Article

The selfie as a global discourse

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Abstract
This article presents a critical multimodal discourse analysis of how people make meaning through the semiotic practice of shooting digital self-portraits (selfies), adding captions and then sharing these texts on the social network site Instagram. Combining theories from social semiotics, critical discourse analysis and multimodal discourse analysis, the analysis focuses on the embedded ideological meaning in such digital communication. The analysis explores a data corpus of 100 selfies shared on Instagram. Despite the fact that digital texts shared on social media are generally regarded as personal communication, selfie makers seem to reproduce features of a commercial and global discourse. The typical way of representing oneself on Instagram appears to be surprisingly similar to visual representations in advertisements and image banks. The linguistic resources in use also appear globalized through a mix of languages combined with slang and abbreviations.

Keywords
Critical discourse analysis, digital communication, digital images, global discourse, global language, globalization, hashtag language, multimodality, selfie, self-portrait, social media, social network sites, visual analysis

Introduction

During the past 10–15 years, people all over the world have gained access to smartphones and other technological devices, which makes it possible to create various kinds of texts and images everywhere and anytime for immediate sharing on social networking sites (SNS, also known as social media). The digital technology of social media offers a

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range of possibilities for meaning-making processes, and the affordances they offer influence how people make meaning. The contemporary technologies have communicational as well as social effects. Pointing the camera at oneself, shooting a 'selfie', is now regarded as an emerging personal media genre (Lüders et al., 2010; Schwarz, 2010; Tiidenberg, 2015). In 2013, 'selfie' gained the title of word of the year by *The Oxford English Dictionary*. It is defined as a photo a person takes of him/herself with a smartphone, a web camera or another technological device, and which is often shared on SNS (Tiidenberg, 2015: 2).

Shooting and sharing selfies became a common practice when the digital camera converged with the mobile phone.[1] Contrary to painted self-portraits and traditional amateur photo practices, the digital self-portrait is easy to make, and it does not require complex technical or aesthetic skills to shoot photos with a mobile phone (Lüders et al., 2010: 958).

Over the past few years there has been a strong visual turn in social media, and diverse representational formats are typically combined in personal texts published on SNS (Eisenlauer, 2011: 131; Machin, 2016: 323; Rettberg, 2014: 3). At the same time, there is a need for more critical oriented analyses of multimodal discourse and popular culture (Djonov and Zhao, 2014; Van Leeuwen, 2013). In this article, we will present a multimodal critical discourse analysis of how people communicate through selfies distributed on Instagram. We analyze texts not exclusively as images, but as user-generated *multimodal utterances*, paying attention to how selfies on Instagram appear as a combination of semiotic resources such as images and written language. The aim of the article is to answer the following research questions: (1) How do people represent themselves in selfies published on Instagram? (2) How do people interact through such digital multimodal texts? (3) How are the visual and linguistic resources utilized in discursively shaped selfies, and whose interests are served? What is presented in the study is based on critical discourse analysis in combination with social semiotics. The methodology is mainly qualitative multimodal textual analyses supplied by some quantitative countings.

This article is a contribution to the emerging literature on discourse in social networks, focusing on how users of social media make meaning. Cultural oriented studies have so far mainly focused on the manner in which the practice of creating and sharing digital texts on social networks serves as an act of self-reflection and self-creation (Bouvier, 2012: 37; Lüders et al., 2010: 958; Rettberg, 2014: 12). Fewer studies have been concerned with critical oriented analyses that emphasize how semiotic representations carry ideological meaning and traces of power relations (Machin, 2016: 329–331). This study is based on the fundamental idea of a mutual relationship between discourse and society and on the overall assumption that changes in discourse practices are an important indicator of wider social and cultural change (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Krzyzanowski, 2016). Due to the fact that an increasing number of texts are produced and shared digitally and globally, there is an emergent need to closely examine these textual practices. Since texts published on social networks combine various semiotic resources, there is a need for research that combines CDA with multimodal approaches (MDA). Nevertheless, few studies have so far combined the two fields, resulting in a gap in the literature (Machin, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2013).

The object of study in CDA has so far mainly been institutional discourse, such as texts produced by the mass media, politicians, health services and education authorities.

The exponential expansion of social media in recent years has changed the traditional way of understanding the relationship between discourse and institutional power, for example the dichotomization between mass media and personal media (Lüders, 2008: 683). As a consequence, analyzing texts produced and distributed on SNS, such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, has become increasingly important.

Literature review

This study of selfies published on Instagram is a contribution to the emerging research on self-documentation on SNS. The present research could generally be divided into two main approaches, one of which covers cultural studies, while the other covers more critical oriented discourse studies.

