IJoC Selfies

Empowering the Marginalized:
Rethinking Selfies in the Slums of Brazil

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Although selfies have garnered much interest in media and Internet studies, the emphasis has been on Western countries. This article offers insights into an understudied group of selfie users—teens in Brazilian favelas—to contribute to research on selfies and online media production from a highly marginalized set of users.

More than just a self-taken, static photo shared on social networking sites, selfies (also known as "self-shooting"; see Tiidenberg, 2014; and "self-portrait": see Mazza, Da Silva, & Le Callet, 2014) 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. Thus, selfies can be both depiction and explanation (Rugnetta, 2014) and are related to (re)claiming control over one's embodied self and over the body aesthetic (Tiidenberg, 2014). Previous studies have investigated selfies in light of adolescent development (e.g., how teenagers use selfies to seek attention; see Houghton, Joinson, Caldwell, & Marder, 2013; 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 (e.g., socially, culturally, economically, educationally, technologically, and politically marginalized groups)?

This article focuses on the engagement and adoption of selfies in such a marginalized user group. Specifically, we used favelas (urban slums) in Brazil as our study sites. Favelas are typical marginalized settlements occupied by squatters who have limited access to digital technologies and often lack public services, legitimation, education, and financial sufficiency. This interaction—between selfies' instrumental

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[1] In memory of our good friend Pedro Brant.

function of communication and self-representation as a technical artifact and their profound sociocultural meaning generating from residents' desire for equity, safety, literacy, power, and confidence—makes these slums interesting sites to study the sociocultural aspects of selfie practices and how marginalized social groups perceive, use, and interpret the role of digital technologies in their daily lives.

We draw on a six-month fieldwork including user observations and 56 in-depth and semistructured interviews in the favelas of Vitória, Brazil, to study slum residents' selfie practices. We used critical ethnography (Madison, 2012) 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, 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 (e.g., sociability, power, and self-reflection) and across different user groups (e.g., socially, culturally, economically, educationally, technologically, and politically marginalized groups).

Selfies and Empowerment

Though widely used, *selfie* is a buzzword, and its origin is unclear. Mazza and colleagues' (2014) and Krause's (2005) *photo idea index* define selfies as self-shot pictures, usually holding the camera in front of a mirror or, more frequently, pointing it to the subject holding it with one hand. Some researchers (Heydeman, 2014) have claimed that selfies date back to Rembrandt and Van Gogh, since people have long been able to portrait themselves. Other researchers (Sbarai, 2013) have suggested that selfies originated in 5 B.C., when Phidias sculpted his first self-portrait. However, the first recorded use of the word *selfie* was in 2002, when an Australian student posted a picture of his split lip after a drunken party (Wallop, 2013).

Regardless of its uncertain origin, *selfie* has become a popular word in recent years. According to Wallop (2013), the popularity of selfies is closely related to the development of smartphones and mobile technologies (e.g., built-in rear- and front-facing cameras in mobile phones) and the rise of celebrity culture. For example, celebrities such as Rihanna, Beyoncé, and Miley Cyrus have attracted new followers and enthralled their fans by posting selfies of their daily dressing, new hairstyles, and gym exercises. Selfies facilitate celebrities' self-promotion among fans, because they can implicitly or explicitly advertise themselves and their fashion styles, including jewelry, perfume, and hairstyles via social media platforms for free. Thus, selfies facilitate celebrities' ability to accumulate financial and social capital faster and more efficiently, which is one form of empowerment.

For ordinary people, selfies provide another form of empowerment by (re)constructing confidence and receiving acknowledgement. Posting a selfie usually implies vanity and narcissism, which presents an optimized, selective, and edited self and expects attention, compliments, and admiration. According to

Turkle (1985, 1997), online identity is emerging, decentered, and multiple, and playing with identity in cyberspace can shape a person's real-life understanding of identity. Therefore, computers and the Internet are not just tools but parts of users' social and psychological lives; users' awareness of self-identity, of one another, and of their relationship with the world is affected by these technologies. For example, when a selfie receives many "likes" or positive comments on social media platforms, a sense of achievement and success emerges, which will empower (Bustard, 2014) the person in the selfie by shaping his or her real-life understanding of self-identity (e.g., he or she will be more confident in real life) in terms of others' idealistic perception and wide acknowledgment.

