

Digital Youth Assemblages:

Affective Entanglements of Sharing (Anti-)Selfies on Instagram

Abstract

Following up on current discussions of digital youth culture, this article examines the concept of assemblage and its potential for understanding the ambiguous forces that shape young people's everyday media practices. In the first part of the article, we argue for approaching these forces in their affective materiality. To provide a situated example, in the second part of the article, we explore the distribution of relations between hashtags *#selfie* and *#antiselfie* attached to 200 photos that were publicly shared on Instagram between August 1st and 30th of November 2019. By focusing on the network of tagging, liking and sharing selfies, we consider the resulting hybrid assemblage of Instagram youth in its multiplicity – from the digital affordances of connectivity and relations of identity performance to the attention economy of Instagram and its manifold affective dynamics that are at play.

Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von aktuellen Diskussionen zur digitalen Jugendkultur wird in diesem Beitrag das Potential des theoretischen Konzepts der Assemblage genutzt, um Einblicke in die vielfältigen Kräfte zu gewinnen, die sich in alltäglichen Medienpraktiken junger Menschen entfalten. Im ersten Teil des Beitrags plädieren wir dafür, diesen Kräften in ihrer affektiven Materialität nachzugehen. Im zweiten Teil stellen wir ein ‚situiertes‘ Beispiel vor, indem wir die Relationen zwischen 200 Instagram-Fotos analysieren, die mit den Hashtags *#selfie* und *#antiselfie* im Zeitraum von 1. August bis 30. November 2019 veröffentlicht wurden. Das Taggen, Liken und Teilen von Selfies auf Instagram wird dabei als eine hybride, durch mannigfaltige Agency-Formen gekennzeichnete Jugend-Assemblage beschrieben. Diese Assemblage umfasst die digitalen Affordanzen der Konnektivität, die performativen Inszenierungen von Identität, die Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie von Instagram sowie die mannigfaltigen affektiven Relationen, die darin involviert sind.

Keywords: Digital youth, selfies, anti-selfies, Instagram, assemblage, affect, platform capitalism.

1 Introduction

In their plea “for a new youth studies”, Dan Woodman and Andy Bennett (2015a) stress the need to go beyond the ‘twin track’ that has previously structured youth research by either emphasizing young people’s processes of transition or their various cultural practices. To attend to “the ‘ordinary’ of experiences of young everyday lives (including the various mixtures of inequalities as well as potentials” (Woodman & Bennett, 2015b, p. 187), the authors propose the use of conceptualizations like ‘assemblage’ and ‘becoming’ as developed by Deleuze and Guattari. Following up on this discussion, in the first part of the article, we examine the notion of assemblage in its potential for understanding the ambiguous forces that shape digital youth culture. We also argue for approaching these forces in their affective materiality. In the second part, we further explore both concepts as a way of overcoming the two oppositional readings that dominate research into young people’s use of selfies on social media platforms such as Instagram: On the one hand, internet scholars often problematize selfies as stereotypical objects of visual circulation, conforming to consumer culture and narcissistic trends. On the other hand, selfies have been celebrated for their liberating potentials involving alternative configurations of identity, gender and sexuality. As Senft and Baym (2015) summarized five years ago in their examination of the phenomenon in the *International Journal of Communication*, selfies are ubiquitous: They are productive practices of human agents, they are photographic objects, and as soon as they enter digital space they become “part of the infrastructure of the *digital superpublic*” (Senft & Baym 2015, p. 1589) where nonhuman agents are at work as well. Well suited for grasping “the pushes and pulls” (Woodman & Bennett 2015a, p. 7) of these multiple agencies, the concept of assemblage enacts valuable insights into the interplay between the cultural relevance of selfies and the social network of Instagram youth. To provide a situated example, we explore the distribution of relations between hashtags *#selfie* and *#antiselfie* attached to a total number of 200 most liked photos that were publicly shared on Instagram between August 1st and November 30th 2019. We use a digital methods approach to data extraction and analysis – an “online-grounded” (Rogers, 2019, p. 21) set of analytical tools for studying digitally mediated participatory cultures in conjunction with the technological infrastructures of platforms that host them. By focusing on the embeddedness of Instagram youth in platform practices of tagging, liking and sharing selfies, we consider the resulting hybrid assemblage in its multiplicity – from the digital affordances of connectivity, to the relations between identity performance and networked photographic objects to the attention economy of Instagram and its manifold affective relations that are at play.