In cultural studies, self-documentation technologies are commonly interpreted as a way of empowering the individual, of giving people control over the representation of their own lives. Moreover, digital genres are often understood in relation to more traditional genres and textual practices. Digital self-shooting may then be explained with reference to the history of self-portraits. During the Renaissance, artists used mirrors and oil paints, and early Egyptians, cave people and indigenous people testified to their presence on rock surfaces (Lüders et al., 2010: 960). In a study based on an analysis of in-depth interviews with 23 Norwegian teenagers and their self-portraits shot with camera phones, Lüders et al. (2010) found that most of the self-portraits '(…) appear as slightly blurred close-ups' (p. 958), showing 'an aesthetically self-conscious subject, performing for its own "I"'. The function of selfies can be explained in a manner similar to the need of a diary. People use selfies in the work of constructing themselves, as well as in building communities and relations.

Eisenlauer (2011) compares SNS in general with the German poetry album, a textual genre that has been utilized for recording social networks since the mid-16th century. The poetry album was passed among students, pupils and soldiers to ask friends to inscribe dedications. According to Eisenlauer, there are striking similarities between the traditional poetry album and SNS when it comes to the function of documenting social relations and presenting the self. In another study, Tiidenberg (2015) analyzes how conflicts happen and evolve in selfie and image practices, especially referring to sexually explicit material published on the micro-blog *tumblr*. Tiidenberg found that selfies may carry multiple meanings for self-makers and that photo shopping and selfie stealing often generate conflicts.

Several critical oriented discourse studies of self-documentation on social networks have focused on self-representing texts as being influenced by commercialism and consumerism. In a study of selfies and online materials published on the Israeli social network *Shox*, Schwarz (2010) found that users almost exclusively published images of themselves. Both boys and girls presented themselves in clothes and a pose that seemed to be influenced by advertisements, including the fact that the photos were often edited or manipulated (p. 168). Schwarz, who also interviewed Israeli teenagers, notes that photos shared on this social network might have different functions. Sharing photos may function as a starting point for conversation, a way to maintain social interaction, as well as a manifestation of beauty. On a higher level, and by referring to theories of Bourdieu,

Schwarz suggests that images in general play a major social role in the exchange process between different sorts of capital. He maintains that self-portraits are carriers of a specific sort of *corporeal capital*, referring to the notion that the beauty of the body may enable access to power in specific spheres (Schwarz, 2010: 171). One conclusion of this study was that the user's capacity to make friends through the social network seems to depend on the extent to which users publish the 'right' photos. Thus, the teenagers seemed to exchange corporeal capital for social capital.

Another critical oriented study is that of Bouvier (2012), who studied how undergraduate students express their identity on their Facebook profile. The study consisted of questionnaire and interview data from 100 students at a university in Wales. In analyzing which kinds of self-categorizations were used, Bouvier found that Facebook users draw on different classifications of combination and contradiction. Nearly half of the students mentioned the social classification category of 'nationality'. They also mentioned relational identification, which defines people in terms of their relations. However, they did not mention relational identification (Van Leeuwen, 2008a: 42) in connection with social class or social or political identification, but rather in relation to lifestyle and the kind of popular culture that they liked and preferred (e.g. sport). Consumer identity was found to be very prominent on Facebook, and one of the most surprising findings, according to Bouvier (2012: 51), was that many students described themselves in terms of physical characteristics. The conclusion of this study was that Facebook serves the individualism of consumer capitalism and that identity construction in the digital society must be understood in relation to the interests of institutions and global corporations. To assume that new forms of media will automatically foster new forms of identity patterns is, according to Bouvier (2012: 55), erroneous.

As shown in this review, self-representation on SNS seems to be understood very differently in different types of studies. Media and cultural studies (Eisenlauer, 2011; Lüders et al., 2010; Rettberg, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2015) seem to focus mostly on how digital images published on SNS might play a role in the construction of identity by empowering and emancipating the individual. Conversely, researchers within a more critical oriented tradition question the trend of viewing new technologies of self-documentation as emancipating and the interpretation of digital cameras as kinds of agents that democratize people. Critical studies (Bouvier, 2012; Schwarz, 2010) seem to emphasize the manner in which self-documentation in social media is influenced by globalization, consumerism and the economic interests of the industries that develop digital platforms. However, none of these studies presented multimodal micro-analyses of how the meaning in self-documenting texts on SNS is created through a combination of visual and linguistic resources in a semiotic entity.

