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### Sick bunnies and pocket dumps: "Not-selfies" and the genre of self-representation

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## Abstract

This article develops and troubles existing approaches to visual self-representation in social media, questioning the naturalized roles of faces and bodies in mediated self-representation. We argue that self-representation in digital communication should not be treated as synonymous with selfies, and that selfies themselves should not be reductively equated with performances of embodiment. We do this through discussing "not-selfies": visual self-representation consisting of images that do not feature the likenesses of the people who share them, but instead show objects, animals, fictional characters, or other things, as in the practices of #EDC ("everyday carry") and #GPOY ("gratuitous picture of yourself") on platforms such as Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, and reddit. We present an account of self-representation as an emergent, recognizable, intertextual genre, and show that #EDC and #GPOY practices are best conceptualized as instances of self-representation.

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## **Sick bunnies and pocket dumps: ‘not-selfies’ and the genre of self-representation**

This article develops and troubles existing approaches to visual self-representation in social media, questioning the naturalized roles of faces and bodies in mediated self-representation. We argue that self-representation in digital communication should not be treated as synonymous with selfies, and that selfies themselves should not be reductively equated with performances of embodiment. We do this through discussing “not-selfies”: visual self-representation consisting of images that do not feature the likenesses of the people who share them, but instead show objects, animals, fictional characters, or other things, as in the practices of #EDC (“everyday carry”) and #GPOY (“gratuitous picture of yourself”) on platforms such as Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram and reddit. We present an account of self-representation as an emergent, recognizable, intertextual genre, and show that #EDC and #GPOY practices are best conceptualized as instances of self-representation.

Keywords: visual self-representation, EDC, GPOY, selfies, self-representation, visual culture.

### 1. Introduction

This article explores visual self-representation consisting of images that do not show the bodies and faces of the people who share them, instead showing objects, animals, fictional characters, or other things. We discuss the practices and conventions of producing, sharing, tagging and viewing #EDC (an acronym for “everyday carry,” i.e. photographs of the items a person might routinely carry about with them) and #GPOY (an acronym for “gratuitous picture of yourself,” i.e. images found on the internet and used to reference the poster’s mood) images. We argue that despite the absence of the embodied self in these pictures, they are best

conceptualized as self-representation, and that this broadens the concept of self-representation in ways that may be helpful for other scholars of social media and visual culture.

This argument is predicated on the following assumptions: firstly, that creating, sending and viewing images of all kinds is one of the most notable contemporary uses of the internet (Mirzoeff, 2015). Facebook users, for example, upload 350 million photos a day; users of both Snapchat and Whatsapp double that, with over 700 million daily photo shares (Morrison, 2015). Secondly, as Thumin points out, “self-representations are proliferating in digital culture” (2012, p. 10). Visual self-representations in the form of networked images circulate between individuals and groups, facilitate the creation and maintenance of relationships, memories, norms and ideologies, and are widely understood as tools for identity formation and communication (van Dijck, 2008).

Before proceeding, we situate our use of the concept of self-representation in the extant, abundant, and conflicted literature. Canonical cultural studies work defines representations as signs and symbols that “index, stand in for or represent” us to others (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Applied to digital visual self-representation, this somewhat narrow focus on indexicality has generated some critique. Viewing profile images or selfies as indexical representations of the person is seen as flattening the social import of these images, disregarding the technocultural conditions of their production, and inviting an orientation where they are evaluated primarily in terms of their perceived success as significations of truth and reality (Frosh, 2015; Gomez Cruz & Thornham, 2015). This tension can be addressed by incorporating a more nuanced definition of both indexicality and self-representation. The first can be accomplished by seeing an index as that which goes beyond a trace of, and a semantic reference to, the photographed object; and sees it as also involving a trace of an action or a gesture (cf. Frosh, 2015 for his use of index as deixis in

conceptualizing selfies). Visual communication, like other symbolic interaction, is both practical action and interpretive or semiotic work. The second is addressed by authors who propose that self-representation should be understood as a recognizable, multidimensional and intertextual *genre* (Thumim 2012), where genre is conceived as a tacit understanding between producers and audiences (ibid), operating dynamically between expectations and conventions (Lüders, Proitz & Rasmussen 2010 p. 947). In describing the genre of self-representation, Thumim suggests that it is associated with personal subject matter, and “involves the attempt to persuade of the authenticity of the ordinary person’s point of view” (2012, p. 168).

