


Space, Place, and the Self: Reimagining Selfies as Thirdspace

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Social Media + Society
April-June 2021: 1–10
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DOI: [10.1177/20563051211027213](https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211027213)
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Abstract

The rise of digital and visual communication has brought an increased focus to the places that people occupy. While places are created through various meaning-making processes, one way of establishing the meaning of a place is by inserting oneself into spaces by taking selfies. The places depicted in selfies may reflect a desire to associate oneself with the place, to make a statement challenging that place or the dominant meaning associated with it, or to create new meaning concerning the place and the self. Drawing on the concepts of Thirdspace and heterotopias, we proffer a framework for the practice of taking and sharing selfies that depict a place. We argue that people colonize points in space to reproduce, counter, or mix the meanings of places. People then both draw from and contribute to the construction of places and are motivated to “place” themselves to provide alternative or personalized perspectives of these places but also to represent their self.

Keywords

selfies, place, space, placemaking, Thirdspace, self-representation, heterotopias

Introduction

The ubiquity of mobile digital technologies has fueled a rise in visual communication (Van der Haak et al., 2012). Indeed, images and videos have become the main forms of information shared via the Internet (Newman, 2020). This rise in visual culture (Russell, 2011) and especially mobile photography has also expanded the scope of information that is being relayed in the process of visually documenting and communicating social life, frequently including contextual, geographical, and spatial elements (Villi, 2016). These structural and social factors of spaces, real and imagined, influence the communication about and performance of social life (Lefebvre, 1991). In particular, the ubiquitous social media practice of recording and displaying social life through selfies is often informed by the environment and contexts in which people find themselves (Villi, 2016; Zappavigna, 2016). When people take selfies in front of the Eiffel Tower, the pyramids, or the Grand Canyon, the act of documenting oneself or witnessing one’s presence within a space (Koliska & Roberts, 2015) is frequently initiated by being in that specific space or, more accurately, place (Leaver et al., 2020; Tiidenberg, 2018; Villi, 2016). At the same time, the documentation process endows that point in space with meaning, asserting to the world that this is an important place, one worthy of noting a visit (Hjorth & Hendry, 2015; Leaver et al., 2020). We adopt Tuan’s (1977) notion of space as

unequal to the concept of place; whereas the former refers to generally undefined geographic or physical location, the latter is meaningful and familiar.

The visual documentation of social life through selfies is an activity where we can observe the interaction between the self and places in everyday communication processes (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018). In the past, less attention has been given to the understanding of places, which often have been taken for granted as stable and unchanging (Thrift, 2006). Recently, the importance of space and place within digital communication has increasingly been pointed out. As we leave traces in offline spaces, through our physical presence, and online spaces, through geotags, online reviews, and likes, those traces not only reflect people’s behavior and sociocultural position but also blur the boundaries between offline and online spheres. Mobile photography has highlighted the importance of space and place in communication and discourse about the self (Brantner, 2018; Hjorth, 2013; Hjorth & Hendry, 2015; Villi, 2016).

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Not only does such locative media allow for more accurate location-specific information (through geotagging, Global Positioning System [GPS], and metadata), it also ties personal experiences to particular events and places (Hjorth & Pink, 2014; Villi, 2016). The notion of the spatial self, which combines “lived and/or imagined social and spatial realities to express identity” (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1647), and the concept of “placeification” (Gutsche & Hess, 2020), which describes how digital spaces get appropriated as places of meaning, exemplify the need for a better understanding of the interactions between the self and places in the digital communication context. Yet, these concepts primarily focus on one side of these interactions: how individuals appropriate or leave traces in digital spaces as part of their self-representation.

In this conceptual article, we focus on the visual features of selfies that show some evidence of a location, the space around or behind an individual, and the resulting interactions between self and space that create polysemic meanings of places and the self.¹ We consider how the positionality of the self within a specific point in space can change the discourse about or meanings of specific geographic and socially known places—meanings that are frequently negotiated through intersubjectivity, that is, between “the different perspectives or points of view on visually represented phenomena,” including the self and places (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018, p. 1737). Zhao and Zappavigna (2018) posit that the various perspectives can belong to the self and to various audiences, including family, friends, and social media followers, among others.

