

The semeful sociability of digital memes:

**VISUAL COMMUNICATION AS ACTIVE
AND INTERACTIVE CONVERSATION**

Fiona Andreallo

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology Sydney**

April 2017

Certificate of authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of student: _____

Date:

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been completed without financial support from the UTS Chancellor's Postgraduate Fund research scholarships (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) and the Australian Postgraduate Award. This thesis also would not have been completed without very clever editing skills of Dr Suzanne Eggins.

A very special thanks to my supervisor Professor Theo Van Leeuwen, who not only supervised me, but gave me the confidence and space to write again, reminding me about the passion real research involves. Thank you so much, Theo, for your full support and patience. Thank you for reading so many drafts, for your extensive knowledge and fabulous conversations over coffee. Although I enjoyed your supervision for just over a year, I have learnt so much in that time.

Also a special thanks to Professor Kath Albury for providing so many great academic opportunities and showing such kindness, energy and support in her very cool way. Dr Nick Hopwood for just being human, providing kind words, sage advice and interesting lunches. Dr James Meese, you have been fabulous. Even though you only joined me in this project in the last two months, you made me feel like you had my back. I also want to thank so many other people for different reasons and far too many to list. But for reasons big and small: Dr Theresa Senft, Dr Benjamin Hankel, Dr James Meese, Dr Mary Mainsbridge, Dr Jesse Lymn, Dr Sandy Shuck, Vassiliki Veros and Natalya Ortiz. You have all at times made my day, and you definitely made the journey more interesting. Thanks to Dr Paul Byron for drinking with me and Dr Tom Appleby for providing drinks at a point that really turned this thesis around. Also the Toronto SM & Society selfies presentation group, Dr Carolina Cambre, Dr Katie

Warfield, Dr Crystal Abidin, Stephaine Duguay, Cristina Miguel and Jocelyn Murtell. You were my ray of sunshine in dark times. I also need to mention all those involved in the selfies FB group and twitter PHD support groups, as well as the 'self-made' PhD writing group. Also the strongest and kindest person I have ever met (who also keeps me sane), El Rose.

Most of all I thank Ed Jacyna for sharing this adventure of my life and for being there for me. A special hug of thanks too for my babes Iggy and Beth who have been patient and loving. I know one day you will understand that this journey has been as much for you as it has been for me. Because the thesis has made up most of your lives, I look forward to you knowing life beyond this for you as much as I do for myself! I could not imagine a better partner and children throughout this crazy and wonderful journey. ■

Table of contents

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	II
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES	VIII
ABSTRACT	1
PROLOGUE THE UGLY GIRL AND THE DIAMOND PYTHON	3
CHAPTER 1 A SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP OF LOOKING	7
Context and problem.....	8
Organisation of the thesis	13
CHAPTER TWO THE IDEA OF LOOKING.....	20
Existing models of looking	21
Towards a digital visual culture model of looking.....	24
Conclusion	32
CHAPTER THREE DIGITAL MEMES AS VISUAL COMMUNICATION	33
Defining digital memes as everyday social interactions involving groups and movement	36
Saussure's speech circuit illustration as metaphor for visual communication	46
Conclusion	63
CHAPTER FOUR THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UGLY AND JOKES IN VISUAL CONVERSATIONS.....	65
The significance of the ugly: the female body and public space.....	66
The funny thing about the ugly: digital memes as jokes	77
Chapter summary	84
Conclusion to the literature review	86
CHAPTER FIVE ANALYSING PHOTOGRAPHIC DIGITAL MEMES: RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA AND ANALYTICAL APPROACHES.....	88
Conceptual design	90
Research questions	91
Research data.....	95
Research instruments	100
Relevant approaches to data analysis	102
Summary	107
CHAPTER SIX DIGITAL MEMES AS SOUSVEILLANCE.....	109