A shift in focus, from the object/text that stands (in) for a person, to the object-in-context that can be indexical of an action, or a practice, allows us to appreciate that self-representation is social and expressive, and that the meanings of representations are always context dependent and negotiated (Walker Rettberg, forthcoming). Focusing on the shared contextual literacies involved in producing and recognizing different forms of self-representation affords a more inclusive and textured conceptualization, just as “studying a text’s intertextual relations can provide us with valuable clues to the readings that a particular culture or subculture is likely to produce from it” (Fiske, 1987, p. 108).

In contrast to media and cultural scholarship, work in social psychology shifts the emphasis by foregrounding the *self* in self-representation. Michael Bamberg thus defines self-representations as “mental constructions about us as persons in terms of what we are identifying with and how we are identified” (2011, p. 6). Identification is a term that originates from the psychoanalytical tradition, and is often defined as “the psychological process of association between oneself and something else (originally someone else)” (Woodward, 2004, p.16). In recent decades the concept of identification has become increasingly relevant to sociological

understandings of identity, because “it accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation” (Hall 1996, 4). Identificatory practices thus go beyond association and imitation, and can be considered “central to all forms of identity-formation” (Lawler, 2014, p. 163). And the internet, arguably, is “a site of identification with the possible” (Ferryday, 2009, p. 50), where the merging of our interpretations and experiences of fantasy, realness and virtuality allows us to broaden our options for what to identify *with*.

Describing self-representation as an intertextual, multidimensional genre of identification helps to move us away from preoccupations with the semiotic content and function of the representation; and with the characteristics imputed to the self so represented. In both paradigms, opportunities to conceptualize the embedded, relational form of self-representation as a practical activity bound by localized community literacies can be missed. Therefore, we join the authors who find the heuristic of genre a more holistic means of engaging with the social and cultural practices of self-representation online.

Drawing on these definitions, we understand self-representation as a set of practices, conventions and norms of content production and consumption. Self-representations are emergent, dialogical, and intertextual, while being recognized by both producers and audiences as flexible statements of identification. Conceptualized as such, we argue that self-representation foregrounds indexicality, individual and community identity-work, and accounts concisely for the practices of circulation relevant to a robust understanding of both EDC and GPOY.

The objective of our account is to develop and trouble existing approaches to visual self-representation in social media, questioning both the naturalized roles of faces and bodies in mediated self-representation, and conceptualizations of it which start from assumptions that such representations, by definition, must show human figures. The argument deploys the idea of genre, and community genre literacies, to shift focus away from the “meaning” or referentiality of particular images, and toward the participatory practices and strategies of image production, circulation, and use. As we will go on to show, the argument has implications for scholarly and popular discussion about selfie culture, and more broadly, for how self-representation online can be productively described.

## 2. Methods

The data for #GPOY was collected during an ethnographic study (2011-2015) of a community of #NSFW Tumblr bloggers and sexy-selfie practitioners, and is comprised of blog content (images, captions, hashtags, text posts, interactions), field notes and interviews with the bloggers. Analysis of this data relies on the logic of visual narrative analysis (cf. Rose, 2001, Riessmann, 2008). Initially the content was thematically analyzed for what GPOY was mainly used for (making aspirational, vulnerable and stigmatizable identity claims, and for the purpose of being confrontational); this was followed with visual narrative analysis of specific cases to explicate the layered and intertextual aspects of meaning making.

The material on EDC was generated through ethnographic research, informed by visual anthropology, conducted across several sites during 2013-2016, concentrating in the first year on the large user-submitted photoblogs, forums, and Tumblr; attending in the later years to Facebook: specifically, EDC community and BST (buy/sell/trade) groups, and to a lesser extent

Instagram. The original analytical interest was in documenting the circulation of images of objects (and the objects themselves) across virtual and physical spaces, as a development of previous research on collecting, representation and mediated subcultural identities (e.g. Whelan, 2015). Image downloads, participation in exchange, public and private online conversations, and fieldnotes documenting routine and extensive situated immersion are drawn upon here to describe the practices conducted through and with respect to EDC images within the community.

