Selfies in 'mommyblogging': An emerging visual genre

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ABSTRACT

This article employs multimodal discourse analysis to explore how mothers represent their everyday experiences of motherhood on Instagram through different forms of self-portraiture. It investigates whether the 'selfies' that they share can be characterized as a visual genre and identifies four subgenres: presented, mirrored, inferred and implied selfies. The article illustrates the different ways in which the photographer's perspective can be represented in each subgenre. The aim is to show that the function of the selfie as a multimodal genre is not solely to represent 'the self' but rather to enact intersubjectivity, that is, to generate various possibilities of relations between perspectives on a particular topic, issue, or experience and hence to open up potential for negotiating different points of view.

1. Introduction

Visual self-representation via 'social photography' (Zappavigna, 2016), that is, sharing images on social media services, is an increasingly important means of negotiating experiences and relationships. This article explores how selfies, a form of photographic self-portrait produced using a smartphone camera, function as an emerging multimodal genre. It focuses on the particular visual structures which allow these images to introduce the photographer's personal perspective, or point of view ('voice') into the visual text. The aim is to understand how these images construe interpersonal meanings associated with a practice that has been controversially labelled 'mommyblogging' (Chen, 2013). This practice involves sharing of experiences and opinions about the everyday experience of motherhood, typically via intermodal coordination of images, video and verbiage. What is shared can vary from highly intimate and personal accounts of this experience, to posts resembling commercial discourse recommending particular products related to parenting (Horrall and Cavanagh, 2014; Morrison, 2010). This article focuses on the former type of post and on the visual mode used to represent the social media user.

The self-portrait has regularly been at the forefront of cultural development throughout history, exerting influence on how identity and selfhood are conceived within a culture (Hall, 2014). In contemporary contexts arising with the development of digital technologies, in particular social media platforms such as Instagram, the most prominent and controversial form of self-portrait has become the selfie. The practices of selfie making and sharing traverses social contexts as diverse as war and militarism (Brager, 2015; Kuntsman and Stein, 2015; Silvestri, 2014), education (Charteris et al., 2014), pregnancy and breastfeeding (Boon and Pentney, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2015), and funerals (Gibbs et al., 2014; Meese et al., 2015). It is a practice carried out by private individuals, in particular young people (Albury, 2015), as well as groups visible in news and entertainment media, such as politicians (Baishya, 2015; Coladonato, 2014) and celebrities (Collings, 2014; Nandy; Shipley, 2015).

Despite this ubiquitous presence, arriving at a semiotic definition of the selfie is not an easy task. One commonly accepted criterion is that the photographer is represented in the image, either via the face or parts of the body, or through traces of the body such as a shadow or reflection (Walker-Rettberg, 2005). Compositional principles, or, more precisely, deviation from established professional principles, such as the Golden Ratio, have also been suggested as a distinctive feature (Bruno et al., 2014). However, visual clues alone—be they representational or compositional—are not sufficient for identifying a selfie. While there are often clues such as distortion or the angle of the represented participant's position of a shoulder or arm, often there is no visual information distinguishing a portrait from a selfie without knowledge of how the image was photographed. Recognising an image as a selfie rather than a portrait thus requires viewers to "make inferences about the non-depictive technocultural conditions in which the image was made" and to have been socialized into reading these types of image (Frosh, 2015, p. 1608).

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The complex nature of the selfie is perhaps best captured in Gunthert's (2015, p. 7) description of a "bouquet of practices, that the term "selfie" has reunited *a posteriori in* a cultural construction". Over the past few years, this complexity has given rise to multidisciplinary study, spanning media studies, photographic theory, psychology, and informatics. This work has generated insights across a broad range of emerging social practices. For instance, some scholars have observed, the role selfies play in perpetuating consumerism and in facilitating commodification of different aspects of our social lives (e.g. Iqani and Schroeder, 2015; Kwon and Kwon, 2015; Marwick, 2015). Others have commented on the way in which selfies politicise "discourses about how people ought to represent, document and share their behaviour" (Senft and Baym, 2015, p. 1589), and regulate the formation of gender, race, and sexual identities (e.g. Burns, 2015; Williams and Marquez, 2015). While most research into selfies tends to be qualitative, there has also been some emerging work attempting to quantify broader patterns of use, such as the 'selfie-city project' which "considers both the individual artistic intentions of a singular image and the overall patterns revealed by large amount of selfies made in a particular geographic location during one week" (Tifentale, 2014, p. 4).