Data and methodology

The data analyzed in this study are a random sample of 100 selfies, including attached captions. The texts were published worldwide on Instagram. Together with Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is one of the largest and most widely used social networks. SNS may be defined as

> […] sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 211)

In general, SNS include a textual self-presentation of the individual author, as well as the management of social relations (Eisenlauer, 2011: 136). In contemporary society, social networks and spreadable media practices are expanding points of contact between countries because users from all over the world can easily exchange images, documents, videos and other kinds of information (Jenkins et al., 2013: 263).

To gain access to a sample of selfies published on Instagram, we searched public profiles on Instagram using the hashtag #selfie. By using this search method, we avoided the influence of irrelevant criteria, such as how popular the texts are or from where the texts were published. The data corpus consists of the first 100 selfies that randomly turned up in the search, except from two predefined criteria. The first criterion was that the image actually was a selfie, according to the definition presented earlier. The second criterion was that the language or letters in the captions were possible to understand for us as researchers. For practical reasons, we only included texts (images and captions) containing letters from the Latin alphabet.

In conducting research on texts published on SNS, ethical and practical challenges are inevitable. Even though these texts were published on public profiles, they are not freely available to researchers. Selfies published on Instagram are not easily anonymized; thus, all selfie makers received a request allowing them to reserve the right to not participate in the study. The examples shown in this article are published with the explicit consent of the selfie makers.

This study draws on CDA (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Wodak and Meyer, 2009), as well as on theories of social semiotics and multimodality (Kress, 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2005). Our approach to digital multimodal discourse highlights the dynamic relationship between text and context, macro-contexts and micro-practices (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007: 45). The meaning potential of the digital texts was analyzed on three levels of semiotic meaning: representational, interactional and compositional. The approach is based on Halliday's (1994) theory regarding the three basic meta-functions of language: the ideational, the interactional and the textual.

The detailed multimodal textual analysis was based on analytical tools from social semiotic approaches (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Machin and Mayr, 2012; Van Leeuwen, 2005). We distinguished between two main types of semiotic resources: visual and linguistic (see Figure 1). The analysis was carried out in three steps. At step 1 the data corpus was systematized in terms of mapping how many people were presented in each selfie, their gender and estimated age, and at step 2 the visual resources in each of the 100 images in the data corpus were analyzed. The visual analysis included evaluations of how the individual was depicted in the image (ideational meaning) in terms of whether the person was represented in a contextualized setting, whether or not the person was represented as performing an action (narrative/conceptualized representation) and whether or not the images appeared to be digitally edited (see

Function of meaning	Semiotic resources[2]	
	Visual resources	Linguistic resources
Representational meaning	Contextualized/decontextualized Degree of visual modality Narrative/conceptual	Lexis
Interactional meaning	Social distance ➔ Personal (close up) ➔ Social (medium shot) ➔ Impersonal (long shot) Image act ➔ Offer (absence of gaze at viewer) ➔ Demand (direct gaze) Attitude ➔ Low-angle shot ➔ Eye-level shot ➔ High-angle shot	Style Communicative act (speech act)
Compositional meaning	Relation between visual and linguistic resources	

Figure 1. Model for multimodal text analysis of selfies and captions published on Instagram.

Figure 1). We further analyzed the extent to which the images were characterized by interactional meaning in terms of gaze and various kinds of shots (see Figure 1).

At step 3 the linguistic resources were analyzed, paying attention to lexis, style and performed communicative acts (Austin, 1962). 'Style' is here defined as a matter of writing within the specific sphere of Instagram. It is an important linguistic resource because it expresses identity, relations and values (Fairclough, 1992: 127). According to Van Leeuwen (2005: 139–140), various styles may be understood as a menu or repertoire, and different styles are not mutually exclusive. At this step, the relation between visual and linguistic meaning was also taken into consideration.

Analysis

Step 1: The typical selfie maker – a young female

A selfie may represent more than one person; however, our sample of 100 randomly chosen selfies published on Instagram shows that in the majority of the images (82%), only one person was represented. Collective selfies are rather rare. Moreover, a clear majority of the selfies in the data corpus (78%) are representations of women, and only a minority are representations of men (22%; see Figure 2).

