



palgrave▶pivot

# Mapping selfies and memes as Touch

Fiona Andreallo

OPEN ACCESS

palgrave  
macmillan

# Mapping selfies and memes as Touch



'The other side of silence', 2003, black and white photographic image imprints scarred skin mounted on aluminum, image 11 in series of 12. (Work owned and created by author)

Fiona Andreallo

# Mapping selfies and memes as Touch

palgrave  
macmillan

Fiona Andreallo  
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University  
Melbourne, VIC, Australia



ISBN 978-3-030-94315-8      ISBN 978-3-030-94316-5 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94316-5>

© The Author(s) 2022. This book is an open access publication.

**Open Access** This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this book are included in the book's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the book's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover pattern © John Rawsterne/patternhead.com

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*For Ed, Iggy and Beth*

# Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the support of my colleagues at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University and the University of Sydney. Thank you for your support of all forms in a particularly rough period of my career and throughout severe cutbacks in universities due to the Covid pandemic impact. This book would not have been written without a postdoctoral research grant from the University of Sydney and research support from RMIT University.

A special thank you to colleagues from the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA), who have supported my work both with collegial senior advice and financially during the Covid crisis. The support of small grants and mentorship for early career researchers is appreciated more than I can express.

There have been so many people that have encouraged me along this journey. I am particularly grateful to Umberto Ansaldo, who gave me the confidence to start, and thank him for his time and encouragement. Special thanks to Amanda Third for her warmth and advice in the early stages of writing this book. I cannot express how much support Sandra Garrido has been for my transition from PhD to the postdoctoral stage. Chris Chesher has always been genuine and a good friend to me. Thank you, Marius Foley and Vasiliki Veros, for just being kind and friendly, and my Covid screen academic friends who made life tethered to a desk during Covid bearable.

I am incredibly grateful to have known Theo Van Leeuwen and Anne Cranny-Francis in the years leading up to this book. Theo was a wonderful PhD supervisor and continues to be available for coffees, as well as emails of support and advice. His work remains instrumental to mine and many across faculties of academia. Anne was inspirational during my PhD study years at the University of Technology, Sydney, in person as well as through her academic work. Anne's work on cultural Touch has been instrumental to this book.

A special call out to Larissa Hjorth, Terri Senft, Paul Frosh, Limor Shifman, Katie Warfield, Ryan Milner and Katrin Tiidenberg. Thank you for your inspirational work that continues to brighten my days and make my brain grow.

My favourite Italian adage acknowledges that it takes “Cuervello”, “Cuore” and “Coglioni” (brains, heart and balls) to succeed. It has taken all three with constant setbacks and challenges over the last years, and my passion has only been allowed to remain kindled by my most cherished Ed, Beth and Iggy, who have accompanied me through my journey. I have dedicated this book to you all because I love you so much, and I hope what I contribute serves to make the future a better place for you all in some way. Keep thinking and laughing and never be silenced.



# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Visual Social Relationships of Memes and Selfies, and How They Imply Touch</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>How Touch Works in Everyday Networked Social Relationships</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Mapping Touch of (Ugly) Selfies, Memes, and Jokes as Forms of Intimacy and Violence</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Semeful Sociabilities: Socially Networked Photography as Embodied Relationships of Touch</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Key Takeaways and Prospective Research</b>	<b>103</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>113</b>

# List of Figures

Fig. 2.1	Cat taking a selfie. A visual representation of the differences in spaces and relationships of looking between traditional photographic practice and selfie production. (Illustration created and owned by author)	18
Fig. 2.2	Image of Kilroy—one of the oldest and most well-known memes	24
Fig. 4.1	Two examples of the PrettyGirlsUglyFaces meme. The images here have had a filter applied and colour removed to preserve some anonymity when changing the context of the posts	62



# 1

## Introduction

**Abstract** This book is the first of its kind to map Touch as culturally meaningful in digital social networks. In this chapter, the concept of Touch (with a capital T) is briefly introduced as a social and cultural concept, beyond just the physical practice or sensation of touch as we usually understand it. Touch is specifically identified as a key aspect of photography, including selfies and memes. Touch involves relationships of bodies, objects, spaces, connection, disconnection and positioning. As a communication practice, these relationships are meaningful and significant. This chapter includes descriptions of key terms to locate the focus of the book and a map of the book's content. This introduction frames the great significance of understanding socially networked relationships as Touch.

**Keywords** Touch • Visual social relationships • Practices of looking • The Gaze • Selfie skin • Memes • Multimodality • Networked self • Photography

In the front pages of this book is a direct imprint of scarred human skin tissue. The image is from a photographic series focusing on the body and touch, which employed what might be described as photographic frottage to print body sections directly. Frottage, meaning to “rub up”, is an art technique dating back more than a century that involves covering a surface in paper and then rubbing drawing material over it to capture a patterned texture on the paper. To produce the image used in this book, the photographic imprint was directly touching (rubbed up against) the body in the space of the darkroom. This performance of touch eradicates distance in the photographic process, including that between the camera and the scene, between the camera and the negative, between the negative and the darkroom, and finally between the darkroom and daylight. In this example, touch is central to visual communication practice and experience, and you might notice throughout this chapter that skin is a central theme in theoretical discussions of photography and the role it plays as a form of touch, creating as it does connections and disconnections both through the image and to each other.

Touch is a part of our everyday social relationships. The exploration of touch in this book moves beyond touch as a physical practice or sensation to focus on “Touch” (with a capital T) as culturally meaningful. Touch is culturally meaningful because more than simply being a thing we do, it is a practice that communicates and defines relationships of bodies in cultural and social structures. In this book, Touch is understood to have physical, emotional, intellectual, political and spiritual meaning. As an embodied practice and experience, Touch is mapped through the concepts of spaces, connection and disconnection, positioning and forms of engagement, where the arrangements and degrees of these concepts have everyday meanings and associations. For example, the way we might accidentally brush past a stranger on a crowded train is different to how we might touch a loved one when they arrive home from their day. Furthermore, when we talk about being touched, it often suggests a meaningful connection rather than a physical interaction.

During the recent Covid crisis, avoiding touch, such as shaking hands and even touching one’s own face, was recommended to avoid spreading the disease. Instead, people sought new ways to greet each other and interact, such as touching each other’s elbows or tapping each other’s

shoes. Furthermore, many resorted to video calls for meetings, where people could talk and see each other but felt disconnected to some point without a physical connection. This new reality highlighted how central touch is to our everyday interactions, and how touch acts as a meaningful everyday interaction and gesture.

There is also a long history of touch forming part of a cultural hierarchy, where only certain bodies can touch or be touched. Although such practices are culturally specific, they are always wrapped in combinations of appropriate spaces, connection, disconnection, positioning and forms of engagement. In this way, Touch can act as a form of power, and it can be experienced or intended as violence as well as intimacy.

## **Socially Networked Photography as Practices of Touch**

In everyday contexts, photographs are also experienced and practised as forms of Touch. Photographs are potent practices and objects because they can exclude or include, as well as make bodies and representations visible or invisible. Photographs also have the power to make us laugh, cry or simply recall, and the sharing of photographs connects people beyond words or even the visual elements of the picture. The meaning of a photograph can be at once something a group of people identifies with and yet unique to each individual.

Decades ago, Roland Barthes used the words “skin” and “umbilical cord” (Barthes, 1980/2010, p. 81) to recognise the intimate, personal and cultural meanings of photographs beyond being just a visual mode of communication. The idea of photography as skin has again emerged in Theresa Senft’s (2015) discussions of selfies. Understanding photographs as a skin explicitly locates photography as embodied practice and experience. The boundaries of the physical form or body are skin, and everyday physical touch is considered as the connection between the boundaries of entities. So, describing photographs as skin locates it as part of the embodied self’s expression, identity and experience.