2 Youth assemblages

What characterizes young people under contemporary conditions is the way in which they are affected by and make use of the constantly evolving hardware and software as

part of their environment. In this way it makes sense to speak of a “posthuman youth as a socio-technological assemblage” (Leurs, Shepherd & Harvey, 2019, p. 463). Such an assemblage can take quite different forms depending on the parts of the world where young people are located. In the global South, for example, young people work in mines to produce the minerals needed for electronics, whereas the digital media practices of affluent youth in the Global North have become main targets for data mining and advertisement (Leurs et al., 2019, p. 464–465). In both cases, one of the driving forces in the assemblages is global capitalism. Since the focus in our paper is on selfies, we will only consider here the side of capitalism Jodi Dean (2016) describes as ‘communicative capitalism’. For Dean late capitalism materialises in networked communication technologies that are defined by an intensification of the speed and amount of content that circulates. Young people are strongly involved in this circulation of content. With their posts, likes, uploads etc., young people are doing ‘free’, or what is also called ‘affective’ labour while, at the same time, they are affected by what ‘sticks’ with them in these circulations. What ‘sticks’ is a term used by Sara Ahmed (2004a) to describe how the attachment between different elements creates collective emotions. These dynamic constellations, which are infused with power relations, have become key spaces for young people’s explorations and constitutions of identity. We believe that the concept of assemblage as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) provides a productive orientation towards the processes involved.

2.1 Assembling youth, media, and capitalism

The concept of assemblage in a DeleuzoGuattarian sense¹⁾ is based on a specific understanding of life – freed from pre-given, fixed norms and categories, focussing instead on the creative processes, transformations, events and intensities that constitute life. Life is understood as ‘machinic’ (Colebrook, 2002, pp. xv–xxii): “Life creates and furthers itself by forming connections or territories” (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxii). This is also where their understanding of desire – as productive flow that works through making connections – comes into fruition. This is quite different from the Lacanian understanding of desire as something we are longing for (to overcome a lack). For Deleuze and Guattari, desire “is a process of increasing expansion, connection and creation. Desire [...] is the productive process of life that produces organisms and selves” (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxii), and it is in this sense ‘machinic’. To stress the productive aspects of desire, they use the term ‘desiring-production’ (Harper & Savat, 2016, p. 123). “(E)verything that has life energy produces and, at the same time, every investment of desire is productive” (Harper & Savat, 2016, p. 8). Desire is something we do – it is the flows of our desire that forms connections and produces the world we know.

1) In their thought-provoking writings Deleuze and Guattari don’t use terms according to their common sense understanding and also invent new concepts to disrupt our (traditional) ways of theorizing. They want to steer us away from structural and correlational thinking, where we assume certain power-relations as given and treat things as if they were isolated from each other. They focus on processes, intensities, flows, affect and ‘becoming’ instead of being and the presumption of already existing wholes separated from each other.

The function of society then is to regulate the flow of desire (a process called ‘coding’), to give some structure, constitute social formations and particular forms of subjectivity. Under contemporary conditions of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2016), this regulation is based on liberating the flows of desire first, which are then immediately re-coded and captured in the form of lack. In this setting, our impulses, interactions and affects become part of the economic infrastructure.