2. Selfies as an emerging visual genre

The concept of 'genre' (Martin, 2005) which has special meaning in linguistics, and is used more broadly in other disciplines (becoming almost synonymous with platform or channel rather than text type), has been applied to selfies with varying levels of technicality. In social semiotic terms (Halliday, 1978; Hasan, 1978; Kress and Leeuwen, 2006), genres have been characterized as patterns of meaning that are relatively stable and recurrent, and which unfold in stages that are aimed at achieving a particular goal. They are "social because we participate in genres with other people; goal–oriented because we use genres to get things done; staged because it usually takes us a few steps to reach our goals (Martin and Rose, 2008, p. 5)". Genres can also change as new or hybrid genres emerge (Miller and Bayley, 2016), often in tandem with expansions in meaning potential that are afforded by new semiotic technologies, as we have seen in the explosion of communication via social media.

Social semiotic approaches to genre that draw on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) conceive of genres as configurations of metafunctional resources. According to SFL, language enacts three simultaneous functions, referred to as 'metafunctions': an *experiential* function of enacting experience, an *interpersonal* function of negotiating relationships, and a *textual* function of organizing information (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). A linguist using this theory will attempt to consider these three functions when analysing any instance of meaning. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) assert that visual images as a semiotic mode can similarly be approached via a metafunctional perspective on the meanings that they make. They adopt the term 'representational', 'compositional', and 'interactional' to account for how each of the metafunctions defined by Halliday are realised in images. While it is useful to separate these functions for the purpose of analysis, they are in fact enacted simultaneously in any semiotic performance, and are not mutually exclusive. Each function works in tandem with the other to enact a particular social goal: in the case of selfies this is often some form of 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna, 2012) around a particular topic or issue in relation to which the photographer is offering a particular perspective to the social stream.

The notion of multimodal genre has been under-theorised due to the difficulties of explaining how dimensions of semiosis that have been described using terms such a *mode, media, channel,* *modality, platform* (etc.) coordinate to produce meaning (Hiippala, 2014). 'Visual genre' is also an under-theorised concept. It is problematic in relation to Martin and Rose's (2008) definition, since images make meanings 'all at once' rather than unfolding logogenetically like a written text. Yet, the selfie as a widely recognised, pervasive social practice would at least seem to satisfy the criterion of being a social semiotic pattern with high levels of recurrence. In addition, like genres such as narrative, selfies can be recontextualised across media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, advertising billboards, printed magazines etc.), social practices (e.g. 'mommyblogging', 'sexting' and various forms of social media sharing) and contexts (e.g. personal communication, advertising, public health communication etc.).

In other theoretical traditions, there have on-going attempts to identify selfie as a type of emerging visual genre. Some research has viewed the selfie as a recent iteration of historical genres such as the traditional self-portrait (Fausing, 2014), whilst others studies have focused on its contemporariness, referring to it as a "platform-specific photographic genre" (Meese et al., 2015, p. 1819), a "multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir" with "recognizable, though shifting, aesthetic parameters of posing and composition" (Shipley, 2015, p. 403) and a "true vernacular genre" (Walker-Rettberg, 2014, p. 9). For many scholars, however, the selfie is more than a genre or form of photography, instead is manifest as "social-technical assemblages" that involve "entanglements of subjectivities" (Hess, 2015, p. 1629). Our approach differs from this existing work as we focus on selfies not only from an ideational perspective (the selfie as a visual representation of the photographer) but from an interpersonal perspective (the selfie as affording new representations of 'perspective').

This article approaches the selfie as a visual sign or a multimodal textual artefact that simultaneously fulfills an *ideational* function of representing the self/subject, and an *interpersonal function* of enacting certain social relations between the maker and the potential audience of the selfie (for an extended discussion of the theoretical motivation behind our approach see Zhao and Zappavigna, 2017). We place the focus on the interpersonal rather than the representational function. From an interpersonal perspective, a selfie contains certain 'social propositions' to be negotiated between the image marker and the viewer, and the visual structures of a selfie will provide the textual clues regarding what is to be negotiated. Secondly, acknowledging the interactive nature of the selfie as a visual sign, we suggest that what is being negotiated in a selfie is not the relationship between the visually represented self and the viewers (i.e. me vs. the other) but the different perspectives on visually represented phenomena (i.e. my perspective on me vs. other's perspective on me). Simply put, the social proposition to be negotiated in a selfie is these relations between various perspectives. These perspectives can belong to the selfie taker/poster, the visually represented self, the primary audience (families, friends and followers on social media), the ambient audience (Zappavigna, 2016), media commentators and social media onlookers, etc. We will elaborate in more detail on what we mean by perspective in a technical sense later in the article.

3. Data

The dataset collected in this article was generated using the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). The aim was to detect particular metafunctional patterns that could be used to describe selfie subgenres. Examples of self representation in the domain of discourse about motherhood were sampled using two popular Instagram tags, #motherhood and #momlife (Fig. 1). At the time of writing there were 3,697,725 Instagram posts tagged #motherhood, and 8,503,579 posts tagged #momlife.