In contrast to previous research, which primarily examined the interplay of technical affordances of mobile photography, self-representation, and subjectivity, we focus on the self-space interactions within a selfie. Particularly, we argue that the self-space interactions within selfies create places. This process of placemaking, and the subsequent sharing and reading of the placemaking selfie, creates a Thirdspace, which encompasses the real and imagined, and the objective and subjective meanings of the self and the place. We propose that Thirdspace can alter, sustain, or challenge commonly accepted meanings of places. Understanding the visual interplay of self and place is critical due to what scholars call visual primacy effects, which indicate that visual cues will often overshadow textual and verbal ones (such as tags and captions but also metadata; Van der Heide et al., 2012). We turn to selfies, which are considered ubiquitous meaning-making devices (see Taylor, 2014; van Dijck, 2008), to explore the dynamic construction of meaning in images.

First, we examine the literature on space and place and the process of converting spaces into personal and meaningful places. We build our argument on the notions of Thirdspace and heterotopias to highlight the dynamic and hybrid nature of placemaking in selfies. Next, we review the literature on selfies as forms of public and personalized knowledge and how place is used in selfies. Then we offer a framework for

mapping, reading and examining the polysemic meanings of places within selfies, and the resulting Thirdspace. Finally, we examine the implications of the framework as a way to expand conceptualizations of self-representation that emphasize places as agents of social behavior.

Literature Review

Place, Space, and Placemaking

Social life takes place in a variety of spaces and “social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing ‘in’ space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial” (Soja, 1996, p. 46). This relationship between social life and spaces is complicated by mediation or visual communication practices. The visual depiction of spaces, including in photographic images, compresses and converts geographical spaces into two dimensions, while also capturing and freezing those spaces in (real and sociocultural) time. Soja (1996) asserted, “Any attempt to capture this all-encompassing space in words and texts, for example, invokes an immediate sense of impossibility” (p. 57). As a consequence, visual representations of three-dimensional spaces will result in mere approximations of actual spaces. The perceptual gaps between real and depicted spaces leave room for personal imaginations of those spaces. Moreover, the reading of visual representations of spaces is a constant cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation or denotation and connotation (see Barthes, 1991). Spaces are thus much more than the sum of their physical, spatial, and geographical dimensions as they derive meaning from social, psychological, and cultural factors (Farman, 2012). The philosopher Lefebvre (1991) identified “logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias” (pp. 11–12). The various types of space can inform a wide range of not only specific social meanings, such as national identities (Adams & Jansson, 2012), on a macro level but also status and identities in micro-settings, such as offices (Elsbach, 2003).

While Lefebvre (1991) and others categorized various types of space, it is useful to explicate and separate the notions of space and place. “Space is experienced directly as having room in which to move” (Tuan, 1977, p. 12). In contrast, a place is a concrete object or a point/area in space, often defined as stable and permanent. “‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’ What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). Tuan (1977) associates notions of exploration and freedom with space (regardless of whether it is a mental, physical, or even dream space), while he describes place as a “calm center of established values” (p. 54). Although Tuan suggests space is like an empty canvas ready to be filled, space is not free of meaning. Rather, space lacks familiarity, proximity, or intimacy, which are all

markers of place. For Tuan, space can be like a neighborhood that is still unfamiliar and somewhat confusing to a new resident. Yet, space and place are never fully separate and “require each other for definition” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6).

The differentiation between place and space is helpful for the investigation of selfies that include backgrounds or spaces. The placement of the self in a point in space suggests a relationship between the self and this specific location, whether a specific geographic location, or a generic place, such as a “bedroom,” “forest,” or “school.” In other words, selfies depict places and not spaces. The manifestations of place can be both physical (like object modulation and depiction) and mental (imagination) (Lefebvre, 1991; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015; Soja, 1996). Similarly, selfies create both physical and mental places through the manifestation of the selfie as a tangible (often digital) artifact and the imaginations that are tied to these places. Thus, we posit that places are created, confirmed, and contested through selfies in the interaction of the self with a specific point in space. On one hand, such places can hold very personalized, unique, and idiosyncratic meanings that are linked to individual experiences of place. On the other hand, through the placement of the self as an object in a space, the same points in space are open to contested meanings, depending on the cultural and social readings of the place created and interpreted by different individuals (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018).

In sum, selfies depicting specific points in space create highly personal places through the placement of the self in space, the interaction of self and space as physical objects and through imagination, filling in the gaps between the real and the mediated. Yet, selfies also escape the simple dialectic of meaning making between a point in space and its dominant cultural denotations by opening up a highly individual place, or what Soja (1996) called Thirdspace. This concept echoes Bhabha’s (1990) notion of Thirdspace—a space of hybridity and openness that resists cultural authority and gives “rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (p. 211).