‘Difference’ and ‘becoming’ are two key terms for Deleuze and Guattari, conceptualised as problematizations of the focus in Western thinking on ‘being’ and ‘identity’ (Deleuze, 1990; Deleuze, 1994). Everything is a product of processes of ‘becoming’. This also holds for the human subject, which “ought not to be perceived as a stable, rational individual, experiencing changes but remaining, principally, the same person” (Stagoll, 2005a, p. 22). ‘Difference’ here does not refer to what usually is understood as difference – difference from the same, based on categorizations and (the identity of) things. Differentiations like subject and object, nature and culture, human and non-human, mind and matter, which have strongly determined Western thinking up to now, are problematized. It is no longer presumed that there are singular, discrete entities that interact with one another, but the focus is on the potentially infinite relations of various components and what this produces. In this sense, ‘difference’ refers to the particularity, to the singularity of a thing or a moment. The focus is on the experience, that is, on the unique connections and intensities that are produced in a specific situation or event (Stagoll, 2005b, pp. 72–73). Such an approach does not dispense with power relations, discourses and processes of subjectification. They are theorized and understood differently – as forces, events, affects and relations of/in assemblages.

Discursive formations and power relations come into play in assemblages through the ways the flows are channelled and regulated. This is obvious when we look at media. For Deleuze and Guattari contemporary media are machines that produce a specific form of culture – commodity culture – with our subjectivities being produced as part of it. Media are seen as very efficient machines that encourage us to follow our desires generated as lacking full subjectivity. This is best illustrated by advertising which relies on an understanding of the desires of the media users (as, for example, through data mining of our traces on the internet) and then tries to channel them (through personalized advertising) to produce further flows. Here we can see how advertising normalizes our desires, captures them and turns them into profit (Harper & Savat, 2016, pp. 136–137). Another example of how the flow of desire is captured is by genres in media production. Genres capture creative expressions through categorizations and classifications of media content. At the same time, we always have media products that do not nicely fit into existing genre-categories; but often later they will be used to establish a new category. All this illustrates the continuous processes of what Deleuze and Guattari call deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation – the ceaseless attempts to stabilize an assemblage while, at the same time, there are always unforeseen forces and connections that can change the assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

2.2 Affective youth assemblage

Assemblages exist on all scales, from historical epochs and our subjectivity to media practices such as the selfie and biological assemblages like the orchid-wasp. It is important to keep in mind that the fact that nothing exists in isolation also holds for ‘individuals’. We are always engaged in specific assemblages, are part of various assemblages and are constituted as subjects in these processes. Any time we connect with something from our environment, when we plug into a machine, something happens. What happens is a change of intensity in an assemblage, as a result of “a force that things exert on other things” (Tiessen, 2013, p. 13) – that is called affect. Affect is more than what we are used to describe as feelings or emotions (which are our recognitions of such affections in retrospect). Affect works on the visceral level as “the change or variation that occurs when bodies collide or come into contact” (Colman, 2005, p. 11). Affect is the flow between the components. And, in this respect, affect is what defines bodies, that is their capacity to affect and be affected. When Deleuze and Guattari talk about body they do not only have the human body in mind but any body – this can be an animal, a rock, a film. In the digital context, this can be a smartphone, a user, an advertisement, an app, and so on. Since a body is an assemblage, defined by the relations of its parts, with every connection, the capacity to act (that is the capacity to affect and be affected) can increase or decrease. This also means that we do not know in advance what a body can do (Deleuze, 1988, p. 17). The changes in the capacities to affect and be affected that take place all the time (most of the time they are not noticed consciously), are also called ‘becomings’ (to be understood as ‘becoming different’) (Baugh, 2005; Harper & Savat, 2016, pp. 8–9).

When we approach youth from a DeleuzoGuattarian perspective, we consider youth as a component in various assemblages (like family, school, sport teams, digital networks, video games). Only then are we able to get an idea of all the forces, affects, intensities and dynamics that are involved in the fluid processes constituting contemporary young adults. All these assemblages are affective arrangements (Slaby, Mühlhoff & Wüschner, 2019) which often entice individuals to plug in by offering opportunities for attachment through immediate and intense experiences (of pleasure, excitement, and belonging).

