THE THINGS WE CAN'T SAY IN SELFIES – NARRATING THE SELF THROUGH GPOY, REACTION-GIF AND 'CURRENT STATUS' IMAGES

Katrin Tildenberg
Tallinn University

Cindy Tekobbe
Arizona State University

We are surrounded by the 'powerful and seductive' (Rose, 2001, p.10) images - art, ads, icons, comics, family albums, memes and selfies. The ease of exchanging pictures in the digitally saturated environment of ubiquitous camera-phones makes the communicative potential of images incredibly high. This paper explores the selection and posting of GPOY (gratuitous picture of yourself), gif (graphics interchange format) and 'current status' images [from now on referred to as GPOY] commonly used in social media as acts of meaning making and belonging.

Theoretical context

In our previous work, we have focused on selfies as narrative acts and signifiers of community belonging. Selfies can be bring a sense of control, allow to reclaim one's sexuality and act as tokens of belonging. Others have shown selfies to act as identity explorations (Avgitidou, 2003), which can be both empowering and commodifying (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009, Hjorth, 2006; Koskela, 2004; Schwarz, 2010).
In looking at visual dialogues through GPOY, we are inspired by Gergen's (2009) work on relational being, which emphasizes the stories of belonging over stories of being. According to his approach, the self is where various relations meet, and in order to be meaningful, we need an existing 'tradition of coordination between your utterances and my responses' (Gergen, 2007, p. 366). This nod towards 'rules of intelligibility' (Riessman, 2008) necessary for any meaningful communication to happen, invites the concept of genres (cf. Bakardjieva 2006). Luders, Proitz & Rasmussen (2010) suggest people need genres in 'becoming meaningful', and to make sense of communication. Can we consider speaking in GPOYs an emerging personal media genre? Does it build on the existing genres of self-portraiture or those of pictography? Are GPOY self-reflexive, or should they be understood as icons? Based on Gergen's use of the concept of carnival, I suggest that GPOY, like carnival, 'permits the individual to acknowledge and poke fun at the incredulity inherent in trying to align so many discordant potentialities for identity' (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 835).

Methical context

We will look at how a community of NSFW (Not Safe for Work) selfiers on the social media platform, tumblr, use GPOY to interact with others and tell stories about themselves. We are interested in how these visual narratives, using third party photos or screen grabs from film and animation, are repurposed by people who have an alternative way of visual and textual self-expression online.

We rely on visual narrative analysis (cf. Rose, 2001, Riessmann, 2008) [VNA], in this case, we focus on the story of re-production of images (unlike selfies, these are not images my participants have produced) or a story of production of visual self-narratives. This means finding the gifs and images tagged or captioned as GPOY or 'current status' in my fieldnotes and thematically analyzing them to suss out the narratives they are mostly used for. We then follow with case based VNA of how two of our informants (Katie and Rachel) do visual self-narration via GPOY.

Results and discussion

We suggest that GPOYs, reaction gifs and 'current status' images are an emergent personal use genre (Bakardijeva, 2006; Luders, Proitz & Rasmussen, 2010) of self-narrative for my participants. GPOY are used when informants need to make identity or belonging claims that are at odds with some of their other potentialities for identity. In simpler terms, one turns to self-narration via GPOY when one assumes that their narrative might be (a) stigmatizable; (b) at odds with the community based rules of social-exchange, (c) an impression-management tool for identity potentials we are less confident about. GPOY based visual self-narration is, thus, a result of identity work (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008).

Due to space constraints of this paper, we will just give an overview of findings. **Reaction gifs** are mostly used as responses the bloggers found insulting or ridiculous. They are usually reserved for interactions with strangers / people one does not consider to be within their tumblr. Community, and are an alternative to aggressive or rude utterances, which are generally not endorsed in this particular community.

GPOY and '**current status**' images (or gifs) are used interchangeably, with some informants preferring one label to the other, while others use GPOY and 'current status' intermittently. It should be mentioned that GPOY as an acronym and a meme has a rich history on the internet in general, and on tumblr specifically, thus its use might be related to the particular person's online experience. Our informants often use GPOY and 'current status' to construct a specific (often explicitly sexual) strand of self-narrative and to show that in a favorable, aesthetically pleasing and cute way. It can be seen as a preemptive attempt to avoid stigmatization of said sexual identities. Another common use of GPOY and 'current status' images are pleas for support. Throughout Tiidenberg's fieldwork, many of the informants have reported that they don't want to 'seem whiny' or complain too much on their blogs, GPOY and 'current status' offer a way to release tension and ask for compassion in a way that doesn't undermine one's overall identity

work towards being seen as coherent, positive and distinct (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008).

Not all tumblr users employ these in their visual narratives. For example Rachel (41) relies on GPOY for conflict communication and critical / ironic self- reflexivity. For her, it seems to be a tool of relating to her own vulnerability from arms length. For Katie (31) however, communicating in GPOY is a genre of self- expression and impression management for some of her sexual identities (sexual 'little' / 'bunny') and for managing emotional stress and seeking compassion (which, incidentally, is concurrent with the sexual little head space). Communicating in GPOY thus emerges as a coherent genre at the service of identity work. It has a specific role within one's other personal genres and selves.

References

Alvesson, M., Ashcraft, K. L., and Thomas, R. (2008). "Identity matters: Reflections on the construction of identity scholarship in organization studies." *Organization*, 15:5-28.

Avgitidou, A. (2003) Performances of the self. *Digital Creativity, 14*(3): 131-138.

Bakardjieva M (2006) Domestication running wild. From the moral economy of the household to the mores of a culture. In: Berker T, Hartmann M, Punie Y and Ward K (eds) *Domestication of Media and Technology*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 62–79.

Gergen, K. J. (2007) Relativism, Religion, and Relational Being. *Common Knowledge*, 13:2-3, 362 – 378

Gergen, K.J. (2009) *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community,* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hjorth, L. (2006) 'Being Mobile: In Between the Real and Reel,' paper presented at Asian Pop and Mobile Cultures conference, Gwangju, 28-29 October http://www.cct.go.kr/data/acf2006/mobile/mobile_0101_Larissa%20Hjorth.pd f

Koskela, H. (2004) 'Webcams, TV Shows and Mobile phones: Empowering Exhibitionism,' *Surveillance & Society, 2*(2/3): 199-215.

Lasén, A., and Gómez-Cruz, E. (2009) 'Digital Photography and Picture Sharing: Redefining the Public/Private Divide,' *Knowledge, Technology & Policy*, 22(3): 205–215.

Luders, M., Proitz, L., & Rasmussen, T. (2010). Emerging personal media genres. *New Media & Society*, *12*(6), 947–963. doi:10.1177/1461444809352203

Papacharissi, Z. (2012). Kenneth J. Gergen, Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community, *International Journal of Communication*, *6*, 834–837.

Rose, G. (2001). *Visual Methodologies. An Introdution to the Interpretation of Visual Materials.* London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi : SAGE Publications.

Schwarz, O. (2010) 'On Friendship, Boobs and the Logic of the Catalogue: Online Self-Portraits as a Means for the Exchange of Capital,' *Convergence, 16*(2): 163-183.