Furthermore, we found that most of the individuals depicted in selfies appear to be young people. Even though it is difficult to estimate the precise age of a person based
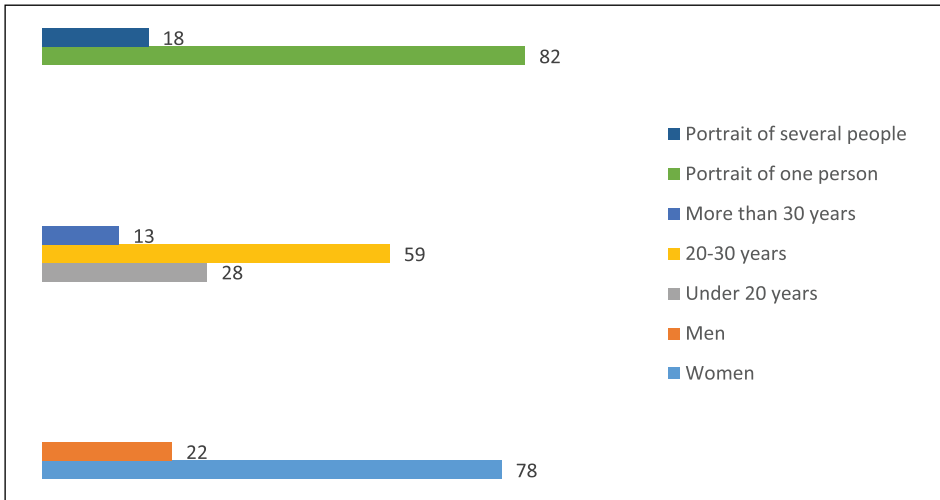
Figure 2. Gender, age and number of people represented in selfies published on Instagram.

on an image, we chose to classify the selfies in our data corpus into three age catego-
ries. The first category covers people appearing to be 20 years or younger, the second
covers people perceived to be between 20 and 30 years and the third covers people who
seem to be over 30 years. Nearly 90% of the individuals depicted in the images in our
data were estimated to be under 30 years old (see Figure 2). These findings corroborate
previous research on digital communication, for instance on personal blogs, indicating
that women are generally more active than men and that young women are more active
than older women on social media (Herring et al., 2005; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005).

Step 2: Visual meaning – decontextualized and designed representations

A selfie may, in principle, represent social actors in various ways, but according to our
findings, most of the representations appear to conform or could be considered stereo-
typical. A clear majority of the images (80%) were more or less decontextualized
representations (see Figure 3). This means that the visual background of the pictured
participant was absent or not fully articulated in the image. A reduction in background
details can be achieved in several ways, for instance by shooting the image in a studio
or a neutral room or by utilizing digital tools such as cropping or blurring (Machin,
2011: 55). The data corpus contains various examples of decontextualized representa-
tions. In some selfies, the background is completely absent, while in others one might
be able to tell whether the picture was shot indoors or outdoors. Even then, very few
details from the situation are included in the frame (see example (e), Figure 5). The
possibility of placing the represented participant in space and time is thereby reduced,
and the viewer perceives her as a 'typical example' rather than as a particular indi-
vidual. Such images may thus be characterized as generic (Kress and Van Leeuwen,
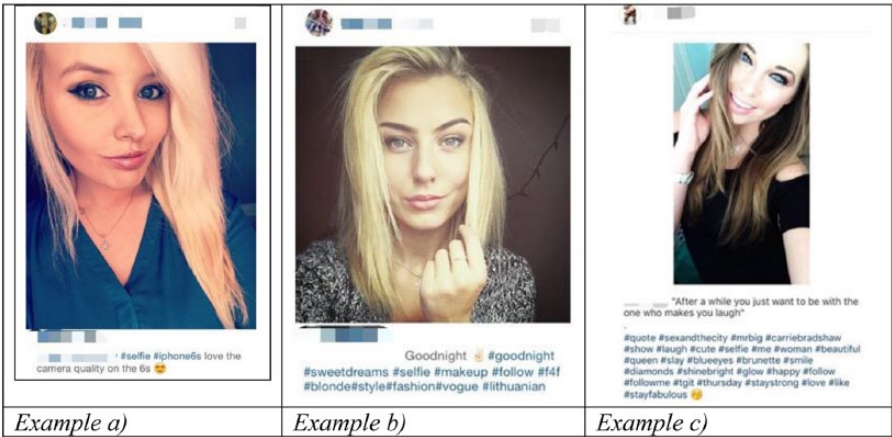2006: 161).

Figure 3. Examples of decontextualized selfies.

As we can see in the examples in Figure 3, none of these young women are depicted as if they are performing an act. The representations are static, which seems to be a very typical way of representing oneself on Instagram. Very few of the images in our data corpus (only 16%) were narrative representations depicting the participants as active. In most of the selfies, the girl is represented in a passive position. In the few images we found representing some kind of ongoing act (e.g. the participant practicing sports), the performer was male (see Figure 4).

Our findings coincide with those of Schwarz (2010) in a study of the Israeli social network, Shox, in which he noted that most SNS users publish images of themselves in a passive position, placed in a setting that gives no indication of time or place. The result is a generic representation whereby the depicted participant appears stereotypical.