This study argues for conceptualizing selfies as Thirdspace—specifically those selfies that include some visual information about the space surrounding or in the background of the subject. Besides the subject, the space where a selfie is taken forms part of the visual message conveyed to the audience. Even though not every selfie depicts the space surrounding the self, certain public or private spaces (bathrooms, clubs, streets, etc.) are often a catalyst to take a selfie (Villi, 2016; Zappavigna, 2016; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018). Losh (2014, 2015) has referred to the locating of a subject in a physical and social context as a “placemaking function.” Selfies are therefore much more than simple mnemonic devices or self-representations but can also create ephemeral yet very private places or locations of personalized meaning.

Thirdspace and Heterotopias: Space, Place, and the Self

Soja’s (1996) concept of Thirdspace suggests that places are not stable and unchanging entities. Instead, places may be understood as a third factor, evading the “dual mode of thinking” about places as physical objects (Firstspace) or mental/conceived ideas (Secondspace) (Soja, 1996, p. 10). Thirdspace describes places as hybrid or confluent, where the subjectivity and objectivity, the real and imagined, the abstract and concrete, the physical and mental come together (Soja, 1996). Contrary to the meaning suggested by the use of the word space in Thirdspace, the term applies to specific and familiar places rather than generic and unfamiliar spaces. Thirdspace is built on the ideas of Lefebvre (1991), who suggested that space and place may be understood on the basis of a spatial triad consisting of objective space (spatial practices), conceived space (representation of space), and lived space (spaces of representation). Lefebvre (1991) argued that a specific place, such as Venice, Italy, “combines the city’s reality with its ideality, embracing the practical, the symbolic and the imaginary” (p. 74). This conceptualization was echoed by Harvey (2012), who suggested Times Square in New York can be seen as real estate, or absolute space; as relative space, or what we do there; and as relational space, a spectacle of capitalist advertising display. Usher (2019) adapted this conceptualization of space for material, lived, and cultural-economic places of news and journalism, stressing the importance of place as an agentic factor of meaning making. But, in contrast to Harvey (2012) and Usher (2019), this triad can also be distinguished as physical or objective, mental or subjective, and social space (Soja, 1996). Social space is different from physical and mental space because it is an “approximation of an all-encompassing mode of spatial thinking” (Soja, 1996, p. 62), transcending the duality of the objective and subjective through the notion of a Thirdspace. Thirdspace constantly challenges the notion of measurable objective and felt subjective space and place, opening the possibility for new meanings and epistemologies to emerge. As such, Thirdspace transcends notions of spatial knowledge that are primarily tied to objective measures or concepts like Geographic Information Systems (Fisher, 2012) and spatial journalism (Schmitz-Weiss, 2015) that suggest a clear and measurable understanding of places.

The spatial triad that is the foundation of Thirdspace can be observed in selfies. Selfies as representations of social places combine the dimensions of physical (objective), conceived (subjective/mental), and lived (social) space, potentially creating hybrid places of meaning that oscillate between the real, the imagined, and the communicated/represented (Bhabha, 1990). Each selfie creates these hybrid meanings by photographically making the self a vital part or object of a specific place. In effect, selfies include two additional factors of space: the self and the notion of a mediated place, expanding Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptual triad. All

these factors contribute to the dynamic and polysemic character of place in selfies as meanings can fluctuate between the objective, lived and imagined place, and also the self and the mediation of place. This openness that underlies the meaning-making mechanism within selfies allows for challenging dominant readings of places.

Based on Lefebvre, Brantner and Rodriguez-Amat (2016) argued that “(social) spaces are (social) products, and thus the use of social media and the construction of their own social spaces helps protesters to alter the dominant ideologies of place and space” (p. 303). Mobile photography, including selfies, can go both ways: it can challenge or appropriate these dominant meanings to associate the qualities of the place with the self. Villi (2016) suggested that mobile photography can transform places into non-places (physical places without identity or relational and historical meanings—see Augé, 1995) and vice versa, that is, add, alter, or remove an identity or meaning from a place. Ultimately, whether an ideology or meaning associated with a place will be challenged or appropriated may depend on the utility of these concepts to the self and the audience of the selfie. Research suggests that individuals tend to maintain a positivity bias, meaning that they see and represent themselves in a more positive light (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014).