### 3. GPOY

In popular histories of visual self-representation online, GPOY is associated with the blogging platform Tumblr, where it served as an early(-ish) genre of hashtagged selfies. With increasing cross-platform content republishing, and the social media behemoth, Facebook, incorporating hashtagging, #GPOY can now be found across different platforms, although it is, arguably, still most popular on Tumblr. GPOY is still used with actual images of oneself (conventional selfies) but also, and more importantly for this article, with third party images and gifs: typically screenshots from TV shows, cartoons, or movies, meme images, motivational and de-motivational images, and animated and still images of animals. Sometimes #current status and even #me are used instead of #GPOY for non-selfie self-representational images (henceforth: “not-selfies”).

Web trends expert Elise Moreau claims that not-selfie GPOY are used when the people sharing the GPOY feel the situation, action or characters in the image are similar to themselves. “You can basically think of it as the acronym equivalent of saying “this is how I feel/what I look like right now” (Moreau, 2015). Speaking more directly to the level of identification, BuzzFeed’s Sophie Saraiya writes: “GPOY has evolved to mean anything you identify with. (...)you can post

an idea that is not actually *you* and tag it #GPOY to communicate to the rest of the world that you identify so much with that idea, you might as well be that idea.” (2012).

Typically, a GPOY post combines an image and a caption, in part or entirely consisting of hashtags, one of which is #GPOY (or #current status). The images and gifs posted are usually posted without reference to the source. The image content, hashtags and captions comprise an intertextual assemblage, where one “text” modifies the way another is “read”, or a juxtaposition is created between two or more “texts.” Consider, for example how each element influences the possible interpretations of the others, and the whole, when a gif of Bart and Homer Simpson (from *The Simpsons*) making “snow angels” in a pile of fast food wrappers is combined with a #GPOY hashtag and a caption that reads “my wife is away until Tuesday.” This is clearly a joke about the family’s eating habits in the absence of the poster’s wife. The status of *The Simpsons* as humorous makes the post funnier than just writing “my wife is away, my child and I will only eat fast food until Tuesday.” The gif would be funny to someone who has never seen *The Simpsons*; its significance is manifold for those who have. Homer Simpson’s predilection for fast food is well known. We can assume that the gif is to be read as lighthearted exaggeration; nobody would blame the poster for bad parenting or reproducing gendered stereotypes by discursively framing himself as incapable of cooking or making responsible dietary choices.

For a post to function as GPOY, it only needs to be said that it is GPOY. Pointing at something and saying that one has chosen it as self-representative makes the assemblage of tags, text and image a culturally intelligible self-representation. Insofar as there are requirements which merit *successful* instantiation of the genre, they relate to the objectives of doing GPOY well: originally, humorously, unexpectedly, with insight, and in a way that is quintessentially *you*.

#### 4. EDC

EDC is an acronym for “everyday carry”. EDC imagery and discussion can be found in various online locations, including reddit, Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, Pinterest, Flickr, and a number of fora, including the eponymous EDCForums. There are also numerous public “clearing house” EDC photoblogs: including [everydaycarry.com](http://everydaycarry.com), [pocketvomit.tumblr.com](http://pocketvomit.tumblr.com), and [epicedc.com](http://epicedc.com).

A description furnished by Bernard Capulong at [everydaycarry.com](http://everydaycarry.com) unwittingly highlights the tension around EDC as self-representational practice: “As the Everyday Carry community grows, I hear from intrigued visitors who end up scrolling through pages and pages of photos and still not completely understand [sic] what it’s all about.” He goes on: “The everyday carry philosophy is built upon the cornerstones of utility and preparedness. Each component of your EDC should serve a purpose or have at least one specific, useful function” (2015).