In the context of socially networked photography (the creation and sharing of photographs in digital social networks), skin is not the only metaphor relating directly to socially meaningful Touch. For example, phenomenologist and philosopher Mika Elo (2012) calls for the “digit” in digital to be examined beyond haptics or sensations. Although not focused on networked social media, Jennifer Barker (2009) coined the term “the tactile eye” to describe cinematic sensory and emotional experiences as embodied. And Paul Frosh (2015, 2018), a photographer and cultural theorist, has explicitly described selfies as a form of kinaesthesia, acknowledging them as embodied practices involving movement and the tactility or poetics of social visual practices. Frosh intended the adjective “kinesthetic” not only to align with the idea of selfies as a photographic tactility, but to explicitly include the idea of a digitally networked body in movement, which includes relationships of tactile, visual and social interactions.

Selfies and photographic memes are culturally meaningful and meaning-making practices (Milner, 2018; Senft, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015; Shifman, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2018). The ideas you may personally hold about selfies and memes (positive or negative) are based on meanings you associate with them. The cultural significance of selfies and memes is located in those associated ideas and meanings. Because of the significance of selfies and memes, they have been subject to extensive online commentary, criticism and debate (Burns, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018). Academic discussion of selfies and memes as visual communication includes a plethora of terms and descriptions that are, in fact, implicit descriptions of aspects of Touch. The extent of attention and the many proposed terms to describe how we communicate through memes and selfies (implying social relationships of touch) flag an urgency to understand these visual social relationships as cultural practices of Touch.

Considering everyday digitally networked photographic practices such as selfies and memes as Touch recognises them as embodied practices. Highlighting socially networked photography as contextual to relationships of Touch provides a way of mapping the cultural significance of how we connect and disconnect, and the ways that sharing in social networks both enables and constrains bodies and ways of being.

Understanding photographic social relationships as Touch is essential for emphasising an ethics of social relationships in digital contexts, where although agency over self-representation and image-sharing may be enabled, it can also be constrained when images are used beyond the author's intent. The concept of photographic Touch recognises incremental aspects and levels of connection and engagement as culturally significant and emphasises how social photography can act as both intimacy and violence.

This book is the first of its kind to map Touch as culturally meaningful in digital social networks. Focusing on everyday photographic practices of selfies and memes, I consider how the fundamentals of Touch can be identified in everyday socially networked relationships and how these practices are culturally meaningful.

As a map, this book paves the way for future detailed examinations of Touch in networked photographic socialities and work that will focus more explicitly on user perspectives. This map is also a starting point for future examination of Touch beyond photographic social relationships, extending towards how Touch can reframe our understanding of technology in broader digital contexts of both networked and automated social systems. Understanding socially networked photography as Touch recognises technology as embodied everyday cultural relationships, which in turn demands responsibility for how we treat each other. It also identifies how technology is limited to how humans use, create and implement it in already culturally inscribed relationships and social hierarchies.

## Key Terms

The following is a brief glossary of some of the words and concepts I use throughout this book. They may not be new to you, but we must understand them the same way before beginning this journey.

## Touch

The physical practice of touching can be described as the state in which two entities or objects are so close that no spaces remain between their boundaries or surfaces, and can involve physical sensations. In this book I focus on the state and sensation of touch as meaning-making in social relationships, where the fundamentals of touch can be used to explore embodied subjects and the societies and cultures in which they live.

## Visual Culture

Visual culture studies focus on how people visually communicate and attribute social and cultural understandings through practices of visibility and invisibility. The field of visual culture studies draws on a range of theoretical approaches including structuralism, phenomenology, Marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis. Studies in visual culture include artefacts made to be seen and looked at—such as paintings, movies, photographs, memes and selfies—and people’s ways of understanding and attributing meaning to them.

## Practices of Looking, Visuality and Visibility

Practices of looking describe historically and culturally specific ways of seeing, including both the production and consumption of visuality. Practices of looking are inherently political because they shape and constrain what we think it is possible to see, what we are allowed to see, what we are made to see, how we are seen, what is worth seeing, and what is unseen or made invisible. For example, a pivotal basis for discussions of visual practices, Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” (Mulvey, 1989) identifies women represented in films as objects of a male gaze. In this case, the gaze (which I discuss further below) is recognised in gendered power relationships that limit representation. Another foundational work often referred to is John Berger’s book *Ways of Seeing* (2008), which describes limitations of visuality located in



gendered positioning of the male as the viewer and the female as limited to being viewed. Although these examples describe heterosexually gendered power relationships, these key works are often referred to as a basis of exploring a variety of power relationships of visibility.

Visibility deals with the quality or state of being visual, including where certain groups of people may be treated as invisible. Traditionally only certain performances of gender, ability, ethnicity, class and age have been made visible in a variety of media. Movements towards inclusive representation in films and advertising aim to make people traditionally treated as invisible (because of their lack of representation, or limited form of representation) more visible.

## The Gaze

“The gaze” is a term describing the social relationships of looking and how looking functions as control. In this book, when I refer to “the gaze”, I am mainly drawing on the work of Laura Mulvey, who examined Hollywood cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. Mulvey argues that active looking was created exclusively from the point of view of male heteronormative viewers and showed how this limited ways of being for women on screen. The power of looking attributed to the male heteronormative viewer is often referred to as “the gaze”, but since Mulvey’s studies, “the gaze” has been explored in further complexity.

## Agency

Agency is the capacity or power to act or make meaning on one’s behalf, relatively free from the influence of social forces and the will of others. However, Foucault’s model of power suggests that human subjects are never entirely free agents, but are shaped by and through social institutions and historical contexts.

## Modes and Multimodality

Modes of media are things such as written language, the spoken word, images, video, audio or hypertext. Modes also include the elements of visual, aural, oral and touch communication. We communicate differently through all these modes, producing meaning. Multimodality recognises that meaning is best accessed by utilising and recognising the multiple modes of communication media.

## Signs, Signification and Signifiers

The concept of signs and signification deals with how meaning is gestured in communicative processes and actions. In social semiotics, signs are considered resources that people adapt to make meaning. The word “resource” is used by social semioticians to avoid the impression that “what a sign stands for” is somehow given or fixed and not affected by use. In social semiotics, resources are signifiers, observable actions and objects drawn into the domain of communication. The way things signify meanings is constituted by past uses and users based on their specific needs and interests, which are always socially and culturally contextual. Context includes the rules or best practices that regulate how resources can be used (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 1995, 2005, 2008). In this book, I engage a social semiotic understanding of signs and signifiers. However, as a cultural studies communications scholar, I use the word “sign” rather than resource.

## Codes

Codes are the implicit rules by which meanings get put into social practice and can therefore be read by users. They are the systematic organisation of signs, which can include social rules of conduct like greetings, or styles of social interaction that are culturally located. Language and representational media are structured according to codes, so, for example, lighting, camera movement and editing for productions in a particular

genre, period and style are all cinematic codes. Cultural texts, such as selfies, can be encoded with meaning by producers, which viewers then decode.

## Performativity

Throughout the book, I talk about performativity concerning participants of selfies and memes. This term describes the ways that people “perform” their identities, where femininity recognised as a social construct and that there are social codes involved in this performance.

## Networked Self

The concept of the networked self emphasises the technological self and recognises technological presentations and relationships (connections) as embodied practice.

## Embodiment

Embodiment refers to the physical self and the digital (or networked or virtual) self being inseparable. Simply put, we live *in* technology, not *with* technology (Deuze, 2011), and because of this, the technological self is understood as embodied. In this book, embodied practice includes how cultural practices inscribe the body as part of social meaning-making; that is, Touch is located as part of the “sensorily inscribed body” (Farman, 2020) of the networked self.