Thirdspace adds to the dimension of place the concept of hybridity, fluctuating between the real, symbolic, and imagined, and simultaneously encapsulating the idea of a counterpoint to established culture or cultures. While the concept of Thirdspace primarily highlights the notion of hybridity, Foucault (1986) goes a step further by suggesting that points in space are inherently heterogeneous, representing loci of resistance and expressions of individuality. Moreover, heterotopias, as Foucault calls these places, upend and often oppose conventional meanings of specific places while being connected with those places. Foucault (1986) argued that we live in places defined by “a set of relations that delineates sites” (p. 23). Selfies resemble such heterogeneous sites as they combine a variety of relations about a specific place (real and imagined) and the self (real and imagined). Selfies, as heterotopias, convert generic or unfamiliar spaces to specific and familiar places. Heterotopias, like selfies, can be conceived through the notion of the mirror because “it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Selfies combine spaces with the self, which, not unlike the mirror, establish utopias or realms of imagination steeped in the reality of actual specific places and actual selves. Heterotopias are meant to create illusions to show that, in effect, all places are illusions. But heterotopias can also form other and real places “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). Selfies can depict both types of heterotopias, frequently offering imagined or perfect places that

claim to be real, despite being staged and juxtaposing these illusions with our real and messy places.

Conceptualizing selfies as Thirdspace and heterotopias underlines the fluidity and ambivalence of meaning construction in selfies, which constantly fluctuates between the real and the imagined. Moreover, both concepts offer a theoretical perspective on selfies as discourse challenging taken-for-granted notions of specific places. However, we acknowledge that not every selfie operates as a counter-site by subverting the meaning of a place through the insertion of the self but that the real and imagined places are frequently used to enhance the presentation of the self through, for instance, an act of witnessing or surveillance (Koliska & Roberts, 2015; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018).

Selfies as Discourse and Markers of Place

Selfies have been frequently theorized not only as self-presentations based on communication practices such as express, interact, and feel (Tiidenberg, 2018) but also as visual artifacts and sociocultural practices (Senft & Baym, 2015). As such, selfies can be seen as assemblages of subjectivities within a mediated and networked society (Hess, 2015). While selfies are “ephemeral, quickly circulated, discarded, and forgotten” (Hess, 2015, p. 1631), they nevertheless create a discourse, generating comments or likes on social media platforms and “may be seen as more fluid forms of visual communication representing changing yet constructed selves in various socio-spatial contexts” (Roberts & Koliska, 2017, p. 155). Thus, selfies are often part of personal narrative and public debate (Maddox, 2017; Vivienne & Burgess, 2013; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018).

The process of sharing selfies entails presentation, representation, and embodiment (Farman, 2012; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015), creating not only a visual but also the social discourse of the depicted content, namely, the self and place (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018). Essentially, selfies collapse the acts of performance, witnessing, and surveillance, creating narratives within social networks (Rettberg, 2014). Thus, a selfie is “not a self-portrait . . . but rather the representation of the self as a product of the system of interpersonal relationships” (Levin, 2014, n.p.). While Barker and Rodriguez (2019) posit that “selfies can be used as tools to communicate multiple identity dimensions” (p. 1158), Zhao and Zappavigna (2018) suggest that selfies represent forms of intersubjectivity (varying perspectives between image maker and viewer) that go beyond the representation of self. Selfies, they claim, offer different perspectives not only of the self but also of the depicted object (other than the self) that can be negotiated with the perspectives of others.

As a form of communication, selfies can be seen as an aspect of public discourse that contributes to the production and creation of social knowledge and social reality (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In fact, “knowledge is also the space in which the subject [i.e., self] may take up a position and speak

of the objects with which he deals in his discourse” (Foucault, 2004, p. 201). In a selfie, the self can take up a specific position to communicate about an object, such as the place it occupies. This interplay between the self and place allows for the creation of individual perspectives or knowledge regarding a place, which can counter or reinforce dominant discourses about the place. Brantner (2018) pointed out that locative media such as selfies “connect and link people with places, and thus, hybrid spaces arise,” blurring the boundaries between the online and offline (p. 18). Similarly, Hjorth and Hendry (2015) speak of emplaced visuality or how the entanglement of temporal, geographic, electronic, and spatial dimensions in social media photography can offer “new ways in which to narrate a sense of place with sociality” (p. 2).