How are the depicted people related to the viewer?	113
Social distance: the close-up and intimacy	115
Digital memetic social intimacy enhanced by performative spaces and immediacy	120
Social relation: camera angles as aspects of power and involvement	124
Social interactions	127
The selfie and the gaze	128
Response to the question 'How are the depicted people in the PGUF meme related to the viewer?'	133
How are people depicted in the memes?	134
Exclusion	134
Categorisation, specific and generic, and roles	139
Categorisation	139
Categorisation depicted in the PGUF meme	140
The pretty selfie	140
Chin	140
Mouth	141
Hair	141
Forehead	142
The standard attributes of the pretty selfie as a standard of public female performance	142
The ugly selfie	143
Chin	144
Mouth	145
Hair	145
Forehead	145
Specific and generic in the PGUF meme	146
Roles	147
Categorisation and humour	148
Conclusion	150
CHAPTER SEVEN DIGITAL MEMES AS COMMUNITIES ENGAGED IN VISUAL CONVERSATION	152
A method of cohesive chains	155
Mapping cohesive chain patterns	157
The pretty selfie	158
Step one: identifying elements of visual conversation in the pretty meme community	158
Step 2: Drawing chains to track similarities among the pretty memes	159
The ugly selfie	160
Step one: identifying elements of visual conversation in the ugly meme community	160
Step two: Drawing chains to track similarities among the ugly memes	160
The PGUF meme	161

Step one: identifying elements of visual conversation in the PGUF meme community	161
Step two: Drawing chains to track similarities among the PGUF memes	161
Step 3a: Drawing the chain patterns.....	162
Step 3b: Interpreting the patterns: what do cohesive chain patterns suggest about digital memes?	164
A rainbow wheel of cohesive chains.....	166
Conclusion	171
CHAPTER EIGHT 'BUSTED!' SELFIES AS RELATIONSHIPS OF PROXIMITY (WITH SPECIAL GUEST BATMAN).....	174
Proximity and social relationships	178
Visual representations of space in photographic social relations.....	181
Selfie producers' use of social and technical filters to navigate social proximity	192
Visual depictions of combined physical distance	207
In summary.....	214
CHAPTER NINE PGUF AS SEMEFUL SOCIABILITY	216
The female body.....	219
The PGUF and selfie as active practices of looking that are publicly visible	223
Ugliness and the ugly meme.....	224
The joke	235
In summary.....	240
CHAPTER TEN A SEMEFUL SOCIABILITY OF DIGITAL MEMES	242
Sousveillance and surveillance as struggle.....	245
Interaction as visual conversation in movement.....	247
APPENDICES	252
Appendix A: Table collating the observations of the framing employed in the uglies and selfies	252
Appendix B: Hall's proximity descriptions	254
Appendix C: Collated observations of the camera angle observed in the PGUF meme	255
Appendix D: (1) Collated data of the angle, framing and gaze in the selfies that make up the PGUF meme.....	257
Appendix D: (2) Totals of the table in appendix D1	258
Appendix E: Observations of the (pretty) selfie	259
Appendix F: Observations of pretty and ugly selfies combined into one table.....	260
Appendix G: A summary of Hall's description of social relations and physical distance	261
Appendix H Visual representations from Hall's tables	262
Appendix I: Visual representations from Hall's tables	263
Appendix J: (1) Analysis of the pretty selfies 1 to 11	265
Appendix J: (2) Analysis of the pretty selfies 12 to 22	266
Appendix J: (3) Analysis of the pretty selfies 23 to 33	267
Appendix K: (1) Analysis of the ugly selfies 1 to 11	268

Appendix K: (2) Analysis of the pretty selfies 12 to 22	269
Appendix K: (3) Analysis of the pretty selfies 23 to 33	270
Appendix L: (1) Analysis of the PGUF memes 1 to 11	271
Appendix L: (2) Analysis of the pretty selfies 12 to 22	272
Appendix L: (3) Analysis of the pretty selfies 23 to 33	273
Appendix M: (1) Chain patterns in the pretty selfies	274
Appendix M: (2) Chain patterns in the ugly selfies	275
REFERENCES	276