To give some insight into these affective entanglements, we first present two studies on youth and social media before we discuss the notion of Instagram youth in our own study about the circulation of (anti)selfies. Jessica Ringrose (2011) investigates the connections between school assemblages and online assemblages. Her study illustrates clearly how desires of adolescents are channelled by social media, but also, how plugging into a social networking site can produce a freeing of the flow of desire. Ringrose is interested in young people’s engagement with the social networking site *Bebo* (which was very popular among young people in 2008 in the UK). She shows how both the online assemblage and the school assemblage are shaped by commodified gender-

red and sexualized norms. This can be seen in the design of the *Bebo*-profiles as well as in the links to favourite songs, sports brands, and movies. Ringrose demonstrates how the template with categories like ‘top friends’ and ‘other half’ (for romantic attachment) organize and channel the flow of affects. Through her case study focusing on experiences of a young teen girl, Ringrose is able to illustrate how negotiating relationships online (around the comment ‘fat slag’ she received) affected the girl’s capacity to act in the school assemblage. Ringrose also shows, in this case, that the young female adult was able to express her anger online, which is an example of freeing her desire from constraining social norms regarding the image of desirable femininity.

The second study by Carlquist et al. (2019) analyses the way Norwegian youth (aged 16–19) talk about Snapchat and negotiate their sense of being affected by Snapchat. In their study, they follow the discussions of a group of young men who are an ethnic minority in Norway (where national identity is strongly connected to homogeneity and whiteness). The researchers use Sara Ahmed’s (2004a; 2008) conceptualisation of ‘happiness’ as something that is promised through the closeness to certain objects. Ahmed stresses that the promise of happiness functions as a regulatory power in the sense that it directs people to certain types of objects, and that this is something that is shared in specific contexts. Carlquist et al. are particularly interested in the fact that, according to Ahmed, the formation and maintenance of social bonds occurs when certain ‘happy objects’ are shared to make the participants feel good. They found that Snapchat-selfies constitute such objects that promise happiness, e.g., by offering a means of play with dominant ethnic subjectivities in combination with Black rapper nicknames (Carlquist, Proitz & Roen, 2019, p. 242). Another articulation of “good feelings” derives from the ways in which snaps received from a girl make young men experience positive emotions. Expressive of normative forms of heterosexual desire, both interactive practices are variously embodied and ambiguous in their capacity to produce social bonds. Drawing on Margaret Wheterell’s (2012) concept of ‘affective practice’, Carlquist et al. (2019) approach selfies as mundane contributions to the “streams of fun and cringe” that constitute youth life as part of a wider socio-technological assemblage. In what follows, we provide a situated analysis of yet another formation of this assemblage by further exploring youth cultures of selfie-sharing on Instagram.

3 Approaching youth cultures through Instagram #(anti)selfie assemblage

Over the past ten years, Instagram has become a central hub for designing new ways in which millennials experience and curate their digital connections. Youth studies focusing on Instagram have been analyzing young people’s understandings of self-expression in contexts as different as ‘influencer’ cultures and branding (Abidin, 2015; Marwick, 2015), intimacy and mental health issues (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; Seabrook, Kern & Rickard, 2016), gender performance and body-positive art (Caldeira, De Ridder & Van

Bauwel, 2018). In our analysis, we further develop the affective notion of youth network culture by demonstrating how young people's navigations of everyday life on Instagram shape and are shaped through platformed practices such as tagging, liking, and sharing selfies. By following the circulation of user-generated content through Instagram hashtags #selfie and #antiselfie, we argue that young people's networked self-representations can be approached as part of a larger assemblage of relations that produce the experience of youth as hyper-connected, embodied, and culturally contested. In particular, we suggest that Instagram youth cultures may be reinforced by algorithmic infrastructures of visibility where bodies, images and platform technologies are intertwined within a double-fold relation of the singular and the common. For this purpose, we borrow the concepts of "selfie assemblage" (Hess, 2015) and "communicative capitalism" (Dean, 2016) to consider whether and how the relationship of self, device, space, and Instagram platform constitutes youth as an affective source of value generation. If hybridity and difference are being constantly reterritorialized within capitalist networks of affective capture and reproduction, what does it mean to critically approach young people's digitally enhanced social 'selves' as part of the attention economy that Instagram selfies partake of?