Nunes (2017) also noted the selfie situates its subjects (self, others, and place) in two simultaneous contexts: “as an embodied presence, posed before the lens, and as a digital image, distributed across social networks” (p. 110). In so doing, Nunes (2017) claimed, the placemaking selfie:

asserts an identity that borrows from the social and cultural encoding of a place as part of an evolving performance of a networked “spatial self,” while simultaneously foregrounding one’s own understanding of that space through the documentary act of framing oneself within that particular location . . . it both performs and documents the subject’s affective experience of place. (p. 110)

In this context, Nunes (2017) examined how to read “out-of-place” selfies—those taken at places considered too austere for such a frivolous act (i.e., selfies at concentration camps)—and claimed that they “force us to confront, comment on and critique the recorded disjunction between the power of place and the subject’s attempts at emplacement” (p. 111). Nunes highlighted the impact of the spatial content, including social and physical spaces of digital photos in the meaning-making process of selfies. But while Nunes (2017, p. 112) and others emphasize the social network and the “embodied experience” of the self “within a place-specific event”, we aim to go further by explicating the interactional roles of spatiality and self in the meaning alteration and production of selfies. These roles, we suggest, exemplify the visual/textual cues in the negotiation of intersubjective perspectives of place (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018).

A Framework of Placemaking Selfies

Selfies: Preserving, Changing, and Subverting Place. Selfies create hybrid meanings through the interaction of the self and specific locations. The act of capturing the image freezes the self as an object in space and time, turning the space conceptually into a place and altering its meaning. This construction of place is part of the reflexive image making of the selfie. Frosh (2015) claimed that selfies “challenge this spatio-representational segregation” (p. 1611) of conventional photography,

leading to what he called “kinesthetic sociability.” Undefined space becomes a place through associating self and space, creating a level of high familiarity (Tuan, 1977). The positioning of each self within space creates an entirely new place.

Through selfies, we can observe the placemaking process happening on a bigger scale, as countless people digitally occupy various spaces turning them into places by declaring them significant, worthy of marking and incorporating into a narrative about the self that is being created on a social media profile. As Frosh (2015) explained it, “[a selfie] makes visible its own construction as an act and a product of mediation” (p. 1621). But the placemaking function is not the end: examining selfies as Thirdspace means seeing in each image the reflection of the individual’s perception of the meaning and importance of the place, as well as their reaction to the place and what it means relative to their own identity to be associated with that place. Moreover, selfies as Thirdspace includes an understanding of how that place might be read by their audience. One implication of this argument is that no selfie is ever taken in exactly the same place (even though it is the same physical point in space), as no place is identical in terms of the meaning that the individual perceives and is attempting to create or co-opt by placing themselves there.

A Framework of Thirdspace Selfies. For the purpose of theory building, we abstract the concepts of self and space/place as separate visual components that function as signifiers or indicators of meaning, which constantly influence each other because they are part of a single text: the selfie. By the self, we refer to a clearly visible individual (human actor) and not a proxy or object referencing a potential self. By the same token, the place constitutes a visible background that can constitute a meaningful location. The visual interplay of these two signifiers is critical because it describes how structures such as geographical and social places impact the understanding of a self and vice versa. After all, the self cannot exist without space and the various places a self can occupy also shape the self’s existence. The decision to take a selfie that includes a background is often a conscious act meant to capture a place, to fix oneself in a particular time and place, or prove that one is somewhere (Frosh, 2015; Villi, 2016), because that time and place confer a particular meaning on the selfie-taker. People may arrive at the White House or the Brandenburg Gate, brought there by the meaning (political, historical, cultural) that the place has. They take a selfie to mark themselves as having been there, and then they share it with friends, indicating they have a special perspective of the place, whether admiring, affirming, or rejecting its political/historical significance (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018). The selfie-taker claims a specific point in space for themselves and their digital audience: “here I am at the Eiffel Tower,” “here I am working out at the gym,” “here I am at a party,” “here I am participating in a protest,” “here I’m witnessing a warzone.” Because of the self-conscious nature of selfies—as Frosh (2015) put it, the selfie says “see

me showing you me” (p. 1610)—the selfie-taker says not only something about the place but also something about themselves and the assertion they are making about themselves being in that place: “see me showing you where I am.” The selfie-taker asserts which activities and places are significant to them and, by implication, tells the audience what kind of person they want to be perceived as, and also what kinds of places are important, worthy of inclusion in an idealized self-representation.