## Organisation of the Book

Following this introduction, Chap. 2 considers key definitions and discussions of selfies and memes as visual social relationships. Close examination of research on selfies and photo-based memes to date suggests that photographic social relationships have evolved as digitally networked

practices, where agency can be observed in a struggle. Furthermore, discussions of selfies and memes include gestures and relationships that are culturally meaningful and which point towards an understanding (although not yet explicitly identified) of selfies and memes as Touch. Although memes have been considered as multimodal practice, discussions to date have remained limited to modes of media such as text, video and sound. In Chap. 2, I call for photographic practices such as selfies and memes to be understood as multimodal sensory practices and culturally meaningful relationships. I draw key points and descriptions from current literature on selfies and memes to argue that selfies and memes require further consideration as practices of Touch.

Considering how we communicate through touch, in Chap. 3, I examine what we know about touch and locate how it is understood as culturally significant in everyday social interactions. Touch is identified as multiply significant: physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and politically. Understanding touch in this way means that it is more than simply two bodies, objects or entities meeting. Instead, the points of connection and disconnection, as well as the spaces of identification, are culturally meaningful. Describing the five fundamentals of touch—connectivity, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning—in historical, social and cultural examples sets a basis for how Touch might be mapped in social and cultural interactions.

This also provides the groundwork for Chap. 4, which considers more closely how Touch might be mapped in digital social media contexts. Chapter 4 contributes further to the mapping of Touch for the technological self and social media relationships by examining the ways Touch both enables and constrains bodies and ways of being. I identify Touch as including forms of both violence and intimacy in social media relationships and investigate the role of jokes in these relationships.

The mapping of how Touch enables and constrains is examined through the example of the *PrettyGirlsUglyFaces* (PGUF) meme and selfies that make up the meme. The PGUF meme consists of a regular selfie juxtaposed with an ugly selfie. This meme and versions of it that appear on various social media platforms have continued in popularity

since 2014. Today, versions include the popular meme “You are so beautiful—OHGOD!” and selfies on several platforms tagged #uglyselfie, #uglies or #ugly. Significantly, the meme has continued since the social and cultural advent of selfies. The repetition of this conversation indicates a cultural nerve and an interest that is not resolved but shared through connection, engagement and performance.

Central to many memes, including the PGUF memes and related selfies, is the joke. Jokes are an essential part of digital visual cultures. However, far from just “silly shenanigans” to be dismissed, the joke is a powerful communicative tool. The example of the PGUF meme is identified as employing “the joke” to navigate culturally accepted boundaries in the performance of memes. Through these performances and engagement, participants deal with cultural boundaries that both enable and constrain ways of being. The joke is identified for the ways it acts as Touch to enable cultural violence as well as intimate connections.

The chapter proposes three main findings. First, the joke both enables and constrains social relationships. Second, the positioning (one of the fundamentals of Touch) of the PGUF meme is unique and must consider not only platform rules, but also how the rules are informed by broader social and cultural structures. These structures are accessible by mapping Touch. Finally, I argue that because everyday social relationships are experienced as including both violence and intimacy, further research is required to consider the complexity of Touch, since research to date has generally focused explicitly on one or the other.

In Chap. 5, I propose the term “semeful sociabilities” to recognise visual social relationships as culturally meaningful practices of Touch. I define cultural semes as an extension of academic discussions of technological seams. Discussions of technological seams are divided by aspirations of seamlessness—aiming towards technology being seamlessly integrated into our everyday relationships—and seamfulness—driven by a focus on user empowerment and how seamlessness acts as a form of social control. In this context, semefulness, a term first proposed by Anne Cranny-Francis in her work on human–technology physical relationships, focuses explicitly on the significance and meanings of Touch. Identifying social media and the technological self as embodied and

drawing on the findings throughout this book, the term “semeful socialities” describes networked social media practices of the technological self.

In the concluding chapter (Chap. 6), I outline potential takeaways and future research projections.

## References

- Barker, J. M. (2009). *The tactile eye: Touch and the cinematic experience*. University of California Press.
- Barthes, R. (2010). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography* (R. Howard, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1980).
- Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin.
- Burns, A. (2015). Self(ie)-discipline: Social regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1716–1733. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3138/1395>
- Deuze, M. (2011). Media life. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(1), 137–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710386518>
- Elo, M. (2012). Digital finger: Beyond phenomenological figures of touch. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 4(1), Article 14982. <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v4i0.14982>
- Farman, J. (2020). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kineshetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1607–1628. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3146/1388>
- Frosh, P. (2018). *The poetics of digital media*. Polity Press.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.
- Milner, R. M. (2018). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. M.I.T. Press.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave.
- Senft, T. M. (2015). The skin of the selfie. In A. Bieber (Ed.), *Ego update: The future of digital identity* (pp. 134–161). NRW Forum.
- Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1588–1606. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4067/1387>

- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. M.I.T. Press.
- Tiidenberg, K. (2018). *Selfies: Why we love (and hate) them*. Emerald Group.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (1995). Representing social action. *Discourse & Society*, 6(1), 81–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926595006001005>
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics*. Psychology Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





# 2

## Visual Social Relationships of Memes and Selfies, and How They Imply Touch

**Abstract** In this chapter, I examine literature focusing on visual social relationships of selfies and memes to expose current theories about how these visually defined practices communicate through Touch. Furthermore, I argue that the literature essentially locates selfies and memes as practices of Touch, including the fundamentals of gestural, embodied and multimodal practice. The proliferation of research suggesting that selfies and memes act as practices of Touch flags an urgent need for research addressing socially networked relationships of Touch.

**Keywords** Selfies • Memes • Networked social relationships • Photography • Touch • Visual

Everyday photographs are more than just images. They have always been about connection, and in digital social networks, the ease and visibility of photographic connections have increased. Connections include the relationships we experience as individuals and the connections we identify in the sharing and practice of networked photography. Our connection with and through photographs was identified long before the advent of



digitally networked photography. In 1980, Roland Barthes wrote, “A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” (Barthes, 1980/2010, p. 81). By directly referencing parts of the body, Barthes describes photography as an embodied experience connecting the subject and the viewer. This description simultaneously identifies meaning and meaning-making in the everyday visual practice of photography.

As an embodied practice, touch, in its most superficial everyday understanding, similarly deals with the connection and disconnection of bounded entities. This chapter reviews critical literature that signals digitally networked visual practices – specifically selfies and photo-based memes – as concepts of touch and touching. These forms of touching include connections, networked social relationships and networked photographic practices.

To approach the question of “what are the visual social relationships of selfies and memes?”, it is important to first know how scholars have already described and explored these relationships. After reviewing the literature for selfies and memes separately, and then comparing the two bodies of literature, I argue that although networked photographic practices have not yet been explicitly and deeply examined as forms of Touch, touch and touching have formed part of the academic discussions grappling with ways to describe visual social relationships of selfies and memes. The vast literature considering aspects of touch in this context highlights how touch acts as a central aspect of visual relationships. Furthermore, the expanse of the literature flags the need for urgent examination to explicitly understand networked visual practices as forms of Touch.