The tension is as follows: entry-level accounts of EDC present it as being “about” thinking ahead: reflexively selecting and carrying objects to deal with routine (or exceptional) contingencies. As a vernacular philosophy, EDC has roots in the worldviews associated with rugged individualism and the “paranoid style” associated perhaps especially with some forms of masculinity in the U.S. (Hofstadter, 2008). EDCers are sometimes referred to as “pocket preppers”. As Drozdowicz suggests, EDC can be understood as a hyperconsumerist transmogrification of Puritan values of self-reliance, combined with a millenarian concern about the possibility of disaster (2014).

EDC, irrespective of its “philosophy”, is thus a consumption and display subculture (“pages and pages of photos”). It is a self-representational practice conducted through the production, circulation, and viewing of images of these objects (and latterly, the objects themselves). The objects and the circulation of their image are so closely linked that one well-known handkerchief maker, Hanks by Hank, states on his Instagram profile: “These will kick your Instagram pics up a notch or 2 instantly, let’s make that 3!” (2015). The principal selling point for such an item is that it enhances online EDC display.

The more public, anonymous, and commercial contexts of sites like everydaycarryblog.com are characterized by a high turnover of user submitted images, and where items are identified and available, links to where they can be purchased.

These clearinghouse sites share an important feature with the reddit r/EDC: the use of shorthand relating the carry to minimally defined social identities. Images are thus often titled in the form “Jeff, IT consultant”, or even more commonly, the form “27/F/Engineer” or “20/M/Comp. Sci. major”. The viewer is thus invited to consider how incumbency of a social position so defined relates to the items presented in the image: a person of that sort carries things like that. The relation is co-constitutive.

This is at once almost completely anonymous, and strangely, deeply intimate: the imprint of a wallet; a favored pen or bag; the weight of a set of keys that presses on the body all day every day. These small things, if seen in ordinary life at all, are only glimpsed in passing. Outside of EDC imagery, the only times when such an ensemble of items, estranged from their owner, are seen or handled by others is when they are removed in the course of detention, or given to next of kin on death.

5. Visual self-representation on social media: the rise of the selfie

Earlier studies of online visual self-representation focused on avatars, profile and dating site pictures (Whitty, 2008; Siibak, 2009; Schwarz, 2010; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011), and photo sharing on platforms such as Flickr (Van House, 2007; Richter and Schadler, 2009). This research indicates that people usually exercise conscious impression management; selecting photos they think corroborate, support or otherwise align with the textual components of their profiles. An intertextual sensitivity to how the various elements of content cohere in self-representation is thus exhibited. Van House (2011) has argued further that personal digital photographs are vehicles to express aesthetics and reproduce and reconstitute social norms. They are therefore representative of more than our appearances, permitting us to extend in various ways the scope of how we wish to be understood.

Recently, there has been a sharp increase in the scholarly interest in selfies (cf. special issues in *International Journal of Communication*, eds. Senft & Baym, 2015, or *Social Media and Society*, eds. Warfield, Cambre & Abidin, 2016). While selfies are commonly theorized as both self-presentations in the performative or Goffmanian sense, and as self-representations, in the semiotic tradition, Lasén's (2015) approach of selfie sharing entailing presentation, representation *and* embodiment is perhaps the most inclusive.

Based on casual observations of popular culture, the selfie is arguably the most discussed form of visual self-representation today. As a mass phenomenon, it is commonly understood in quite reductive ways. Popular discourses on the selfie often hinge on the content of the image, and what the acts of taking and sharing selfies seemingly imply about the individual engaging in them. In the language of self-representation then, selfies are treated as representations of the

corporeal, but also the moral or intellectual aspects of the self (as the abundant diagnoses of narcissism imply).