Given the polysemic meanings a selfie can create in the interplay of self, objective, conceived, lived, and mediated place, one goal of this article is to explicate dominant meaning-making practices of selfies. Selfies “cannot be decontextualized from the [point in] space they have been” taken in (Roberts & Koliska, 2017, p. 4), as they “attempt to represent the self as embodied in particular spaces” (Hess, 2015, p. 1630). But instead of assuming that these spaces represent stable or taken-for-granted meanings, we suggest that selfies produce new places and, in doing so, function as Thirdspace, encompassing all the polysemic meanings of the place and the self that may have been intended and perceived. Imagining selfies as Thirdspace opens up a dynamic of hybridity that transcends dualistic thinking that simplistically assigns meaning to either the self or place or the objective or subjective aspects of a location within a selfie image (Soja, 1996). Seeing selfies as Thirdspace also can create a greater awareness of the various factors contributing to the meaning making of selfies, which can reveal dominant stereotypes embedded in sociocultural structures of self and place, thus enabling the discovery of novel meanings and possibly challenging meanings of the selves and places depicted in selfies (see Bhabha, 1990). Thirdspace is a framework that can inform the various interpretations of the genre and general practice of selfies. Conceptualizing selfies as Thirdspace means focusing on the meanings that selfies can create about the self and issues, objects, and places related to the self, including the social function of selfies not only as expressions of belonging or becoming (see Tiidenberg, 2018) but also as activism (Vivienne, 2017), documentation, or simply showing off (favorable/idealized self-representation; Maddox, 2017; Senft & Baym, 2015).

Based on the concept of Thirdspace, we propose a spectrum of types of selfies that occupy a point in space and turn it into a place. We posit two main interactions along a self–place continuum. Essentially, all selfies depicting a place create Thirdspace, but there is a spectrum of possibilities in the creation and reading of a selfie, ranging from the dominance of the self to the dominance of the place in assigning meaning to a specific location (see Table 1). The choice to take a selfie in a particular setting demonstrates the importance of a place within a specific physical space, whether a private, domestic scene or public site, and can be read to reflect the social and cultural values of a person taking a selfie, and can simultaneously be used to give importance to a particular place. On one end, where the self is central and

Table 1. Self–Place Interactions of Thirdspace Selfies.

Self ←	→ Place
Embellishment of place selfies	Embellishment of self selfies
Subversion of place selfies	Subversion of self selfies
Documenting of self in place selfie	Witnessing place selfies

essentially assigns meaning to a place by taking a selfie there, we might include selfies taken with friends at a restaurant or cafe. At the moment of taking a selfie, the person capturing the image and their friends are central to the act. On the other end of the spectrum, the place is more central and the selfie-taker is acting to place themselves there because of some generally perceived meanings the place is associated with, such as selfies taken in front of recognizable tourist attractions or historic monuments. The predominance of either the individual or the place may shift, changing from the moment of creation of the selfie to the moment of reception and interpretation of the selfie. Yet, ultimately, each interaction along the self–place continuum will also alter, to some degree, the meanings of both the self and place. We propose a range of Thirdspace selfies in which either the self or place dominates in the process of meaning making (see Table 1). While our proposed categories are distinct, they are not mutually exclusive but provide a framework for thinking about the relationship between place and self in a selfie.

Embellishment of Self. The temporary colonization or occupation of space through selfies, which results in the creation of place and either confirms or counters established meanings of a place, also contributes to the self-representation of the individual in that place. The act of sharing a selfie allows an individual to project a representation of their identity to an online audience. The way individuals construct visual representations of their self involves choosing elements to create a photographic representation (Barthes, 1981) that reflects “the view of our selves that we want to project out into the world” (Gye, 2007, p. 282). The self within the image functions similarly to a flag planted in the ground, colonizing or claiming the place for the self. Selfie-takers use places—rich with personal and social meanings—to contribute to their self-representation and to make a specific claim about themselves by presenting themselves in the chosen place. In that respect, a selfie uses place not only for the construction of self but also for the creation of personal places by giving meaning to spaces.

