant surveillance by powerful drug lords. Slum residents relied on and respected the drug lords but also were afraid of them. These residents' lives were full of violence, poverty, danger, disappointment, uncertainty, and insecurity, but they still did not lose their hope for a better life and their expectations to know the world.

This unique but extraordinarily complicated social, cultural, political, and economic situation greatly influenced these slum residents' freedom and life experiences off-line and online. For them, selfies were far more than an instrumental artifact of communication and self-representation. They perceived, used, and experienced selfies in a sociocultural dense form of empowerment: They could escape from the eyes of powerful drug lords to implicitly express their dissatisfaction and objections; consciously reflect on their true selves and maintain their spiritual purity; overcome the difficulties of being functionally illiterate and gradually learn literacy skills; and improve their interpersonal communication with family members and peers. Their choices and decisions were guided by their reflections on what was important to them in their marginalized living situation and how digital technologies could be used to meet their social, emotional, and physical needs.

These findings add to Noland's (2006) study of a group of marginalized Latinas in Los Angles, which focused solely on the emotional enhancements afforded by self-portraits. Noland also observed selfies as way to overcome language barriers. Our research on selfies in Brazil's favelas follows the findings of Yefimova, Neils, Newell, and Gomez (2014), which report on marginalized groups in Mexico using selfies to realistically depict their everyday lives, history, and social situation. In addition, Frohmann (2005) suggests that selfies could empower the marginalized by creating dialogue about the community's issues through group discussion, reaching policy makers, and informing the broader society of those issues. These findings suggest self-portraits as a way to

hear the voices of some of the inhabitants in poor and marginalized regions, as claimed by Hernández (2009). In all these ways, selfies were embedded in marginalized users' everyday lives and perceived as a pathway to a more promising future.
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In essence, the favela residents used selfies to present themselves online. But, as we argue in this article, their goals were not to present an ideal (or fake) self online (or shallow displays of narcissism, fashion, attention seeking, and self-promotion). We understand selfies as more than a dichotomy of fake/real identities. Rather, we consider people's online presentations (selfies) as ways to improve and benefit their off-line identities: Presenting selves online is to recognize and access an opportunity (i.e., digital technologies) to improve their quality of life and to allow this decision to make a life-enhancing difference. This is the context in which we understand online identities and empowerment.

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