Selfies and visual communication have been common for Instagram since its launch in the Apple App Store on October 6, 2010. Initiated as a mobile application for instantly sharing photos, over the years, the platform has morphed into a messy influencer network with complex visual aesthetic and attention economy (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020). Before posting a selfie, users are not only invited to provide images of themselves with filters, captions and hashtags, but to attract more attention, Instagram also gives a possibility of mentioning through the "@" symbol that links the post to other users' accounts. After the platform was purchased for a \$1 billion by Facebook in 2012, its culture of self-display has become a trademark that comes with the promise of popularity through lifestyle performance and networking. Especially for teenagers and younger millennials whose engagement currently makes up 36,1% of platform traffic (Statista, 2020) the routine of sharing selfies in the name of the so-called *Instafame* comes close to the value of social capital. As Alice Marwick (2015, p. 138) notes, young influencers' well-rehearsed digital self-portraits are central in view of 'instagrammable' online identity management: Users "obsessively document outfits, cars, vacations, and landscapes; and fill their posts with hashtags like #instafamous and #followforfollow" to make other people like their photos. The communicative affordances of the platform engaging teens in the world of carefully curated and variously connected online personas produce an eclectic socio-technological formation of access and visibility (see also boyd, 2008). By allowing up to five public accounts per user that can be switched via the push of a button, the platform offers more than just several opportunities for identity experimentation (Berkman Klein Center, 2018). Beyond diversifying the possibilities of self-exploration and cultural contact, it transforms the generative potential of youth into a source of socioeconomic energy for purposes of extracting monetary value out of online

connections (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018, pp. 24–25). Embedded in this platformed assemblage, young people's desire for likes and followers is what drives the circulation of selfies as affective objects: "Selfies are, on face, about the self, yet they long for – require, even – sharing to be considered 'true' selfies" (Hess, 2015, p. 1631).

Our key interest in the following sections is in understanding how the use of Instagram selfies is embedded in the specific formations of platform experience under which being young and #instafamous is not only extremely relatable, but also contested in its capacity to generate attention. To provide a situated example of these formations, we examined co-tag relations of #*selfie* (100 posts) and #*antiselfie* (100 posts) attached to a total number of 200 most liked photos that were publicly shared on Instagram between August 1st and 30th of November 2019. After using DMI InstagramTool (2019) that interacts with the application programming interface (API) of the platform to extract hashtag-based data, we further explored the patterns of association between images and hashtags through Gephi network analysis (Jacomy, Venturini, Heymann & Bastian, 2014). Figure 1 focuses on the distribution of attention in the network by assembling these associations in two main formations of mainstream performance and its artistic negotiation. Visualized according to the number of likes, the size and color of the anonymized image nodes highlight the intensity of engagement with a given image. The second type of nodes representing hashtags indicates the degree of their connectedness, allowing us to see which hashtags were associated with larger groups of images and which were more relevant contextually – such as hashtags used in the context of #*stefdie*s photo activism.

Using digital methods, we approach such platform networks as hybrid assemblages, in which the circulation of user-generated content is always embedded in transforming states of relations (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). In methodological terms, a network that assembles images through two oppositional forms of tagging for and against – #*selfie* and #*antiselfie* – highlights that such forms of positioning do not exist in isolation (Rogers, 2018, p. 462). Instead, the use of hashtags is nuanced, relationally situated and shaped in temporary connections of heterogeneous publics, which do not follow any pre-given structure, order or hierarchy (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). As composite entities that are shared to express a variety of affective responses, Instagram selfies draw together multiple hashtags while combining further activities such as commenting and liking into a complex attentional machine. Deleuze (1992) refers to this 'machinic' aspect of assemblages as a result of the capacities to affect and be affected that are held together as long as they remain productive. On social media platforms, this is what makes some types of content more 'relatable' and visible than others, while the quantity of interactions (and data) that they produce feeds into "various processes of multiplication" (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p. 1359). In this sense, what constitutes an #(anti)selfie assemblage is not just its different elements – hashtags, images and likes – but the ongoing reorganisation of how these elements are connected with each other through a range of socio-technological practices that we now specifically address in the context of Instagram youth culture.