Embellishment of Place. While place can be used to embellish the self, the self can be utilized to add meaning to a place. For instance, an individual is with friends at school and has the urge to take a selfie because of the people around them or the feelings they are having at the moment, or the way they look (Tiidenberg, 2018). This is an example of the self dominating; the place was not central but is assigned meaning in

effect because it is the space within which the meaningful event occurred and was marked. Essentially, the placement of the self as an object contributes to the creation of place by the construction of a closer relationship between the self and a point in space. This may enhance the place's meaning, not only to the individual but also to others.

Subversion of Place. Selfies, as Nunes (2017) pointed out, can also challenge dominant meanings. As argued throughout this article, once a self is placed as an object into a mundane space, the meaning of that space is modified through the presence of the self—it becomes a place of personal meaning. Selfies can flip the script of a place altogether and make it a counter-site in contrast to its common or normative meaning. For example, so-called out-of-place selfies taken at concentration camps or Holocaust memorials illustrate how the dominant meaning of a place can be perceived as being subverted or undermined through the addition of a self and the self's "inappropriate" behavior. While such "out-of-place" selfies are extremes and can serve as indicators of deviance to detect the norm (Durkheim, 1925/1961), we posit that the addition of a self as an object in a specific place always has the potential to change, or at least challenge the meaning of that place, creating a highly personalized or counter-site. For instance, police officers taking a selfie in front of a burning house may subvert the meaning of personal loss that is associated with that place (Phillips, 2017). Protesters outside a government building or monument could indicate dissatisfaction with the symbolized institution, rather than reverence for it. Through the hyper-personalization of a selfie, aspects of otherness are introduced that defy the norm. Selfies can thus create illusions that juxtapose real space, as in the instance of the Holocaust memorial selfies.² The juxtapositions selfies provide as counter-readings to real and imagined public spaces may be critical to pushing boundaries and producing new socially negotiated forms of knowledge about the meaning of places. Prior research has suggested that selfies as a genre can offer new forms of knowledge or narrations of place through mobile photography (Villi, 2016), which allows for intersubjective perspectives (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018) and emplaced visuality ("entanglement of movement and placing across temporal, geographic, electronic, and spatial dimensions," Hjorth & Hendry, 2015, p. 1).

Subversion of Self. While challenging socially legitimized beliefs about and associations with a place through a subversion-of-place selfie, the taking of an "out-of-place" selfie will inevitably reflect upon the selfie-taker (see Maddox, 2017). The perceived social defiance of taking a selfie inside the US Capitol during the 6 January riots in Washington, D.C. or in front of the Kehlsteinhaus (Eagle's Nest), a former German Nazi Party property frequently visited by Adolf Hitler in the Alps, for instance, can undermine or subvert the intended meaning of the represented self. This is because such images

and the behavior of the selfie-taker in that specific place are frequently perceived by the audience as offensive or socially inappropriate. Given that research indicates a positivity bias in self-representation (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), selfies that violate norms of place contribute to an inadvertent subversion of the self and may be understood as a social faux pas.

Witnessing. Taking selfies in a place can also be motivated by the fact of surveilling behavior (of the self, others, or both) or witnessing at a certain place and time (Frosh, 2015; Koliska & Roberts, 2015; Villi, 2016). Witnessing is closely associated with surveillance and taking a selfie can be seen as evidence-based observation—"This is real, I saw it and now I'm showing you"—showing what happened in that location. The individual shows themselves witnessing a protest, a concert, campaign rally, a battle, or other notable events, thereby associating themselves with the event and, as a consequence of that, the place. In this process of witnessing, the self is associated with something larger than the self. The event and the place where it happened take precedence.

Documenting of Self in Place. While witnessing focuses on the event or place that occurs in the background of the selfie, the documentation of the self puts more emphasis on the self. The self captures the place or places that were colonized—"I was here!"—as part of their self-documentation and self-presentation. The practice of documenting the self is frequently used to track changes in the self over time or document behavior of the self in different contexts. Refugees, for instance, documented their migration experience, capturing their self in new and newly colonized places along their journey (Laurent, 2015). Tennessee Representative Tim Burchett shows the public and his constituents the places he occupies during his workday, frequently sharing selfies ("Rep. Burchett Uses Selfies to Document Life in D.C.," 2019). Andrew Jarvis, an architect in New York, used selfies to track and document his whereabouts in various places for the IRS (Internal Revenue Service), in preparation for a possible audit (Stampler, 2014). Hugo Cornellier documented his self over time from the age of 12 to his wedding day, capturing a slowly changing self and frequently altered place (Moye, 2017). The growing practice of creating images of place with an implied but not depicted self similarly captures this idea of documenting the self (implied self) in a specific place (see Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018).