## **Examining Literature on Selfies and Memes as Visual Relationships**

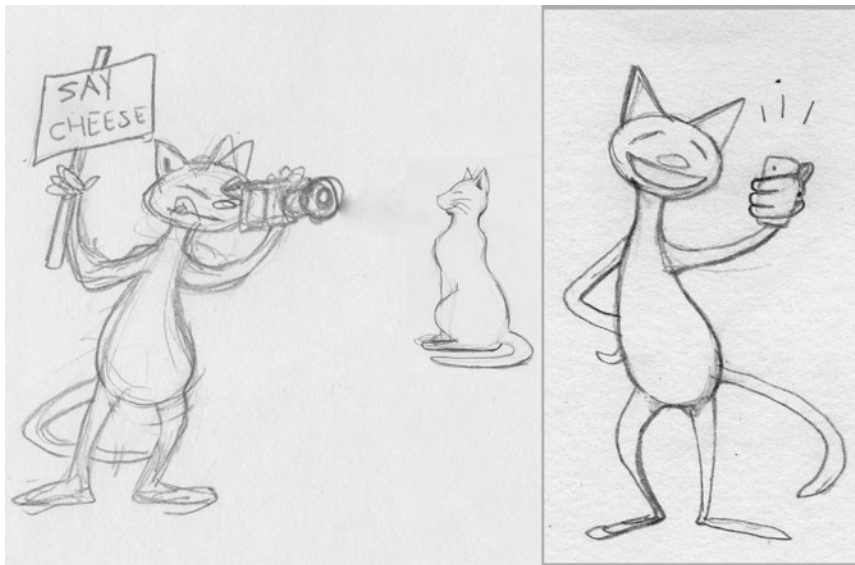
### **Selfies**

Selfies differ from traditional photography because they are based in digitally networked socialities. Selfies can be defined as objects with three properties: they are (1) photographic, (2) self-representational and (3)

digitally networked (meaning taken with a smart device and uploaded to social media) (Tiidenberg, 2018). Of course, people have used photographs for self-representation before and beyond the advent of selfies, so the main property of selfies that has evolved beyond traditional photography is the digital network and the reliance on a smart device. Although this change might seem quite simple, it has caused quite a commotion among scholars about how we might describe visual communication and what it involves.

One of the issues is that photography is essentially a practice of looking, and cultural and social relationships of looking include relationships of power. These relationships are most commonly understood in visual cultures by referring to the work of Laura Mulvey and John Berger. Laura Mulvey (1989) described how power relationships of looking work by drawing on the example of Hollywood cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. In her work, she argues that viewers are limited to experiences of a heterosexual male gaze, where women on screen are limited to performing the object of this desire. In this way, women are coded as being looked at, and male viewers are awarded agency as the bearer of the look. This is something John Berger described when analysing traditional art practice as “men act, women appear” (Berger, 2008, p. 47). Although these concepts of the gaze and power are limited to a gender binary, they remain valuable in pointing out that there is an agency in actively controlling how one is represented and visible. Such agency (or lack thereof) is a form of sociocultural representation and identification that shapes how we connect with others and understand ourselves.

The cultural and social power relationships of looking have (to some extent) been disrupted by selfies. Specifically, the disruption arises from selfies being self-representational and digitally networked. Compared to photographic self-representation of the past, the act of taking a selfie credits more agency to the person in the photograph as they are also the photographer. Using a reflective screen or mirror shot allows the photographer to view and shoot themselves at the same time, rather than being subject to an external photographer’s gaze (Fig. 2.1). As well as the agency in self-representation, there is also agency attributed to the sharing of selfies, because the selfie producer initially chooses to share how they want to be represented. In this way, traditional power relationships are disrupted



**Fig. 2.1** Cat taking a selfie. A visual representation of the differences in spaces and relationships of looking between traditional photographic practice and selfie production. (Illustration created and owned by author)

because, unlike traditional photography practice, visual depictions are no longer limited to a particular gaze. Furthermore, the subject is no longer passive in the production and distribution of their image because the selfie producer is actively involved in the initial presentation and sharing.

However, these visual relationships are best understood as a struggle because the agency is not absolute. One example is that of young women performing selfies. When selfies first became possible, media reports and online comments were primarily negative, with claims of immorality and narcissism (Andreallo, 2017; Burns, 2015). Such criticisms, outrage and control of the female body in public space have a long European history dating back to the nineteenth century, when it was considered immoral for women to be visible in public spaces and streets (Andreallo, 2017; Kessler, 2006). The focus on selfies as problematic for specific groups of people presents an observation of socially and culturally constructed power relationships. So, in the case of young women, there is a struggle between women practising agency in representing themselves in public

space and the criticism that aims to maintain control of female bodies. A struggle also arises from the ways people lose their agency when images of themselves that they share publicly are used beyond their original intent.

Focusing on how agency of selfies and agency in digital networks is both enabled and constrained, Theresa Senft (2015; Senft & Baym, 2015) uses the descriptive terms “the grab” and “the skin of the selfie”. Senft and Nancy Baym (2015) explicitly describe the grab, a physical action, as a signifying descriptor of the gaze in digitally networked contexts. They write, “to grab signifies multiple acts: to touch, to seize for a moment, to capture attention, and to leave open to interpretation (as in the saying, ‘up for grabs’), raising questions of agency, permission, and power” (Senft & Baym, 2015, p. 1598). Senft and Baym’s piece “What does the selfie say?” (Senft & Baym, 2015) is an introduction to the idea of the grab that is explored in more detail by Senft in “The skin of the selfie” (Senft, 2015). Here she explains that selfies can be considered through the concept of skin, grabbing and being grabbed, where the visual content is an epidermis (Senft, 2015, p. 6). The “selfie skin” and “the grab” highlight the complexity of social relationships of looking and the constant struggle over agency.

Because skin and grabbing are located in the concept of the body, considering them as descriptors of selfies identifies how selfies are at once an embodied and active, and meaning-making, practice. Skin is a living organ and penetrable encasement of the human body that not only contains but is also associated with sensitivity and identification. As the encasing of the body, skin presents the boundary of an entity that performs the action of touch during a close encounter with another (where no space remains). In this way, the concept of skin as a signifying descriptor of selfies points to concepts of connection and touch through boundaries, the body and bodies.

The concept of grabbing is an action also located in the body, thus suggesting embodiment as well as an action that involves types of touching. The grab (Senft & Baym, 2015) explicitly draws on a physical, corporeal, gestural act that we can imagine or observe in everyday practices. For example, you might grab a coffee on the way into the office or grab a friend’s sleeve to draw their attention to something. Grabbing actions

also have social and cultural meanings specific to the contexts, spaces and bodies involved.

However, the concept of “the grab” has some limitations. Placing “the” in front of “grab” specifies importance and uniqueness. It also suggests a particular event or specific grab rather than grabbing in multiple contexts with a multiplicity of meanings. Furthermore, a concept of “the grab” might more often be considered as a noun than a verb or adjective, thus suggesting the grab is not an active and interactive practice. In the context of visual connections, the grab specifies a one-way action, failing to identify how visual practices can also be active and interactive. Prior to networked visual relationships, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2020) identified how the gaze of the person depicted in an image is active. For example, direct eye contact of the person in an image can demand engagement with the viewer, and looking away from the viewer actively invites the viewer to look upon the person represented.

Although the term “the grab” appears limited in some ways, Senft makes explicit that it was intended to consider more than an emphasised initial grab, and in her piece “The skin of the selfie”, Senft describes in detail the complexity in relationships of grabbing in networked circulation. Despite its limitations, the concept of the grab is essential to academic literature and early discussions of networked visual practices that examine visual social relationships. Most importantly, a grab is a form of touch and connection that, as a signifier, begins to locate a practice of touch in digital networks as culturally significant and meaningful.

Kinaesthesia is another concept of touch that has been employed to describe visual social relationships of selfies. Paul Frosh (2015, 2018) uses the term “kinesthetic sociability” to describe selfies as embodied gestures and a type of movement, response and interaction beyond traditional visual concepts of photographic analysis. He writes, “The selfie is a pre-eminent conductor of embodied social energy because it is a *kinesthetic* image: it is a product of kinetic bodily movement; it gives aesthetic, visible form to that movement in images; and it is inscribed in the circulation of kinetic and responsive social energy among users of movement-based digital technologies” (Frosh, 2015, p. 1623). By naming selfies an “embodied social energy”, the selfie as a visual relationship is located in concepts of embodiment, similar to the theories of “selfie skin” and “the

grab”. Based on embodied practice, Frosh then explains this relationship as a type of movement, where the body actively participates as muscular movements and associations within the interactive, networked social relationship. The body is at once and independently the body of self, an image with a relationship of connection (as touch), and the body of networked bodies that are in connection through visual interactive movements or gestures. In this way, kinaesthesia describes the connection or touching of images, self and others as active and living social interactions and relationships.