Selfies as empowerment are usually perceived in a quantitative and instrumental approach, such as number of likes, shares, comments, new followers, or financial return. Although we acknowledge the importance of such approaches, we understand that a quantitative approach may risk treating people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of "progress" (Escobar, 1994). Such an approach may obscure the vivid details of personal stories in the process of generalization and cannot reveal how (especially marginalized) users, as unique individuals, understand, use, and interpret selfies and the specific impacts on their social lives online and off-line. Thus, we attempt to expand the current literature by including alternative empowerment factors (e.g., sociocultural factors) to understand selfies, which go beyond the functional and utilitarian frames of modernist development paradigms (Hettne, 2008). We approach selfies as sociotechnical artifacts that can afford human well-being. We highlight selfies as an act of empowerment for individuals to "lead the lives they have reason to value" (Sen, 2001, p. 366).

Method

To conduct the analysis reported in this article, we used critical ethnography, which is a natural fit to study marginalized people's understandings of the sociocultural values that digital technologies provide. Critical ethnography is characteristic of an immersion in a culture. It puts the marginalized people at the center of the research and posits that people themselves define what lives they value. Thus, it is a powerful method to resist domestication and reposition the researcher from "what is" to "what could be" (Denzin, 2001). The method represents a compassion for the suffering of living beings (Madison, 2012), a sensitivity of human freedom, and an emphasis on people's well-being. Using critical ethnography, we conducted an open-ended process of public deliberation instead of a top-down approach with prefabricated hypotheses, to emphasize marginalized people's views of selfies and how digital technologies affect their lives based on their own accounts.

Figure 1. View of São Benedito from Itararé.

The favelas of Gurigica, São Benedito, Itararé, in the city of Vitória, Brazil, were chosen as the study site (see Figure 1). Favelas are considered "wrong" places for studying technology because they are outside the main economic, technological, and political centers. But studying peripheral places allows us to learn about places and their importance in today's "knowledge economy" (Takhteyev, 2012). Like other urban slums, Brazil's favelas are typical marginalized settlements occupied by squatters who have limited access to digital technologies and often lack public services, legitimation, education, and financial sufficiency. Favelas are usually "governed" by drug lords who ensure residents' safety through their actions and political connections (Nemer, 2013b). By enforcing their own laws, drug lords maintain order in the favelas. Residents in the favelas respect them, because these drug lords create a local ecology where most residents feel safe despite the high level of violence (Perlman, 2006).

Figure 2. Users of the telecenter in Itararé.

The most famous favelas in Brazil—Rocinha and Cidade de Deus (City of God)—are in the city of Rio de Janeiro. To prove that the city was a safe venue for the World Cup in 2014 and will be safe for the Olympic Games in 2016, police officers have been expelling drug traffickers from Rio. Drug dealers who escaped are hiding in favelas in nearby cities such as Vitória (do Val, 2012), which makes these slums war fields. Drug dealers from Rio de Janeiro teamed up with the rival cartel from Bairro da Penha and are trying to take over Gurigica and São Benedito. As in other favelas, most people living in Gurigica, São Benedito, and Itararé rely on LAN houses and telecenters to access computers and the Internet (see Figure 2). LAN houses are privately owned establishments where—similar to a cybercafé—people can pay to use a computer with Internet access and a LAN. In contrast, telecenters are facilities supported by the state and nongovernmental organizations where the general public can access computers for free. LAN houses, telecenters, and other technology access establishments, such as libraries, are considered community technology centers (CTCs) (Nemer & Reed, 2013). Conducting ethnographical fieldwork in such areas was challenging but deserving: It shed light on the role of digital technologies (e.g., selfies) in the daily lives of marginalized people who are situated in an extraordinarily complicated social, cultural, political, and economic context.