Popular definitions frame selfies simply as images one takes (and uploads) of one's own face or body; *a priori* assuming the presence of human figures in the images. The growing scholarly literature on selfies, however, interprets them as assemblages of subjectivities, within a massively mediated and networked society (Hess, 2015), and as simultaneously photographic objects and socio-cultural practices, indicative of what different cultures value or dismiss (Senft & Baym, 2015). Speaking more directly to the representational aspects of selfies, Frosh (2015, p. 1609) remarks: "the selfie as an index is less the trace of a reality imprinted on the photograph than of an action enacted by a photographer ... it exploits indexicality in favor of connective performance rather than semantic reference." A broadening of the ground for considering images as self-representational can thus be discerned within the critical selfie scholarship. We want to build on this and take it further: decoupling the mandatory presence of a face/body from the definition of a selfie, thus taking the thinking on visual self-representation beyond the dynamics of good/bad, empowering/objectifying that the selfie debate has tended to emphasize.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Self-representation in #EDC and #GPOY not-selfies

In this section, we offer some interpretations of our fieldwork data demonstrating how #EDC and #GPOY practices instantiate tacit, intertextual, recognizable genres (Thumin 2012; Lüders, Proitz & Rasmussen, 2010) constituted by visual practices, meant to communicate something of what the poster identifies with (Bamberg, 2011), and recognized as such by others. The following is thus structured with respect to elements of the definition of self-representation

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<sup>1</sup> There is a wide range of literature addressing the articulation of selfhood and social identity across and through objects and other things. We cannot hope to do justice to this literature here, but see for example Belk (1988; 2014), Chevalier (2014), Fowler (2004), Shields (2003), and Strathern (1988).

as genre (identification, flexibility, intertextuality, recognizability) that we are using and seek to develop.

#### Identification, indexicality and identity

Among sexy selfie enthusiasts, #GPOY manifests a particular paradox: saying or showing *more* about oneself by departing creatively and playfully from the conventional indexicality of the embodied self, and through that exhibiting, figuratively, a “true” feeling or sensibility. GPOY makes evident one’s identification with something else, and through that posits an identity claim. EDC posts are on some sites tethered to minimally specified social positions (e.g. M/28/electrician), but similarly to GPOY, the bulk of the identity work is done by the images. However, people who post EDC images do not precisely identify *with* pocketknives or pens, they identify *as* being the type of people who do EDC, and delegate the artful expression of this to the objects and their representation. They are interested in being (seen as) particular kinds of people: prepared, competent, knowledgeable; but also *au fait*, stylish, cool: the cognoscenti. In both cases, then, an intertextually legible content assemblage (a post that combines the caption, the hashtags and the image) is produced, and recognized as indexical to a self the poster in that moment identifies with or wants to identify with.

We can explore this further by contrasting some of the specificities of GPOY and EDC.

Sexy selfie enthusiasts on Tumblr use #GPOY and #current status images to communicate in particular ways, and to make specific identity-statements. The distinction from their other self-representational forms (in textual posts and selfies) is that GPOY seems reserved for types of identification that would otherwise have no suitable outlet. Thus, GPOY is a kind of

tact or “face” strategy used to make self-referential statements the poster might feel embarrassed, uncertain or vulnerable about.

This can take the form of using #GPOY to complain or seek compassion without violating the tacit norm that “nobody likes whiny blogs.” For example, an image of a toy bunny in bed with a towel on its forehead, is captioned with “If I wake up from my Tylenol coma, I might answer some emails, but I can’t promise anything, love you Tumblr”, and hashtagged #sick bunny #tired #sleepy #my life #gpoy #goodnight. Similarly, #GPOY and #current status are used to reveal vulnerable aspects of one’s personality. An “anxiety cat meme” with a text that read “go to party, play with the dog all night” is posted with a caption that reads “my husband just said: ‘oh, I’ve seen you do that.’” The tags following this were #anxiety #anxiety cat #gpoy #animals are sometimes easier to talk to # I’m an anxious weirdo.

Analogously, #GPOY is used for identifying with practices that are potentially stigmatizable. In this community BDSM is quite popular and openly spoken about in long text posts, via selfies and in reblogs, but women who prefer dd/lg (daddy/little girl) roleplay often use #GPOY and #current status to represent those aspects of their sexuality. Thus a gif of the pop singer Ariana Grande with her hair in ribboned pigtails, demonstratively pouting, is captioned “When Daddy goes on a date with another girl”, and hashtagged #current status #hmph #pout #little #Daddy #gif #but but but #curls #bows #ribbons #pouty #non monogamy #jealous.