3.1 Selfie: #instayouth selfies as mainstream identity performance

Writing on the circulation of selfies under conditions of what she calls “communicative capitalism”, Jodi Dean (2016) points out that attention value of social media content accrues from its capacity to facilitate interactive impulses. For Dean, a major component of the selfie is the fact that it involves affective dynamics that are both singular and common: “The face that once suggested the identity of a singular person now flows in collective expression of common feelings” (Dean, 2016, p. 5). Selfies work because of the affect they transport as they move across platforms through imitative practices of sharing. Understood from within these practices, #instayouth selfies have “a collective subject, the many participating in the common practice, the many imitating each other” (Dean, 2016, p. 6). The greater the image’s circulation, the greater its capacity to affect new interactions, which includes posting reaction selfies or responding through gestures such as “like”. In their affective quality, such interactions are never neutral. As they multiply attentional dynamics within specific formations of sharing, they can both amplify and diminish young people’s capacities to act and be acted upon through what Sara Ahmed (2004b, p. 355) describes as a double-fold transformation: “transformation of some others into unlikeness (‘not like me’) and other others into likeness (‘like me’)”.

A zoom-in view on co-tag relations of #instayouth reveals the ambiguity of #selfie formation in accordance with the main contested quality of Instagram identity performance – relatability (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). In networks of social media engagement, questions of embodiment, privacy, participation and belonging are variously embedded in material and symbolic power relations that platforms perpetuate on an everyday basis. On the one hand, networked promotion of fashionable, witty, flirty, sexy, cute, smiling, cool, happy, swaggy, relaxed or otherwise engaged self-images on Instagram through related hashtags such as #instamood, #instagood, #instadaily, #likeforlikes and #followforfollowback plays an important part in how young people choose to express themselves, exchange attention and moods, or become part of a community. The motivations behind the use of selfies as “phatic” or connective gestural objects are fuzzy, neither completely flexible nor entirely narcissistic in terms of their capacity to provoke response (Senft & Baym, 2015). On the other hand, the endless circuits of hashtagging, linking and liking that selfies mobilize in the course of their circulation feed into algorithmically valuated streams of platform data, defining the conditions under which youth cultures gain visibility and become an important source of monetization (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). With makeup and shopping influencers selling their faces and bodies as promotional spaces and gay fashion bloggers competing for likes with #instagirls and #nofilter models, #instayouth selfie cultures provide a powerful source of affective labor that is readily commodified through reproduction of default identity categories and advertiser-friendly forms of self-representation.

3.2 Anti-selfie: negotiations of networked embodiment in #stefdie activism

At the same time, this “normative virtual body” (Nakamura, 2011, p. 388) is far from being steady or uncontested. In their attempts to negotiate Instagram’s algorithmically modulated infrastructures of visibility, young selfie users expand and modify the conditions under which some forms of participation on the platform are valued over others. Challenging the boundaries of what is considered conventionally “engaging content” (Rogers, 2019, p. 180), the trend of travel influencers risking their lives for a spectacular selfie is just one example attending to what drives Instagram youth culture in pursuit of new clicks, likes and followers (Elgan, 2019). Another example are artistic forms of negotiation through “anti-selfies” that either do not show or playfully engage with the bodies and faces of the people who share them (Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2017). Embedded in cotag relations connecting #selfie and #antiselfie cultures, #stefdie picture series by a young performance artist and travel photographer Stephanie Leigh Rose (aka @STEFDIES, 2020) pushes further both of these trends through alternative forms of digital embodiment. By sharing images that show her lying face down and playing dead in tourist hotspots around the world, she accumulated over 18,000 followers on Instagram with some of them actively contributing to the series through their own imitations of the #faceplant pose. Using #stefdie references and cotags indicating different moods such as #unhappy, #weird, #shameless or #exhibitionist, the #antiselfie movement produced a diverse range of spectacularly faceless selfie appropriations. Along with the eight most-liked #stefdie images featured in our dataset (see Figure 1), only 24 #antiselfie posts contain memes or unrelated images focusing on different objects covering the face. Other 68 #antiselfie contributions copy @stefdie photo-shooting techniques in the context of #performanceart and #streetart communities. The physical act of lying face down signals a reorientation in the self-centered body-technology-space relation that is inherent to the typical selfie-gesture of extending the arm with smartphone in hand (Hess, 2015, p. 1640). By disconnecting the face from the Instagram network, #stefdie operates within the logic of simultaneous attention and distraction (see also Wise, 2012).