Documenting the self may be seen as a selective form of surveillance as the documentation of the self is frequently associated with a specific purpose, which at times is shared with the public. But the documentation may be even more relevant for an individual when selfies are taken with the intent not to share them. The documentation of place is deliberate and primarily to locate the self in a specific time and place. The place is thus a vital stage for the performance and contextualization of the self over time.

Conclusion

While selfies are often considered idealized forms of self-representation, these idealizations can affect the reading and understanding of places. Selfies are thus not only a means of self-representation but contribute to the public discourse about places. They result from people placing themselves somewhere in the world and, in the process, contribute to a larger understanding about the places we inhabit and how we create, challenge, and maintain meaning around places and also how we represent ourselves. We argue that selfies, specifically Thirdspace selfies, like many other online practices, temporarily colonize places, marking them as a familiar place.

Through this process, Thirdspace selfies create relationships between imaginary idealized places represented online and real physical places offline. Frosh (2015) said that “the selfie makes visible a broader kinesthetic domain of digital culture,” combining “the mediated mobility of whole bodies in physical and augmented space provided by locative technologies” (p. 1623) with the navigation of virtual spaces. The practice of selfie-taking adds ritualistic meaning to points in space and enhances the creation and meaning making of places through the sharing of selfies. This mechanism would suggest that selfies may actually counteract a process that Giddens (1990) calls disembedding, which he defines as “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (p. 21). Selfies reclaim spaces, turning them into places. By colonizing and re-sanctifying space, imbuing it with meaning, selfies re-embed social relations through a fleeting interaction with a space, reclaiming it as a personally meaningful place.

The colonization process not only entails the temporary occupation of a point in space but also implies an appropriation, alteration, and/or domination of sociocultural meanings of the place. The process of colonization within a selfie, even though temporal and often hyperlocal, is not unlike the colonization of the “Orient,” for instance, a real and imagined place, where the Western colonizer shaped the discourse about what the Orient “is” or is supposed to be (Said, 1978). Thus, the selfie-taker or space “colonizer” attempts to determine the subject–object relationship or influence the viewing of the self and place relationship within a selfie. The simple placement of the self within a point in space not only offers subjective and intersubjective perspectives (Brantner, 2018; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018) but makes the self a central part of the image. As such, the self holds the power to set the agenda within a selfie but not to determine each and every perspective of reading the selfie. The power of the selfie-taker to determine or influence the meaning of the self–place relationship is also limited by the ephemeral character and ubiquity of selfies (Hess, 2015).

The effects of selfies reclaiming spaces may also be seen in the physical world, as users eager to engage in the same practices they have seen online flock to “Instagrammable” places and overcrowd them, in some cases resulting in lines

of people waiting to take their selfie or simply overwhelming areas not accustomed to or prepared for such large crowds (see, for example, Leaver et al., 2020; Spitznagel, 2019). Online practices can change or create offline places but also impact offline practices, such as travel. Leaver et al. (2020) described the formation of Insta-museums or Instagrammable backdrops that have specifically been created to cater to the preferences of Instagram users, who are also willing to pay to visit such places. Gretzel (2019) argued that while social media are not entirely responsible for overtourism, “it certainly encourages behaviours that lead to crowding and it perpetuates images that influence others to travel to certain places and, once there, behave in certain ways” (p. 70).

The ubiquitous nature of selfies means that these processes are happening constantly and rapidly, and we are not suggesting that every selfie has a significant impact on the understanding of a place or an individual. The negotiation of meanings of places and representations of selves that are happening in the digital realm as individuals move through the physical spaces around them and colonize them for a digital representation, mapping themselves in places, is ongoing and fluid as the concept of Thirdspace suggests. Places become part of each self’s story, adding meaning to individuals’ identities. We put forward this framework as a way to think about the aggregate effect of users’ selfie practices on the places they inhabit, both the physical spaces and Thirdspace created through depiction online.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article, we are referring to selfies that include a visible and meaningful background. As we cannot speak about the intentions of selfie-takers, we do not differentiate between selfies that include a background deliberately and those that may do so accidentally.
2. While “out-of-place” selfies can certainly also be understood as a form of witnessing and not just as a subversion of place, they frequently elicit unfavorable perceptions that can challenge or subvert the meaning otherwise broadly attributed to a place.

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