Finally, confident or self-flattering statements that many cultures teach us are immodest are also made via #GPOY. This can take the form of “borrowing” cuteness or sexiness from animal photos or illustrations. Very often captions and tags in this type of posting are limited to the single #GPOY label, indicative of the slight discomfort of being self-complementary.

GPOY facilitates specific, hard-to-express or hard-to-place, and sometimes potentially face-threatening identifications. Desired responses (compassion, admiration, acceptance or encouragement) are evoked by emphasizing that one identifies with an object/image/idea/message/character/existing story carrying those traits in an evident way. A tiny, fluffy, bunny is indisputably cute. A sad, sick kitten is indisputably worthy of compassion. Similarly, some images are fairly obviously (especially within a culture or a community) sexy or “bad ass”, and make certain sexual kinks more palatable or attractive.

EDC too is practiced to make specific identity statements. These can be understood variously as assertions of personal attributes (organization, competence), of community belonging and participation (within the subculture), and of expert knowledge, acumen and style (via possession of rare items).

There is an ethic and an aesthetic of EDC. To do EDC well is to secure sought-after items, balance them harmoniously with respect to each other, and arrange them artfully for display. It is a way of “doing” or “being” a self: communicating one in accordance with adroit play around the rule. EDC must be personalized. EDC images featuring items such as condoms, eyeliner, sunscreen, painkillers, umbrellas, tampons, lip balm, diapers, or pacifiers are not unheard of, but they are uncommon. Some such items will be “cute” when incorporated in EDC images, because they are, in a small way, incongruent with the form.

EDC as a “refined” practice is thus about *gear* and the acquisition thereof. There do not seem to be obligatory EDC items, but EDC images usually feature some of the following: flashlights, pens, pocketknives (the “light, write, slice” triumvirate), notebooks, wallets, cardholders or billfolds, key rings or key organizers, handkerchiefs, multi-tools, lighters,

vaporizers, watches, spinning tops, combs, hobo or challenge coins, thumb drives, pocket organizers, bags and backpacks, and knuckles (especially single-finger) or other self-defense items, including firearms. Some desirable instances of these items are rare and difficult to source.

Concurrently, participation in the community is an end in itself. EDC is a mode of sociality oriented to and through these objects, and EDC images are the sign of that, and the type of object most widely circulated within the context. EDC is “about” mediated sociality: mediated via the circulation of images, and mediated via EDC objects and their trajectories.

#### Flexibility and interpretive openness

In both EDC and GPOY, the *flow* of images, the configurability of the flow of images, and the routine and rhythmic practices of production, sharing and viewing, are important. Self-representation as constitutive of and mediating the social and the everyday become evident when we look at EDC and GPOY practices in their local context. EDC and GPOY form and frame the context for their own intelligibility as elements in a mosaic of everyday practices. The point we wish to emphasize here is that *local context matters*, and highlights how self-representations circulate in particular ways, are accessed and viewed in particular contexts, have temporally bound network densities, are clustered via particular algorithms and semantic practices (such as the tags circulated with and nominating GPOY or EDC images as such) and so on.

GPOY, for example, can be used to behave in ways that go against the tacit rules of interaction in the community, but do so in an interpretively flexible way, allowing one multiple different communicative accomplishments for multiple different groups with various levels of interpretive expertise. The sexy selfie enthusiasts’ community generally operates with a very high level of tolerance and politeness, such that responding to private interactions in a public,

ridiculing way (Tumblr allows you to publish private messages) is frowned upon. However, sometimes women in the community get messages where people make demands, or send unsolicited “proof of manly desire”. In these cases #GPOY is employed: to express anger and annoyance, to shut down a particular communication, to publicly indicate a lack of desire for other such communications, all without opening oneself up to allegations of being “overly emotional,” “hysterical” or “bitchy”, such as women’s textual efforts to stand up for themselves on the internet are often met with. Thus a message from a stranger that said: “Helloo :) do you like camsexx?? :)” was published with nothing more than a #GPOY hashtag and a gif of a giant fish suddenly leaping out of a river and slapping a fisherman across his face, knocking off his hat.