Instagram offers users a range of digital tools for editing images such as in terms of changing contrasts, sharpness and color saturation. Selfie makers may also use various filters and applications. Such visual resources may affect the judgement of what social semiotics refer to as visual modality or the 'visual truth' of the images. The general principle is that the more an image of something resembles how we see it with our own eyes, the higher the degree of naturalistic modality. As many as three of four images (78%) in our data corpus were obviously edited before being published on Instagram. Figure 5 exemplifies selfies with varying degrees of editing.

When the majority of selfie makers choose to edit their images, the visual representations appear designed, calculated and generalized. In advertising, resources for indicating low visual modality are often used to express ideals, how something *might* or *could* be (Van Leeuwen, 2005: 166). The meaning potential of the multimodal texts in the corpus is often ambiguous, balancing between two kinds of statements: on the one hand, this is me, and on the other, this is how I want to be.

An Instagram friend: Demanding contact. As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 6, visual symbolic interpersonal meaning can be expressed through the system of contact, social

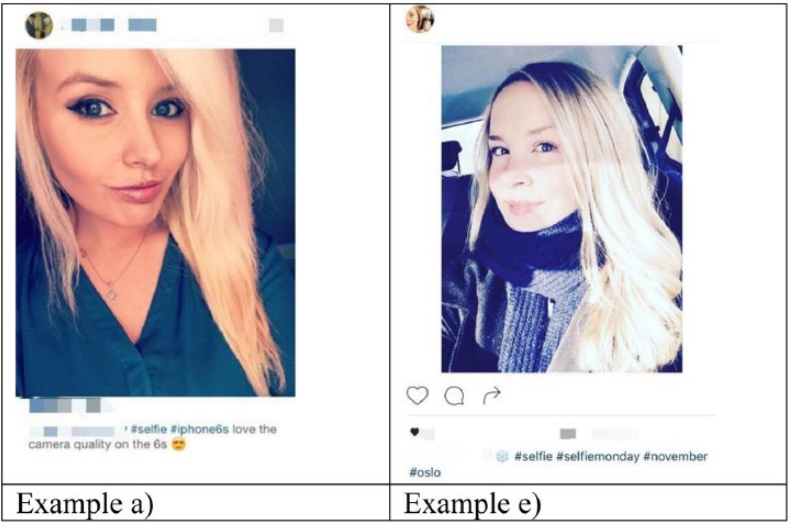**Figure 4.** Male selfie, narrative representation.

Figure 5. Degrees of naturalistic representation.

Function of meaning	Visual resources							
Ideational meaning	Decontextualized 80%		Contextualized 20%	Obviously edited 78%	Not edited 22%	Conceptual 84%		Narrative 16%
Interactional meaning	Close-up 74%	Medium shot 20%	Long shot 6%	Direct gaze at viewer 68%	No gaze at viewer 32%	Low-angle shot 10%	Eye-level shot 69%	High-angle shot 21%

Figure 6. Use of ideational and interactional visual resources in selfies.

distance and point of view (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 145ff.; Van Leeuwen, 2008a: 141). Social media is often understood as personal media, and we found that most of the selfies published on Instagram invite the viewer into a close imaginary relation between the viewer him/herself and the represented person. The majority of the images in the data corpus (74%) were categorized as close-ups. In such images, the face of the depicted person dominates the image frame. The distance between the represented person and the viewer appears to be short, and a major part of the image suggests an intimate symbolic relation between the viewer and the represented. Very few images in the data (only 6%) are long shots, indicating a more impersonal symbolic relation (see Figure 6). When the shot is longer, more of the background is visible inside the frame, so even if long shots correlate with an 'impersonal' distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 125), social actors depicted in long-shot selfies tend to appear more unique and less generic. This is due to the fact that such self-portraits often offer more information about the concrete situation in terms of where the photo has been shot.

The gaze is a significant semiotic resource in visual communication and indicates whether the viewer is encouraged to engage with the represented person or not. When the represented person gazes directly at the viewer, an imaginary contact is established (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 117). We found that the majority of the selfies (68%) were demanding images in which the person gazes directly at the viewer. This finding underlines the assumption that the act of making and publishing selfies is not only an act of self-presentation, but also an invitation to interact. Through the direct gaze, the selfie maker suggests that she is eliciting some kind of a response from the viewer.