The critical ethnography was conducted from April to October 2013. The fieldwork focused on two LAN houses (Life Games in Itararé and Guetto in Gurigica) and two telecenters (one in Itararé and one in

São Benedito). The first author visited two CTCs per day five times a week, and then switched to two different CTCs the following week. This weekly CTC swap continued until the end of the fieldwork, which optimized the time in each CTC and allowed the researcher to reach a larger and more diversified user population. To collect data for this article, he observed user activities in these CTCs and asked potential participants whether they were users of this CTC and would be willing to participate in this study. He conducted 56 in-depth and semistructured interviews with CTC users (14 interviewees from each CTC). The participants visited the CTCs at least twice a week. Thirty participants were female, and 26 were male. Regarding age, 35 participants were between 15 and 24 years old, and 21 were between 24 and 45 years old.

Interviews were conducted in Portuguese and lasted for 45 minutes on average. Interviews were recorded using Google Glass and an audiorecorder. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The interview and observational data were coded using MaxQDA (http://www.maxqda.com), a popular computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that can identify emerging themes. Both authors performed the analysis of the coded data to identify patterns in participants' use and understanding of selfies.

Findings

To present our findings of how marginalized residents in favelas used selfies to fulfill their desires for equity, power, and confidence, we highlight these residents' social and technological experiences in CTCs and their motivations to share selfies: escaping from censorship, expressing their true selves, and overcoming illiteracy.

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; all interviewees had Facebook accounts and were active users. This was surprising because Orkut had been Brazil's most popular social networking site until 2012 (Nemer, 2013a).

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, 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 *favelados* (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.

Figure 3. André using his smartphone in Gurigica.

For André, taking and posting selfies had nothing to do with narcissism or attention seeking (Figure 3). 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 sociocultural dense context and cannot be reduced to a simple act of self-promotion.

Similarly, Neuza, age 30, used selfies for self-reflection:

I upload my photos on Face [Facebook] so I can see my own person[ality]. See who I am. When I see myself, and hopefully the others will do the same, I reflect on my image. If I'm feeling sad or angry, I take a picture and post it on my Face to see if it reflects on my soul. I don't think I'm going crazy or anything. I just want to have the conscious[ness] of my true self in this crazy world.

Neuza was not concerned about others' opinions of her, though she hoped that others would do the same to "reflect" on her. She did not endeavor to (re)construct her self-esteem or optimize self-presentation to seek compliments. She used selfies to express her emotions ("sad or angry"), to enhance private self-awareness (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997), and to maintain her "true self" in the "crazy world" where she was suffering. Neuza's selfie practice was self-oriented (e.g., with a focus on self-reflection and self-improvement) rather than others-oriented (e.g., attention seeking).

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.

Another intriguing finding from our fieldwork is that 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.

Figure 4. Maria and her friends taking selfies in the telecenter of Itararé.

For Maria and her friends, taking selfies in the CTCs enabled them to show a "happy side" of their unhappy lives (see Figure 4). 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 residents of Itararé, Gurigica, and São Benedito 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.

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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.

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.

Figure 5. Roberto using selfies to communicate with his friends.

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

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[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.

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 (see Figure 6).[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 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.

Figure 6. Alice using selfies to overcome illiteracy.

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

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. Alice detailed her motivations:

> I want to be famous in the community. . . . I need to know how to use Face, take good photos and one day, thank God, I'll learn how to do cool videos. . . . I know people from the drug cartel, from church, from school. . . . I want to be a *famosinha* [famous teenager] so I can talk to cute boys and people will "like" my photos, call me pretty and make me feel important.

Researchers have established that teens use social media in ways that defy popular stereotypes of superficiality (boyd, 2014), and we found similar complexities among youth in Brazil's favelas. However, as a younger generation lacking education, public security, and access to digital technologies, learning how to take and post selfies on Facebook has deeper sociocultural meanings for them: It helped them know more about the world ("aware of what is going on"), benefited their social life ("can hang out with other friends"), and improved their literacy ("understand what people are talking"). In this way, they (re)constructed their confidence, knowledge, hope, and enthusiasm in a relatively severe environment.

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 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.

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.

To summarize, this study represents our efforts to amplify the voices of the marginalized in Brazil and highlight their social and technological experiences of selfies in community technology centers. The use and adoption of digital technologies among these marginalized users were not motivated by a shallow acknowledgement of their desire for entertainment but rather were situated in a contextualized reality. In a broader sense, we point to the importance of investigating different perspectives of digital technologies, especially in the geopolitical periphery, including the way people choose to live, how they choose to live, and what they desire in their everyday lives.

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