In EDC, a somewhat paradoxical acceptance of the transience of the objects so important for the culture is built in to the activity. According to the parameters of the practice, it is good to realize an absence; that carrying some thing could possibly improve one’s quality of life. It shows thoughtful and reflexive engagement. It is better still, having had this realization, to exhibit *discernment* via the object selected to fulfill those requirements. EDC is therefore comprehensible in the terms given by Bourdieu (1984) and Thornton (1995), and via a different trajectory, those furnished by Appadurai et al (1986). EDC is ongoing; always and of necessity unending and incomplete. “Grail” items are sold on as the next grail appears. Members speak of the items “in the rotation”, meaning there are several such items in possession and use. The objective as far as the carry is concerned is to continue to experiment and refine, to explore new avenues, try out different things, and expand a collection but also a knowledge base, a social network, and a personage: a self.

## Intertextuality and multimodality

As described above, #GPOY and #EDC are forms of metaleptic signaling requiring specific literacies for sound use and interpretation. They make identity claims, and manage interactions and perceptions in semi-public contexts. GPOY and EDC, succinctly, are tags, that index and mobilize the shared conventions guiding the effective interpretation of these communicative gestures.

Both GPOY and EDC imply that the best way of understanding (some feature of) the identity of the poster is to follow their gesture and look to an elsewhere, similar to Frosh's (2015, p. 1610) account of the selfie as a gesture of "see me showing you me": reflexively pointing, although in these cases at something other than their embodied self. In GPOY, it is something drawn from the vast pool of existing online images and the shared references to popular culture they mobilize. In EDC, it is an image of an arrangement of possessions. The "other thing" chosen to represent the self commonly possesses multiple layers of meaning with which to identify, and for others with suitable cultural capital to appreciate.

In the case of GPOY an image or a gif is of something (an animal, a character, an object) that looks a certain way (cute, pathetic, sexy). It may be from a pre-existing narrative (a TV show, a film, a cartoon), with text added. All of these, when combined in complementing or juxtaposing ways, come together into an intertextual assemblage which permits understanding at various levels for both the producer and the viewer. A TV show gif may be chosen based on the looks of the scene and the characters and without knowledge of the storyline, but the more intertextual layers are available to producers and viewers, the more it will offer in terms of information and affective response.

With EDC, an image of specific items is ordinarily combined with some text. But the meanings of those items (together, and separately) are specialized: layers of understanding and appreciation are available based on the cultural capital at the viewer's disposal. There are (homo-) social worlds devoted to many, or perhaps all, of the collectibles that comprise EDC, with devoted markets for pens, flashlights, bags, knives, and perhaps most obviously watches.

Prestige EDC objects are often boutique or bespoke, but not really "designer". A rare, custom-made pry bar from an up-and-coming maker may be sought after, but not a Louis Vuitton wallet. The latter is permissible, but nobody is really interested in it, partly because the only barrier to possession for such an item is price. The closest to an exception to this is high-end watches (which are expensive, but also a quest to source, as with vintage Panerai or Rolex). But the high end is by definition inaccessible, and as with other items, EDC watches are often valued for durability or application rather than signification of luxury.

Analogously, it is possible to collect pocketknives without experiencing the sticker shock at the upper end of the market. Scarcity is significant in EDC; craft manufacturing sometimes trades on scarcity as a stalking horse for quality. Scarcity can drive price, but does not require that it be set prohibitively at point of release. Money can help, but it takes more than money to play. The display of EDC items produced in limited runs is usually a sign of a financial investment, of the kind Eisenberg deemed "heroic consumption" (1988: 15). There are objects commanding imposing prices within EDC, which are utterly inexplicable to the uninitiated. For EDC though, this display is also, more importantly, a sign of commitment, of *savoir-faire*, of social connections and shared enthusiasms, of patience, of astute observation and careful planning, and of good taste. Ownership of prestige EDC items entails active and ongoing participation in the (often relatively restricted) networks oriented to the exhibition and transfer of

these goods. EDC images are thus read differently depending on the trajectory and EDC “career” location of the viewer.