The impression that the typical selfie maker intends to construct direct contact and an imaginary personal relation between herself and the viewer is underlined by the point of view. The point of view relates to attitude, involvement and power (Macken-Horarik, 2004: 15). In the majority of the selfies (69%) the point of view was eye level, indicating symbolic equality and a symmetrical relation between the selfie maker and the viewer. Furthermore, 21% of the images had a high angle, indicating the power of the viewer, and only 10% of the selfies had a low angle, indicating the power of the selfie maker (see Figure 6). Since most of the selfie makers presented themselves both horizontally and frontally, they seemed to have no intention of expressing power; rather, it appeared that they wanted to visually construct themselves as friends.

Step 3: Linguistic meaning

Representing the world with slang and abbreviation. The popularity of the photo-sharing platform Instagram[3] may be understood as a demonstration of the fact that visual resources in general are becoming increasingly important in the current discourse, and often even more important than linguistic resources (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007: 170). Instagram also allows the user to attach captions in terms of (short) written texts. Even if the image is obviously most salient, we found that the linguistic resources constituted a surprisingly important part of the communication going on within this social network. Furthermore, our data demonstrates that the manner of using linguistic resources in digital texts presents a challenge to traditional linguistic and textual conventions. Even if the texts in the data sample were created by Instagram users from a number of countries, we found that the texts were written primarily in English, sometimes in combination with other languages. This indicates that users want to be understood outside their home countries. The texts published alongside the selfies are usually not composed of ordinary sentences, but consist of words organized in an order that differs from traditional syntax. If we look at the examples (from Figure 3) earlier, we see that example (a) contains one near ordinary sentence, while examples (b) and (c) do not:[4]

Example (a)
#selfie #iphone6s love the camera quality of the 6s

Example (b)
Goodnight #goodnight #sweetdreams #selfie #makeup #follow #f4f #blonde #style #fasion #vouge #lithuanian

Example (c)
#quote #sexandthecity #mrbig #brunette #smile #diamonds #shinebright #glow #happy #follow #followme #tgit #Thursday #staystrong #love #like #stayfaboulous

Examples (b) and (c) illustrate what we found to be the typical way of expressing oneself in selfie captions on Instagram. As we can see, the words are primarily captioned as hashtags. These are often made up of several words without whitespaces or punctuation, and the order of the words might not appear logical. The reason for such unconventional texts is germane to the original function of the hashtag. On Instagram, hashtags are initially used to label photos. They are often placed in a more or less random order. In a photo tagged with a number of hashtags, the caption therefore consists of several words that seemingly have no internal connection. In the 'hashtag language', traditional norms relating to orthography, syntax and punctuation are ignored.

The hashtag *#selfie* presented in every text in the data sample indicates that the main topic of these texts is the self. This is confirmed by similar hashtags such as #me and #myself, which occurred in more than 50% of the texts. Here are some examples:

Example (f)
Nothing is better than home #Nyc
#selfie #me #beautiful #nofilter #girl
#smile #eyes #hair #sexy

Example (g)
:D #selfie #me #love #handsome #smile #eyes
#pretty #instaselfie #selfietime
#igdaily #instalove #followme #follow

Other frequently used lexises in the corpus are words that physically describe the represented person, such as *#blonde*, *#brunette*, *#redhead* and *#blueeyes*, or more evaluating words such as *#nice*, *#handsome*, *#beautiful*, *#sexy* and *#pretty*. Words indicating the nationality of the selfie publisher, or where the selfie was shot, are rare but do appear in the corpus (see examples (b), *#lithuanian*, (d), *#thenetherlands* and (e), *#oslo*). Moreover, selfie captions often contain one or several slang words and abbreviations, as demonstrated in example (h):

Example (h)
#selfietime, #lategram, #instalove, #nofilter, #podt, #ootd, #tb, #tbt

The first four hashtags in this caption may be characterized as slang words. Their meaning can be translated as follows: #selfietime (time for a selfie), #latergram (this image is not a snapshot), instalove (love on/for Instagram) and #nofilter (this image is a shot with no filter). The next four hashtags are abbreviations: #podt (photo of the day), #ootd (outfit of the day), #tb (throwback) and #tbt (throwback Thursday).

We also found other frequently used abbreviations, such as *#l4l* (*like for like, meaning to leave the selfie a 'like'*), *#wbu?* (*what about you?*), *#tiredaf* (*tired as fuck*), *#igers* (*Instagrammers, Instagram users*) and *#igdaily* (*Instagram daily*) (see example (c)). The frequent use of abbreviations like these illustrates that an internal code language has been established among Instagram users. This can reveal who the implied readers of the texts are. For readers who are not familiar with the communicative conventions of social media texts, the content in these texts may appear ambiguous. Readers who do not understand this specific discourse will therefore be excluded from the communication. Consequently, textual practices in selfies show how the choice of linguistic codes can include or exclude readers, even though digital texts can, in theory, reach large audiences.