According to the artist, the point of taking these photos in the most uncomfortable poses and sharing them on mainstream platforms is that it allows instantly producing images that steer young people’s imagination outside the box of self-obsessed, attention-seeking social media. Commenting on the manipulated or “distorted” nature of conventional selfie use, @STEFDIES emphasizes the value of the art project as an act of teaching “young adults there are alternatives to the perfectionism of selfies and on-line culture” (Stefdie, 2020). Here again we are dealing with the ambiguity of Instagram attention economy that is driven by a desire for authenticity and immediacy to the same extent as it propels the idea of platformed self as a site of ongoing performance and optimization of visibility. Accumulating genre-specific attention through typical Instagram hashtags such as #travelphotography, #contemporaryart, #humour and #ce-

lebratelife, the art photo series plays by the rules of Instagram search recommendations without being fully incorporated into its stereotyped mentality. Sarcastic in its stance and potentially subversive in its reappropriation of cliché selfie-poses, #stefdiess activism offers a perfect example of how much social networks are intertwined with broader axes of difference and questions of identity, even if they are often dismissed as narcissistic and trivial (see also boyd, 2008).

4 Conclusion

In “why Youth ♥ Social Network Sites” (2008), danah boyd has argued for taking seriously the notion of social media connectivity as that which comes with both affordances and limitations for young people’s everyday lives and cultural practices, both on- and offline. Through the perspective of assemblage theory and the use of digital methods in this article, we were able to get a glimpse of the affective dynamics that are involved in these relations. Specifically, we have been focusing on the connective role of selfies in Instagram youth networks and the attention economy they produce through hashtag-mediated experiences of self-embodiment and self-representation. As illustrated through attentional arrangements of #selfie and #antiselfie cultures, in their everyday communication on social media platforms, young people are always on the frontlines of dealing with default identity categories and dominant user norms. Amplifying and channeling energy of youth networks through practices such as liking and sharing, selfies come to act as connective objects that operate on the basis of bound excitation. On the one hand, Instagram selfie cultures provide valuable resources for community building and affective response. By activating a new kind of ‘shared’ or socially mediated ‘self’ among young people, they help to question fruitless narratives of moral panic in both public and scientific discourses. On the other hand, networks of (in)visibility that emerge when users strategically distribute their content through hashtags are far from being innocent. In their capacity to connect bodies, devices, physical spaces and social platforms, practices of selfie sharing not only express a desire to be seen, they also carry users into corporate controlled spaces that make profit out of participatory impulses (Hess, 2015, p. 1643). The challenge in researching these assemblages is to analyse how their various components function in relation to one another. The flows of affect they set into motion are per se neither positive nor negative; the key question is what affect *does*, what it produces. Does it increase the capacity to act, to make (new) connections or does it diminish it? This question goes beyond what Woodman and Bennett (2015a) have identified as the two dominant strands in youth research. By pointing towards the ways in which digital youth practices are relationally embedded and variously embodied, it is expressive of accounting for the ambiguity of connections that assemble young people’s everyday media use.

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