List of figures and tables

Figure 3.1 Drawing of the Kilroy figure, typical of the Kilroy meme	33
Figure 3.2 Examples of A4 waist challenge meme	40
Figure 3.3 Examples of memes known as ‘nutsapes’	40
Figure 3.4 Saussure’s 1974 [1916] speech circuit ‘oral speech diagram’	47
Figure 3.5 Speech in public contexts as transmission, generalising from Saussure	52
Figure 3.6 Visual speech diagram capturing ‘viral’ visual speech as transmission.	53
Figure 3.7 Speech as conversation that involves interaction between two or more people.....	55
Figure 3.8 Examples of the ‘A4 paper challenge’ meme.....	58
Figure 3.9 Examples of meme images from #onTinderAttinder	60
Figure 3.10 Janus as representative of digital memetic visual conversation	61
Figure 3.11 Janus head, Vatican museum.....	62
Figure 4.1 Two examples of the PGUF ‘prettygirluglyface’ meme that consists of a pretty and an ugly self.....	65
Figure 4.2 ‘Five grotesque heads’, sketch by Leonardo Da Vinci	68
Figure 4.3 ‘Five grotesque heads and three men in profile’, sketch by Leonardo Da Vinci	69
Figure 4.4 Examples of the meme ‘high expectations Asian father’	77
Figure 4.5 Examples of the meme ‘successful black man’	77
Figure 4.6 Example of the ‘you had one job’ meme	80
Figure 4.7 Example of the ‘you had one job’ meme	80
Figure 5.1 Examples of the Pretty Girl Ugly Face meme.....	96
Figure 5.2 Original images from the post by Catness_neverclean in late 2012	96
Figure 6.1 Drawing of surveillance and sousveillance by Mann’s six-year-old daughter .	111
Figure 6.2 Image from sunnyskyz blog.....	115
Figure 6.3 Summary of PGUF memes discussed in this chapter	117
Figure 6.4 Examples of framing and close-up in PGUF memes.....	120
Figure 6.5 An illustration of a cat taking a selfie	122
Figure 6.6 An illustration of traditional photographic spaces.....	122

Figure 6.7 Two examples of the PGUF meme using extreme angles	125
Figure 6.8 PGUF meme #4	129
Figure 6.9 PGUF meme #15	129
Figure 6.10 PGUF meme #30	130
Figure 6.11 An example of difference of looks of demand from an ugly and pretty selfie	131
Figure 6.12 PGUF meme #22	132
Figure 6.13 The Reddit site's main page exhibits females in its page decoration	136
Figure 6.14 Three screens from the interactive graph of Google analytics	139
Figure 6.15 Two examples of the PGUF meme where the pretty selfie forehead is cropped out of the frame	142
Table 6.1 Totals table of the contents in the table appendix F	144
Table 7.1 Key listing the dimensions analysed in the memes	162
Figure 7.1 Chains formed from the whole PGUF meme where both the selfies are juxtaposed	163
Figure 7.2 Cohesive chain wheel used to capture relations between memes 1 to 28	167
Figure 7.3 Diagram showing how the rows from figure 7.2 are represented as strands on the cohesive chain wheel	170
Figure 7.4 Diagram showing the locations on the circular cohesive chain wheel of the filters from figure 7.2	170
Figure 8.1 Publicly accessible images from '17 people caught taking selfies'	175
Figure 8.2 Images of people 'caught 'taking selfies'	176
Figure 8.3 Illustration of Hall's (1956) four spaces of social relations	180
Figure 8.4 Hall 's original chart showing 'interplay of the distant and immediate receptors in proxemics perception'	182
Figure 8.5 Hall 's second chart of vision, oral and aural interactions according to distance in social relations	183
Figure 8.6 Visual descriptions of social relations and physical distance	184
Figure 8.7 Comparison tables of visual representations of social distance relationships ..	187
Figure 8.8 A selfie with the snap chat dog filter	193
Figure 8.9 A meme found in a public image search (original text and content)	194
Figure 8.10 Examples of busted selfies where parents have walked in on young people in their private space (bedroom or bathroom)	197