This way of expressing oneself resembles a style described within social semiotics as 'the style of the street'. This style is characterized by a vocabulary from the latest slang and expressions used by the young and the trendy. The identities and values expressed through this style are transient and require constant updating (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007: 145). Since the acts of creating and publishing texts on social networks are things that can be done easily and quickly, it is likely that linguistic conventions are changing quickly.

Furthermore, the language in the data appears personal, and the selfie makers often address readers directly, for instance with hashtags like *#wbu?* (*what about you?*) or by imperatives (*#followme*, *#comment*, *#doubletap*). In addition, selfie captions often contain lyrical elements, like quotes (e.g. *carpe diem*, *never stop believing*), extracts from song lyrics and so on. This way of using language appears similar to what Fairclough

(1992, 1995) describes as the 'advertising style', which is characterized by addressing readers directly and personally and by adding lyrical elements. The advertising style is typically used by, for example, corporations in need of keeping up with consumers in order to sell products and form values and identities. Fairclough points out that there are signs that the advertising style and marketing models have extended into new spheres such as media and politics. Based on a study of the magazine *Cosmopolitan*,[5] Machin and Van Leeuwen (2007: 139) note that the advertising style continuously infiltrates other genres. Our identification of the advertising style in the selfie captions published on Instagram shows that it has been further recontextualized. In contemporary society, consumers are themselves applying the advertising style to their own texts.

I like you, if you like me: The communicative functions of hashtags. The hashtags used in the selfie captions can be interpreted as various communicative acts. Some of the most common hashtags in our data corpus were revealed to perform directive speech acts. Typical examples in the data material are hashtags such as *#like*, *#comment* and *#follow*. These hashtags solicit the addressee to 'like' the photo, to leave the selfie a comment or to start following the publisher. Such hashtags are utilized to encourage the reader to take some kind of action; they function as requests or demands.

   Commissive speech acts are also numerous in the data material. Some examples are the hashtags *#likeforlike*/*#like4like*/*#l4l* (meaning that if the reader likes the selfie, the writer also commits herself to liking the reader's photo), *#commentforcomment*/*#comment4comment* (meaning that if the reader comments on the selfie, the writer also commits herself to commenting on the reader's photo) and *#followforfollow*/*#follow4follow*/*f4f* (meaning that if the reader starts following the user who has published the selfie, the user also commits herself to start following the reader). Through these hashtags, the selfie maker is offering something to the addressee. In return, she promises to do some kind of future action. The hashtags thereby represent a promise, a commissive speech act. The double act of both offering something and at the same time demanding something shows how the linguistic resources of the selfie, together with the visual resources, encourage interaction. This offer-and-demand function of the selfie contributes to the impression of how the typical selfie maker tries to construct a symmetrical communication and a personal relation with readers.

Selfies as a global discourse: A critical discussion

In the Introduction section, we asked the following research questions: (1) *How do people represent themselves in selfies published on Instagram?* (2) *How do people interact through these multimodal texts?* (3) *How are visual and linguistic resources discursively shaped, and whose interests are served?*

Global images

An important task within visual social semiotic analysis is whether people are depicted specifically or generically (Van Leeuwen, 2008a: 143). Do selfie makers depict themselves in a way that emphasizes them as unique or, rather, as certain social types? A main finding from our analysis is that selfie makers depict themselves in a very similar way.

The typical selfie maker is a young girl representing herself in a decontextualized setting; she is not involved in any action. Furthermore, we found that the majority of the images were obviously edited before being published on Instagram. In terms of interactional meaning, the majority of the images in our data corpus were close-ups and eye-level shots depicting young women with a gaze directly toward the viewer. Through visual resources, selfie makers choose to depict themselves as close friends demanding contact. These findings correspond closely with a related study of photos in international image banks (Machin, 2004; Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007). The main finding of this study was that image banks typically depict people in a generalized, decontextualized and stylized way. These researchers claim that the leading international image banks are '(…) changing the world's visual language from one which emphasized the photograph as witness, as record of reality, to one which emphasized photography as a symbolic system (…)' (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007: 151). It is interesting to note that about one decade after this study on international image banks was published, this visual norm seems to be transferred to social media. The commercial conventions for using visual resources are obviously recontextualized and taken up in the domain of personal media genres.