Within the concept of kinaesthetic sociability, the idea of selfies as embodied recognises how they are a constitutional part of the self, and how we interact in a larger, digitally networked body or corporeality in digital social media contexts. Selfies are aspects of how we perform our identity and, in that way, are linked directly to the self. We might even recognise a visual representation of this linking of the selfie to self when the extended arm is included in the frame of a selfie: the outreached arm holding the mobile device in the action of performing the selfie physically gestures touch to the viewer of the image. The person in the image appears to be physically reaching out to touch or embrace the viewer, gesturing a physically intimate connection and reducing the space between the selfie subject and the viewer.

As well as explaining networked visual social relationships, the term kinaesthesia can also be extended to understand a variety of other networked relationships. However, the way Frosh uses the term to describe touch in visual practice without explicit mention of tactility is unique. For example, when we talk about kinaesthetic learning practices, they involve learning through tactility as well as active performance. Furthermore, phenomenologist Jennifer Barker (2009) writes about “the tactile eye” to express how cinematic experience involves more than vision and can be understood as sensorily embodied. Kinaesthetic sociability can also suggest tactility in this way. However, in networked social relationships, kinaesthesia is located in active tactile interactions and explicitly related to the body as a touching entity, where the self can be touched and bodies actively interact, connect and relate as part of networked embodied practice.

So far in this chapter, I have discussed the concept of selfies as touch through the most straightforward understanding of touch – the connection at the points where two entities become so close that no space remains between them. However, connection is not the only aspect of touch to be considered; disconnection, the boundaries of the bodies (or entities) and the spaces involved are also central to the concept. Although describing photographic relationships as a skin (Barthes, 1980/2010; Senft, 2015) suggests intimate relationships of touch, it also identifies concepts of boundaries, because the skin encasing the human body is the boundary through which touching others physically occurs. Boundaries of self and boundaries in our interactions are a part of our everyday relationships. For example, in a conversation, the topic works as a type of boundary. We also practise boundaries of self in how we perform in different social contexts where, for example, our work profile image is different to our family social media account. These boundaries are essential to how we connect and interact.

Boundaries in the relationships of touch of selfies involve what is included, and what is excluded or cut. When a photograph is taken, people perform in a certain manner to pose for the image. We might try to crop out any unsavoury aspects of the image or things we do not want to be included for a multitude of reasons. We might also use filters, or retouch the image or crop it after it is shot. Katie Warfield (2016) has started to consider these concepts as the boundaries of self-performance through selfies. Warfield writes about “cuts”, identifying that what is cut or excluded from a shared selfie is also an essential aspect of the performance of the selfie. Examining what is cut or excluded from an image, platform or a conversation can reveal how selfies both enable and constrain the presentation of self. The concept of cuts or what is excluded in visually networked practices is an essential aspect of Touch because what is excluded defines what is not acceptable to be made socially visible. In this way, cuts identify the boundaries and boundary-making in the performance of self. Touch then is about what is excluded and the points of disconnection as much as it is about connection and what is included. What is made visible is made significant by what is made invisible, and within these connections and disconnections of visibility constitute relationships of Touch.

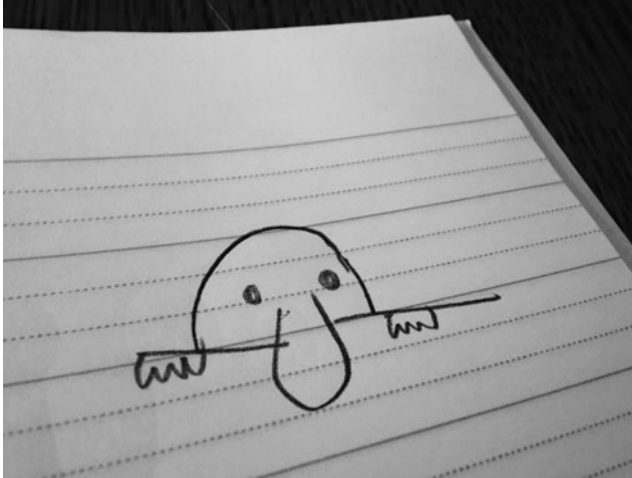
## Photo-Based Memes

Just as selfie scholars have recognised an evolution of photographic communication through selfies, meme scholars have claimed an evolution of memetic communication in digital contexts. Visual culture scholars focusing on memes have also extended traditional concepts of visual communication and photography towards recognising relationships of touch in discussions of relationships of connection.

As in the cultural research on selfies, the central aspect of the evolution of memes from traditional practices is in how they are digitally networked (specifically their circulation and interaction). Limor Shifman (2014a) defines memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics, (b) created with the awareness of each other, (c) circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 41). Like the definition of selfies earlier in the chapter, memes here are defined as evolving from traditional models because of the context of digital networks. Whereas selfies are defined as “an object” and as self-representational, memes are located as “a group” (Milner, 2012, 2018; Shifman, 2014a, 2014b), and self-representation has mainly been considered as a focal aspect beyond belonging to and identifying with groups of people (Gal et al., 2016).

Memes have a long pre-internet history as critical cultural interactions. One example of a meme that existed before the internet (and is still going!) is “Kilroy was here”, which you may have noticed as graffiti in public spaces, usually accompanied by a face with a big nose peeking over a wall (Fig. 2.2). This meme was something I first noticed in the 1980s on my older sister’s pencil case and etched into school desks. I also remember writing it on the steamy car windows on cold mornings and doodling it in books. The origins of Kilroy are still a matter of debate, but there are objects still around from the Second World War, such as buttons, pins and small figures of pregnant women, that include the words “Kilroy was here”. A common consensus among historians is that the meme can be traced back to shipyards in the Second World War, where shipyard inspector James Kilroy marked inspected sections of the ship with those words (Gilmore, 2012). Soldiers noticing the markings





**Fig. 2.2** Image of Kilroy—one of the oldest and most well-known memes

extensively throughout the ships began to inscribe the slogan on a variety of surfaces. As the ships and soldiers travelled, the meme also travelled and extended to urban graffiti. Of course, I had no idea of this history when I was four years old, scribbling on things in the 1980s. The meme continued to spread, evolving in meaning over time. The way it spread and evolved relied on people practising imitation.

The word “meme” was introduced by Richard Dawkins (1989) in his book *The Selfish Gene*. It is derived from the Greek “mimema” to indicate “something that is imitated”, and Dawkins decided it should rhyme with gene. In the simplest terms, internet memes can be described as a practice of imitation, acting essentially as a unit of cultural transmission (Shifman, 2013). Cultural transmission and imitation occur through interactions and relationships involving the ways we connect or touch each other. If we locate photography as a practice of looking (as I have done earlier in this chapter), and if we include photo-based memes in that, we can consider practices of looking and ideas of imitation as units of cultural transmission.

However, since Dawkins’ introduction of the word “meme”, the ambiguity of its definition has given rise to much debate between biological and cultural scholars, given that examples include ideas (God), texts

(nursery rhymes and jokes) and practices (Christian rituals). Shifman's (2014b) definition of memes focuses on the complexity of "what memes are". The aspects of awareness of each other, sharing commonality, circulating, imitating and transforming are all practices of connection or Touch because they include connections through common identifications and ideals. These social connections through which Touch is practised all form a part of what Shifman calls "hyper-mimetic logic" (Shifman, 2012, 2013), which recognises memes as part of our embodied everyday social relationships.

To explore how memes gesture as embodied everyday social relationships, Shifman (2014a, 2014b) introduces the terms "prospective photography" and "hyper-signification", which explicitly deal with signification or meaningful forms of connection. These terms consider how people form connections through memes and define memes as connections or relationships of touch. We can therefore say that Shifman identifies how Touch signifies and is culturally meaningful, both in our relationships with photography and in relationships with each other.