Both #GPOY and #EDC are multimodal, combining (multiple kinds of) images (still, moving, memes) with multiple kinds of text (searchable tags, captions), thus facilitating the capacity to communicate more, with less effort, and with a higher likelihood of being seen/read.

### Recognizability

GPOY not-selfies can be of anything, so long as they are not of the person who posted them. One of the principal rules is to post something *touching*, which presents an opportunity for empathetic insight. This is the difference that is the same in successful GPOY images. EDC images must, of course, instantiate the rule in depicting EDC items (the sameness is different: always the same sorts of things, with minor but significant variations in the items and the composition). EDC is similar to GPOY insofar as it involves a kind of double mediation: a digital image, which is not of a person, as a mode of self-representation. According to the definitions we are working with, it is important that self-representation is recognized as such by others. With GPOY posts, the tags (#GPOY or #current status) include an actual reference to identification with something (“this picture of not-me is a picture of me”). However, for both EDC and GPOY the ability to recognize the posts as flexible, intertextual self-representation comes with immersion in and understanding of the local context. Self-representations are not messages in bottles *ex nihilo*, thrown into the sea. As with other communicative practices, intelligibility and sound parsing require, reiterate and play upon situational knowledge and familiarity with shared histories and priorities. Seeing an EDC or GPOY post in isolation (especially without cognizance of the acronyms and their histories and cultures of use) might

confuse an uninformed viewer as to what the image is or what it is supposed to do. When seeing a flow of them across one's dashboard in the context of the surrounding interaction, however, it is quite easy to understand that what is at stake here is not bunnies and pocketknives but people's experienced, relational, human selves.

## 7. Conclusion

We have sought to present a straightforward argument about self-representation within particular online communities: that EDC and GPOY images are not only eligible for consideration as forms within the genre of self-representation, but also that this is how they are understood locally, and should be understood. We make this argument to broaden the understanding of visual self-representation in digital communication, as going beyond performances of embodiment. Through doing so, we suggest that not only should we not equate self-representation in digital communication with selfies, we also shouldn't equate selfies with performances of embodiment either. By making these arguments, we hope to have added to an understanding of self-representation as a genre, rather than a particular kind of text.

Attending to selfies is vitally important to a sound understanding of how body and body-identity practices articulate through mediated environments. Yet the mere presence of a face/body does not make a photograph a selfie: intentionality and perceived representativeness seem to be of importance (this is why we sometimes see technically non-selfie photos of celebrities being referred to as selfies). The uploader has to understand and/or intend it to be understood that the shared image is representative of "who they are", and others can, in some sense "correctly" recognize it as a representation relevant to forming an understanding of that person's self-conception at that moment. Selfies, and play with the form that is the selfie, have

both a politics of identity and a politics of authenticity. Attending to not-selfies of the sort we have described here demonstrates that multiple representational logics of identity are in use, and facilitates an understanding of how such logics are articulated.

In a sense, EDC and GPOY simply invite the acknowledgement that mediation occurs at an anterior level: images are representations, but they are also things, and things mediate social selves and identities. Where digital images are acknowledged as artefactual rather than transparent, the idea that other kinds of objects could also do this self-representational work seems uncontroversial: “people use objects to represent themselves to those around them” (Shankar, 2006: 296). The process of objectification enabling a sleeping kitten or the contents of someone’s pockets to stand as a forthright representation of them is analogous to that which renders digital image captures of bodies or faces referentially unproblematic. Not-selfies are heightened in terms of their communicative function precisely because they are “of” the people who took them, in such a way as to say things about them or communicate on their behalf, in ways that can be, locally, more profound and direct than self-portraits. This becomes recognizable to others as self-representation because it is embedded in ongoing local practices of intertextual, interpretively flexible, multimodal identification. Disarticulating self-representation from the meanings of single images, and moving away from the body (however malleable) as ultimate arbiter of selfhood, allows us to develop a definition of self-representation as an intertextual genre of expressed identification, and thereby more accurately describe the range of what we can (claim to) be.

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