Global language

Signs of linguistic globalization are manifested in the selfie captions through the extensive and creative use of English. We found that mainly English words occurred in the captions, sometimes in combination with other languages. Furthermore, the analysis of verbal resources demonstrated the selfie maker's use of a global 'hashtag language' that appeared fragmented, unstructured and linguistically incomplete. This way of writing appears similar to what Van Leeuwen (2008b) has characterized as 'new writing' (pp. 130–132). However, users seem to have developed an internal system of codes that allows them to perform various communicative acts by including a minimum of linguistic resources.

Moreover, we found traces of various styles in the corpus. These findings support Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2007: 125) description of a mix between the *advertising style* and the *style of the street*, which is typical of linguistic globalization. The 'hashtag language' on Instagram consists of codes, slang and abbreviations. On the one hand, this language appears internal and understandable only to a specific group of Instagram users. On the other, the language is used worldwide.

Global genres

Based on our analysis of 100 selfies published on Instagram, we maintain that these texts constitute a global multimodal genre. As mentioned in the literature review earlier, self-documenting texts published on SNS obviously draw on traditional self-documenting genres such as the diary and poetry album. However, through the worldwide distribution of SNS texts, users can participate in global communication practices. According to Machin and Van Leeuwen (2007), 'Media genres, format and technologies are increasingly globalized and homogenized. Such genres, format and technologies are not neutral containers or distributers of content. They carry meaning and value themselves' (p. 170).

Our analysis shows very clearly how the multimodal texts, which are apparently personal, appear stylized, generic and predictable.

Most of the selfies we have studied seem to be influenced by a broader marketization of discourse (Fairclough, 1993; Van Leeuwen, 2015). The selfie makers in our corpus are obviously inspired by marketing practices when they 'brand themselves' through available visual and linguistic resources. This tendency may be explained as a result of globalization, a process which involves various forms of flows, networks and interconnections across boundaries and borders. And whose interests are served? According to Fairclough, globalization is complex and multifaceted, and '(….) too "big" a phenomenon to be controlled by any particular agency'. On the other hand, he maintains that global corporations and international agencies have power to influence not only the actual process of globalization, but also the values, attitudes and beliefs that are being transferred globally (Fairclough, 2006: 4).

The communication going on in social network sites such as Instagram is complex because it cannot obviously be described as either personal *or* public. Several decades ago, Fairclough (1993: 40) described how the public domain had become influenced by discursive practices of the private domain, such as 'conversationalization', while personal communication had been influenced by a promotional language. In contemporary society, the difference between private and public discourse seems even more blurred. The communication we have studied cannot easily be connected to either the personal or the public domain. Rather, it could be described as quasi-personal since the messages are published on open personal profiles, address a 'global audience' (Fairclough, 2009: 332) and invite communication with 'strangers' (Schwarz, 2010: 180).

We may ask, 'Is the expansion of globalized communication and the use of global discursive repertoires, genres and styles also a positive trend?' 'Could emerging digital self-documenting texts empower users, as some previous researchers (Eisenlauer, 2011; Lüders et al., 2010; Rettberg, 2014) have claimed?'. The global design, accessibility and distribution of such texts make them very powerful. But according to our research, the power of the selfie seems to be more ideological than individual. Our research demonstrates that the selfie makers are not completely free in their textual practices. For instance, most of the selfie makers represented in our data corpus obviously had made an effort in representing themselves as 'looking good'. And, as emphasized by Van Leeuwen (2015), 'Clearly, "looking good" is an aesthetic which is still very much based on the how, on "presentation" and style rather than substance', and '(…) is it also a particular aesthetic, albeit an increasingly dominant one, the aesthetic of today's global corporate culture and its values (…)' (p. 202).

Individuals who publish self-portraits on social media networks such as Instagram (usually) do not have to fulfill commercial targets. Still, by taking part in such textual practices, they seem to adapt the homogenized multimodal language, thereby contributing to spreading values and interests of global corporations. As a consequence, SNS users get a rather narrow impression of how people, especially young girls, should behave and could look.

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Notes

1. The first mobile phones with integrated digital cameras (camera phones) were introduced around 2000 (see Hill, 2013). Available at: http://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/camera-phone-history/.
2. According to Van Leeuwen (2005: 285), 'Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of semiotic regime'.
3. In 2016, the mobile app Instagram had 600 million monthly active users. The app is free and available in 25 different languages (https://www.instagram.com/press/)
4. Other than a quote from a TV series (see Figure 3).
5. Machin and Van Leeuwen (2007) studied the language in several local versions of the worldwide American lifestyle magazine *Cosmopolitan*. Some of the main findings were that English words, to a great extent, were being used in all languages and that the *Cosmopolitan* style was a hybrid of different styles.

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