Prospective photography essentially describes the way photos for meme creation are perceived as raw material for future image creation. When photos are perceived as raw material, photo-based memes are understood as gestures to participants encouraging creative contributions. This gesture calls out to the participant by touching them or being meaningful to them in such a way that they decide to participate.

The term "hyper-signification" was first used to describe a movement in the advertising industry where the glamour, construction or set-up of the photographic representation was exposed in the advertisement. The code of advertising itself was no longer concealed but was turned into a sign (Goldman & Papson, 1996). Hyper-signification essentially deals with the way people participate with memes.

Central to hyper-mimetic logic and the concepts of prospective photography and hyper-signification is an examination of how people gesture with and through photo-based memes as social relationships. Many meme interactions, creations and connections involve participants playing with the authenticity of social and cultural ideas of photographic truth. Exposing the façade or codes of social practices (i.e. hyper-signification) acts as an essential element of the connection and how it

touches people. This practice is most often employed in meme genres through the use of a joke.

The joke (which I will discuss further in Chap. 4) is a communicative tool that allows people to cross social boundaries and expose the facades of social performance. The way we use media such as photography supports cultural beliefs and social structures. For example, what we choose to exclude, edit and include in an image (often unconsciously) displays social and cultural ideals by what we see and make visible or invisible. Culturally the photograph continues to be used as a form of proof even though we know that it can be easily edited. This knowledge is key to understanding the joke because it is the cultural idea of photography as proof that is signified in “reaction photoshop” and “stock character Macro” meme genres. Similarly, the cultural knowledge of the joke as posed and constructed is part of the fun of “photo fad” memes.

One example of a reaction photoshop meme is “disaster girl”, in which an image of a smiling girl is superimposed onto different disaster settings of the meme creator’s desire. The image is funny mainly because a young girl is presented as causing great disasters, but central to the practice is a play with the truthfulness of the photographic image as a form of evidence or truth. Because the image is heavily manipulated, one of the ways this meme works is as a type of hyper-signification. Here photography is simultaneously presented as fact and heavily manipulated, and understanding of this is a key aspect of where the joke is produced.

The stock character macros genre, which includes memes like “confession bear” and “Asian dad”, is overt construction of social and cultural stereotypes (Shifman, 2014b). Such constructions are produced by presenting stock images with added text that locates the social and cultural stereotypes associated with the image.

Photo fads include memes that tend to focus on the pose and performance of the pose (Shifman, 2014b). They include memes like planking, in which the participant must perform a plank pose, or hair flick selfies, in which the participant flicks their hair in a body of water, splashing water in a pattern in the sky. Photo fad memes reference social and cultural ideals of posing and performing for everyday photographs – for example, the way people perform in front of the camera to create culturally coded intimacy or attractiveness, such as smiling a certain way, tilting

one's head, leaning forward or turning one's hips on an angle to the camera. Photo fads make explicit the performance involved in photography.

Another way to consider the connections and relationships of memes as Touch is as practices of reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, spread and multimodality. Ryan Milner (2012, 2018) has identified these aspects of memes as the five fundamentals of memetic social relationships, cultural connection and engagement. These five fundamentals can also be acknowledged as practices of Touch and indicative of the complexity of the degrees of Touch in social relationships of memes.

Reappropriation identifies how reuse and appropriation are essential to meme creation and conversations. We can consider reappropriation as a form of connection and practice of Touch using the example of the stock character macro and photo fad genres I mentioned earlier. First, the stock character or photo fad image reaches out to an image from the past and connects it to present contexts and conversations. People then connect to each other through the further reappropriation or performance of the image when participants attach new aspects to the template of the meme.

Resonance recognises the ways memes carry personal meaning and importance beyond the broader connective conversation. Resonance explicitly identifies the complexity of connection in embodied networked practices. In the earlier section on selfies, I identified how this embodied networked self includes image, body and bodies through concepts of kin-aesthesia, skin and umbilical cord. Resonance points towards the complexity of connections, including degrees of Touch in different circumstances.

This broader conversation comes together in the fundamental of collectivism. Collectivism essentially deals with groups and boundaries of meme conversations, which deserve further scholarly consideration as to what is included and excluded and how these boundaries are defined in meme visual conversations.

The aspect of spread deals with the circulation of memes as "spreadable media" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 3), where people share content for their own purposes. Spread relies on the interactive practices and association of the last three fundamentals (reappropriation, resonance and collectivism), thus relying on connections and Touch. The definition of spread

highlights that people share for their own reasons. These personal reasons depend on how the images touch us personally and the degrees of touch and connection to images in shared relationships. Spread therefore requires closer scholarly investigation into the connection and meaning-making that Touch can provide.

Understanding the practices of reappropriation, resonance, collectivism and spread as located in the multimodality of media is also essential to meme practice and interaction. Multimodality and visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020) are essential concepts that have been influential across many disciplines. These concepts recognise that meaning is never produced through a singular mode. Milner recognises the fundamentals of memes as multimodal to highlight that meaning in digital contexts is conveyed by more than images alone, for example, by hyperlinks, videos, text and comments. He writes, “Although visuals abound, thinking in terms of a ‘visual internet’ is a limiting paradigm, since more than only text and image exist in multimodal media” (Milner, 2018, p. 25). Multimodality essentially identifies many modes of communication that interplay simultaneously to make social and cultural meaning. In stock character memes, for example, participants add text to stock images to change the meaning. The meaning-making in this practice includes combinations and relationships of the modes of written text and image. The image without the text or with another contributed media produces different meanings, which serves to recontextualise the image.

Milner’s definition of memes as multimodal media is vital because it recognises that the active engagement of participants in the creation and sharing of memes includes multimodal relationships. Furthermore, multimodality contextualises the fundamentals identified in meme relationships as practices that are not limited to images or the visual alone.

Despite these critical contributions, Milner’s notion of multimodality remains limited to considering only physical modes of multimedia (e.g. links, text, images). If we accept that we do indeed need to move beyond the concept of a “visual internet”, as Milner proposes, this flags an urgency to understand people’s visual *experiences and interactions* as multimodal, rather than simply considering the multimodality of the physical media. Furthermore, it flags a need to understand people’s visual *social* interactions as multimodal, because the way we practise looking involves more

than the sense of sight. Networked visual relationships require further urgent academic attention, recognising that people communicate through many modes of media and that these interactions include many sensory modes.

## What Do We Already Know About Visual Social Relationships of Selfies and Memes?

The literature on selfies and memes examined throughout this chapter has all pointed to ideas of connection and gesture, where visual experience is located in the cultural and sensory mode of touch. This research suggests that networked visual practices such as selfies and memes are (1) meaningful, (2) a gesture, (3) embodied practices dealing with identity and the body, and (4) multimodal visual sensory practices. These four fundamentals of selfies and memes point towards networked visual social practices being experiences of Touch.

### Meaningful and Meaning-Making

Selfies and memes are culturally meaningful practices. The passionate debate surrounding selfies locates them as having meaning to people whether they love or hate them (Tiidenberg, 2018). Scholars to date have focused on how memes and selfies create meaning as embodied, gestural and multimodal practices.

### Gesture

Gesture is essentially about practices of Touch because it is about the ways we connect and engage. Networked visual practices involve a variety of gestural responses and interactions, including how we connect with or touch others using memes and selfies, and the personal associations and connections that images gesture to us individually.

Selfies and photo-based memes act as gestures in two ways: they gesture ideas as a form of communication with others, and they are both culturally meaningful and significant gestural practices.