Figure 8.11 Examples of busted selfies where people have been captured performing private representations of self in public space	198
Figure 8.12 Examples of busted selfies that include publicly admiring oneself	199
Figure 8.13 One of Depoorter's works from 'Tinder In'	200
Figure 8.14 Screen shot of comments in reaction to Depoorter's work	203
Figure 8.15 Depoorter's artwork, showing how factors such as dress can also indicate the social space within which people represent themselves	206
Figure 8.16 Batman selfie	208
Figure 8.17 The Sleeping Beauty castle in Disneyland Paris.....	208
Figure 8.18 Notre Dame Cathedral remains a very popular spot for selfies	209
Figure 8.19 The Eiffel Tower selfie seems to be a must for anyone visiting the City of Lights	209
Figure 8.20 Examples of the 'tourist guy' meme	211
Figure 9.1 Screen shots from the MOMA gallery site	221
Figure 9.2 Samples from other series by Sherman	222
Figure 9.3 The image on the cover of Kim Kardashian's book of selfies entitled Selfish ...	222
Figure 9.4 Screen shot of a feed of Kardashian selfies	223
Figure 9.5 Selfies of the author with a variety of snap chat filters	231
Figure 9.6 PGUF memes reproduced in Pinterest site	231
Figure 9.7 Robert Doisneau, 'An oblique look', 1948, SFMOMA	238

Abstract

Digital visual culture scholars have struggled to find a viewing model that suits the ways in which we communicate visually within participatory culture. Participatory culture suggests that people are visually active participants. However, traditional models of looking such as voyeurism involve a one-way looking practice that includes an active viewer who 'looks' at a passive subject. The recent theory of 'the grab' (Baym & Senft, 2016) begins to recognise visual interaction as agency and power. However, the action of grabbing remains a one-way transaction.

This thesis addresses the complexities of viewing digital communication by asking: 'How do people communicate using photographic digital memes?' The research analyses a sample of 66 PGUF (PrettyGirlUglyFace) memes produced by women in a Reddit site community. The PGUF meme consists of a 'pretty' selfie juxtaposed with an 'ugly' selfie. The data also includes a critical review of media commentaries about selfies collected from 2012 to 2013, online conversations and comments by meme producers, and members of meme communities during selfie workshops in Australia and Canada.

The data was collected within an interpretative methodology involving reflective situating (Markham, 2009). Accepting Thomas's (2007) argument that identity online is performed by self, community and broader public, the 66 photos were analysed for these three dimensions. The aspect of self as an active looking subject was analysed by applying a social semiotic discourse method (Van Leeuwen, 2008), community was mapped with cohesive chains (Tseng,

2013), and the broader public was analysed by approaching the digital memes with theories of proximity (Hall, 1956).

The analysis of the 66 PGUF memes shows that ‘viewers’ and ‘subjects’ are both active agents *and* objects of observation. The performativity and exaggeration in the images suggests that women contributors use humour (the joke) to simultaneously acknowledge and subvert conventional ideas about feminine appearance. The concept of ‘conversation’ is used to theorise how memes help members of online communities communicate as they engage in what I describe as a ‘semeful socialibility’.

The findings suggest people communicate through photographic digital memes by use of active semes (signs). Close observation of semes suggests that visual communication involves practices of looking (rather than viewing) that are active, interactive and reactive. Communities of ‘produsers’ of digital memes are involved in an interactive visual conversation. This visual social interaction also reacts to traditional modes of looking that continue to treat certain groups of people (commonly, women) as passive subjects. ■