

The Geography and Gaze of the Selfie

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Extended abstract for Media's Mapping Impulse CfP

Although self-portraits have an important place in the history of artistic expression and have been in vogue for centuries, the selfie – the digital portrait of oneself, most often taken by holding a camera phone at arm's length and subsequently shared through social media – has captured the global public imagination with great force over the last decade. Early selfies were often taken with webcams hooked up to desktop computers and are more stationary in character. They are taken within the home, within the intimacy of the living room or bedroom, and mostly focus exclusively on the photographer's face. But the prevalence of camera- and internet-enabled smartphones has brought the selfie into the outside world. A selfie today is as much about the photographer's surroundings as it is about the photographer themselves. What else can be discerned within the photo's frame? Who else is included? From what location was the selfie sent? This change in character is exemplified by the popularity of the selfie-stick. Quite literally, this stick, on which the camera is mounted, enables the user to hold the camera much further from their face, thus increasing the field of view of the camera much beyond a single face.

Considering how selfies are intricately linked with various social media platforms, the selfie cannot be considered to be just a visual object or cultural representation. Instead, the selfie is intricately tied up in *producing* social media culture as well. Selfies are viewed, 'liked', commented on and shared onwards by followers and friends on social media platforms as well as by more traditional media. Moreover, selfies are much more likely to actually receive likes, comments and other interaction than photographs without human faces (Bakhsi et al., 2014). As such, it is a particularly relevant phenomenon for those interested in the process of production and consumption of social practices, even though selfies might only represent ~4% of all images posted to such platforms (Manovich, 2014). For example, Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) analyze selfie culture using Urry's (1990) concept of the tourist gaze. They note that, while the traditional tourist gaze was pointed outwards, the technological possibilities and social practices around the selfie have enabled a shift to a more reflective gaze that includes both the destination *as well as* the tourist's relation to such a place. Other scholars in the humanities have looked at the role of the selfie in the attention economy (Marwick, 2015) and the selfie as an art form (Saltz, 2014). Computer scientists and designers have focused on the more quantitative description and visualization of selfies and those who make them – describing demographic characteristics such as age and gender (Souza et al., 2015) or selfie characteristics such as face tilt and mood (Manovich, 2014). Surprisingly, few geographers have studied the selfie as a social or spatial process.

Since smartphones have enabled the selfie to untether itself from the living room webcam, naturally the *geography* of the selfie and how it produces certain representations of places becomes an important and intriguing subject. This is amplified further by the fact that many

selfies are explicitly geotagged. That is, users of social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter choose to add a specific geographic location to the selfie they are uploading. With this implicit indication that the location of that photo is somehow important, we ask 'what is the geography of the selfie?'. Are selfies created in, and subsequently producing, specific locations and places? How do they connect to specific scenes or geographic contexts?

To answer these questions, this article uses a global dataset of geotagged selfies posted to Twitter since the summer of 2012 (cf. Poorthuis et al., 2016). By matching based on keywords and hashtags related to selfies, a dataset of ~10 million tweets and their corresponding images is extracted. The empirical section of the article consists of two parts. In the first part, characteristics of these selfies are compared with random samples that represent all tweets and all tweets with images attached, respectively. These datasets are mapped and visualized to analyze the geographic distribution of selfie production. What parts of the world and cities are selfies documenting and producing? Where do we see more selfies than we would expect based on spatial patterns of population or non-selfie tweets? These spatial patterns can be refined by examining differences over time, between different Twitter user networks and variations in tweet text. The entire analysis is performed at a global scale, as well as an urban scale by looking at two specific case studies: New York City and Singapore.

In the second part, the same two city case studies are used to conduct a qualitative and visual analysis of the actual selfie images, using Rose's critical visual methodology (2012). Here we seek to explore the potential reasons for the spatial differences in selfie space by understanding how the visual and textual context of selfies is (re-)producing digital and material cultures. Through an analysis of images, text and behavior (retweets and favorites) we identify elements of the selfie gaze and how these elements contribute to the production of place representation within larger social media and material cultures within the urban. By analyzing both the geography and gaze of selfies, we seek to better understand how this new and ubiquitous digital cultural practice is both based upon and contributing to the evolving cultures of everyday places.

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