The definition of memes to date has focused on gesture-making, which includes how media gestures, as well as how people engage in particular practices of gesture as mimic. For example, the concept of prospective photography (Shifman, 2014a) essentially locates photography as a gestural medium, identifying how it beckons to people to engage. Besides being simply gestural media, an essential element of memes is gestural interactions. Hyper-signification (Shifman, 2013, 2014a) identifies how people engage with cultural signifiers and codes, both of media and in communicative practices that subvert or expose social and cultural boundaries. The subversion or exposure of social and cultural boundaries is what produces the joke and how the joke works as a form of communicative gesture and interaction (Andreallo, 2017). The practice of reappropriation (Milner, 2018) is a form of mimic in meme-sharing that also relies on gestural meaning-making that is contextually specific. For example, an image from a historical painting or a stock image is recontextualised and afforded new meaning through text or image manipulation. This meaning-making is a gesture inviting a reaction of some sort. The meme then becomes a template for further reappropriation, and these contributions are also part of the gesturing process, referring to a standard conversation based on the meme template. These gestures and the clarity of the communicative gesture are essential to the success of the meme and its spreadability or circulation.

Selfies are also, above all else, a gesture (Senft & Baym, 2015). Visual culture scholars have identified this centrality of gesture in the practice with numerous physical touch metaphors, including grabbing (Senft & Baym, 2015), kinaesthesia (Frosh, 2015, 2018) and cutting (Warfield, 2016).

In photographic practices of selfies and memes, such as prospective photography, photography also gestures as an embodied media by beckoning us to act (Shifman, 2014a). Photographs have the potential to gesture intimate and personal meanings for individuals that are so close to self that metaphors of flesh, including umbilical cord (Barthes,

1980/2010) and skin (Barthes, 1980/2010; Senft, 2015), have been used to describe the personal association and intimacy of connection.

The main difference between memes and selfies as gestures lies in the nature of the gesture. Memes rely on gesture and sharing as a form of interaction: for something to be imitated in public, it has to be shared, and in this way, memes are always a group rather than a singular object. Selfies, on the other hand, are not always created for sharing; they can also be used for self-contemplation or documentation. Even when selfies are not shared, they still have the capacity to act as a form of cultural gesture because they are significant and culturally meaningful.

## Embodied

All the definitions of memes and selfies in the literature throughout this chapter identify digital social networks as their point of evolution from traditional social relationships. The description of digitally networked social relationships as embodied identifies virtual and physical realities as aspects of the self rather than as separate entities. As photographic practices, selfies and memes are also identified as embodied practice (Barthes, 1980/2010), where connections to photographs can be intimate and are an aspect of identification, identity performance as well as self-representation. Recognising selfies and memes as sensorily inscribed embodied practices (Farman, 2012, 2015, 2020) locates these practices beyond simply visual sensory interactions. It locates them as gestural visual practices that simultaneously flag visual interactions and sensory modes of touch.

## Multimodal Visualities

Throughout this chapter, I have described how scholars grappling with descriptions and explanations of visual practices have drawn on aspects and concepts of touch, recognising that visual interaction extends beyond vision or sight. Although Milner (2018) has identified digitally networked visual practices as being multimodal, this identification sought to



locate visual media in the context of multimedia that might include, for example, hypertext, words and video. One of the problems with locating meaning in physical modes of media alone is that it disregards the embodied nature of networked digital practice, where the body is also the text on which cultural meanings are inscribed. The networked self is not separate from other ideas of self, and the way we experience digital social networks is as sensorily inscribed embodied subjects (Farman, 2020). As all sensory processes are never experienced in isolation, I propose that a deeper and more complex analysis and understanding of social relationships is needed, which approaches visual practices as including more than one mode of communication and experience.

## Where to from Here?

As we have seen, research suggests that selfies and memes are practices of Touch. The proliferation of terms to describe visual social relationships highlights the limitations of the visual as an isolated sensory mode. Furthermore, it flags an urgency for research that considers how visual practices work as Touch and connection.

In Chap. 3, I will define Touch more fully as it is understood in everyday interactions and propose the fundamental means to map Touch as culturally significant and meaningful.

## References

- Andreallo, F. L. (2017). *The semeful sociability of digital memes: Visual communication as active and interactive conversation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Technology, Sydney]. OPUS Open Publications of UTS Scholars. <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/120273>
- Barker, J. M. (2009). *The tactile eye: Touch and the cinematic experience*. University of California Press.
- Barthes, R. (2010). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography* (R. Howard, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1980).
- Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin.

- Burns, A. (2015). Self(ie)-discipline: Social regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1716–1733. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3138/1395>
- Dawkins, R. (1989). *The selfish gene* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Farman, J. (2012). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media*. Routledge.
- Farman, J. (2015). Stories, spaces, and bodies: The production of embodied space through mobile media storytelling. *Communication Research and Practice*, 1(2), 101–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2015.1047941>
- Farman, J. (2020). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kinaesthetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1607–1628. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3146/1388>
- Frosh, P. (2018). *The poetics of digital media*. Polity Press.
- Gal, N., Shifman, L., & Kampf, Z. (2016). ‘It gets better’: Internet memes and the construction of collective identity. *New Media & Society*, 18(8), 1698–1714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814568784>
- Gilmore, D. (2012). *Another brick in the wall: Public space, visual hegemonic resistance, and the physical/digital continuum* [Master’s thesis, Georgia State University]. ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication\\_theses/91](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_theses/91)
- Goldman, R., & Papsion, S. (1996). *Sign wars: The cluttered landscape of advertising*. Guilford Press.
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media*. New York University Press.
- Kessler, M. (2006). Dusting the surface, or the bourgeoisie, the veil, and Haussmann’s Paris. In A. D’Souza & T. McDonough (Eds.), *The invisible flâneuse?: Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* (pp. 49–64). Manchester University Press.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.
- Milner, R. M. (2012). *The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas]. KU ScholarWorks. <https://kusolarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/10256>
- Milner, R. M. (2018). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. M.I.T. Press.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave.

- Senft, T. M. (2015). The skin of the selfie. In A. Bieber (Ed.), *Ego update: The future of digital identity* (pp. 134–161). NRW Forum.
- Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1588–1606. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4067/1387>
- Shifman, L. (2012). An anatomy of a YouTube meme. *New Media & Society*, 14(2), 187–203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811412160>
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(3), 362–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013>
- Shifman, L. (2014a). The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 340–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546577>
- Shifman, L. (2014b). *Memes in digital culture*. M.I.T. Press.
- Tiidenberg, K. (2018). *Selfies: Why we love (and hate) them*. Emerald Group.
- Warfield, K. (2016). Making the cut: An agential realist examination of selfies and touch. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641706>

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





# 3

## How Touch Works in Everyday Networked Social Relationships

**Abstract** This chapter presents a way to begin mapping Touch in everyday networked practices by examining how Touch is culturally significant. Extending from the previous chapter, networked Touch is first identified as embodied and multimodal. The five fundamentals of the cultural mode of Touch—identified as connection, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning—are then located for how they are culturally significant in everyday relationships. Finally, acknowledging networked social relationships as embodied and multimodal, I argue that visual social relationships can be understood as practices of Touch and mapped through close examination of the fundamentals of Touch. Furthermore, the fundamentals (as a map) could potentially be used to investigate the technological self beyond visual social relationships.

**Keywords** Touch • Photography • Visual • Social relationships • Digital cultures • Visual cultures • Connection • Engagement • Selfies • Memes

More than just a physical practice or sensation, Touch is culturally significant and a form of everyday meaning-making. Touch is multiply significant, with social and cultural meanings that can be physical, emotional, intellectual or political (Classen, 2012, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Cranny-Francis, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Jewitt, 2017; Schroeder & Rebelo, 2007). As Constance Classen writes, “Touch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies. The culture of touch involves all of culture” (Classen, 2020a, p. 1). In this book, I am interested in Touch as accultured meanings and how these meanings are constituted through interaction with other beings and objects in our world. This includes the way meanings are activated by touch, and how these meanings are contextual to the nature of touch and the circumstances in which it occurs. Locating Touch in the topic of selfies and memes therefore recognises that these practices act to document, analyse, understand and modify interactions between our bodies and the environments in which we live.

As I have previously mentioned in this book, the most straightforward understanding of touch is the state whereby two entities or objects are so close that no space remains between their boundaries or surfaces. However, as I began to argue in Chap. 2, drawing on the literature on selfies and memes, this simple explanation includes complex concepts such as boundaries, spaces that involve both inclusion and exclusion, as well as the complexity of connections of the self and networks.

The proliferation of research implying that selfies and memes act as practices of Touch flags an urgency for research addressing socially networked relationships of Touch. As discussed in Chap. 2, my examination of the literature focusing on visual social relationships of selfies and memes exposed how these visually defined practices are (implicitly) identified for the ways they communicate through Touch. Furthermore, the fundamentals of selfies and memes were located as gestural, embodied and multimodal practices. Describing these complexities of Touch, scholars focusing on selfies and memes have used metaphors and terms including skin (Senft, 2015), kinaesthesia (Frosh, 2015, 2018), cuts (Warfield, 2016), prospective photography and hyper-signification (Shifman, 2013, 2014b). For example, skin can be considered as boundaries; cuts as what is excluded and included in the boundaries; and kinaesthesia as a

complexity of boundaries, movement and touching. Similarly, cultural gestural interactions of Touch—prospective photography, hyper-signification (Shifman, 2013, 2014b) and appropriation (Milner, 2012, 2018)—have focused on active cultural connections and meaning-making.

Literature focusing explicitly on social relationships as Touch has recognised how touch is socially and culturally significant by drawing on history (Classen, 2012, 2020a, 2020c; Jewitt, 2012; Jewitt, 2011), philosophy (Elo, 2012) and human–technology relationships (Cranny-Francis, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), and the technological self has been identified as embodied sensory practice (Farman, 2020). However, everyday networked relationships, including visual social relationships such as selfies and memes, remain under-investigated and require further explicit investigation as Touch relationships. Research considering Touch and technology has so far largely focused on material relationships with technology, such as haptics and grasping. There is much work to be done in the area of Touch and technology beyond grasping (Elo, 2012; Jewitt, 2011), such as considering closely how Touch acts as a key and significant mode in everyday interactions and relationships.

Having a cultural studies focus, this book draws on a multimodal social semiotic approach to understanding the social world as it is represented in and through interaction and artefacts. A typical starting point for the multimodal social semiotic approach is to generate a general description of an artefact or sequence of interactions (e.g. a genre, materiality or general structure). This general description is then located in the broader world of representation and communication to define the modes and semiotic resources available in a given situation, how people use them, the choices they make, what motivates these choices and how their choices realise power (Jewitt, 2011).

To address the gap in the literature and gain a deeper sociocultural understanding of socially networked Touch, this chapter first describes the approach to Touch as meaningful, multimodal, embodied cultural practices. Then drawing on the social semiotic framework, the five fundamentals of Touch—connection, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning—are identified for how they are used in everyday examples and histories to produce meaningful social relationships. Finally, the

fundamentals are proposed as a type of map that will be used to analyse an example of memes and selfies in Chap. 4. This map is also helpful for guiding further research into networked relationships and the technological self beyond so-called visual practices.

## Networked Social Relationships of Touch as Embodied and Multimodal Practices

### Networked Practices as Embodied

Touch is an essential element of everyday networked social relationships. In fact, digital social relationships might best be considered as touch (Elo, 2012) rather than as purely visual phenomena (Milner, 2012, 2018; Streeck, 2009). This is because the understanding of visual gesture is driven by the body's practical acquaintance with the environment as it is lived in, explored and modified.

Digital relationships of selfies and memes are embodied because the body and bodily practices are essentially texts (Grosz, 2020) that are non-linear and in continual performance (Butler, 2002; Cover, 2015). The performance includes the creation and production of the body within social and cultural orders (Grosz, 2018). Recognising the performance, creation and production of the technological self as continual in everyday practices like selfies, digital cultures scholar Jill Rettberg has employed the term "feed" (Rettberg, 2014, p. 33). Similarly, Paul Frosh (2015) describes selfies as kinaesthesia, explicitly locating selfies as embodied and unfixed or in the process of bodily muscular interactions and creation.

Furthermore, as I mentioned in Chap. 1 (and examined further in Chap. 2), the terms used in the literature to describe selfies suggest embodied touch. For example, "the grab" (Senft & Baym, 2015), "the selfie skin" (Senft, 2015) and "kinesthetic sociability" (Frosh, 2015) are all located in digitally networked social relationships as corporeal or embodied socialities. *Skin* is an organ of the body, *grabbing* is foremost an action the body produces, and *kinaesthesia* is essentially located in muscular movements. Because these concepts are located explicitly as parts of

the corporeal body, they are already acknowledging how networked social relationships are embodied and, more specifically, that the visual is experienced as gesture and sensory inscriptions of touch.

Gestures such as grabbing are visually located forms of touch because they are a visual description of the body in an active form of touch. Moreover, embodied experiences in digital contexts have also been recognised for the ways the body is inscribed through sensory practices (Farman, 2012, 2015, 2020), which I extend to include the practices of selfies and memes. For example, touch can be recognised as a sensory inscription (Farman, 2020) in the way the recipient of conversational gesture (in this case, the sending or sharing of memes and selfies) draws on undisclosed understandings of touch in the visual communication process (Streeck, 2009).

Touch then locates the way people communicate through selfies as embodied, providing a way to consider the complexity of visual social relationships of Touch in digitally networked contexts.

## Multimodality of Networked Practices

Although memes have been recognised as multimodal media (Milner, 2012, 2018), they have not been recognised as embodied practices that focus on the multimodality of bodies in social relationships. In this book, I acknowledge the multimodality of media but focus on selfies and memes as embodied media, in which, as sensorily embodied (Farman, 2020) practices, the embodied mode of touch is the central point of focus.

The concept of multimodality and meaning-making is inseparable from bodies (Stein, 2007). The multimodality of bodies includes modes like gesture, gaze, posture and movement. Examination of these many modes pays attention to how people use and interpret specific modes to interact, represent and communicate meaning. As embodied practices, networked social relationships of Touch are therefore multimodal.

In this book, Touch in the context of selfies and memes is considered to be multimodal because gestured gaze and movement both function as forms of touch. From a social semiotic point of view, touch is a mode because it realises Halliday's (1978) three dimensions of metafunctional



meaning—interpersonal, ideational and textual—that are essential to defining communications in a social semiotic context (Bezemer & Kress, 2014). Touch meets Halliday’s interpersonal metafunction because it involves interaction with (one or more) specific others and occurs when someone is addressed; it meets the ideational metafunction because touch communicates something about the world; and it meets the textual metafunction because touch is coherent with signs made in the same or other modes to form an interaction. Handshaking, for example, acts as a coherent sign informing interaction.

This book contributes to the exploration of selfies and memes as Touch by examining what is included as touch and the social semiotic meanings associated with the dimensions of touch. Different modes offer different potentials for meaning-making. The potential of a mode is described in social semiotics as its affordance. Modal affordances are connected to the mode’s material and social histories, or its social and cultural purposes and how it is used in specific contexts. The researcher, as an embodied subject, therefore shapes a knowledge of what is understood according to their contexts and identification. Because of these connections, it is crucial as a researcher to remain reflexive. Therefore, aiming towards reflexive research, I wish to note my positioning as a cisgendered woman, identifying as she/her, with a mixed-Italian heritage and living on Australian land.

## Mapping the Fundamentals of Touch

The five fundamentals of Touch—connection, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning—were initially defined by Anne Cranny-Francis (2011b) to discuss human–technology relationships in the context of art gallery spaces. These fundamentals are defined simply in Table 3.1. Although not originally applied to networked social relationships of Touch, these five fundamentals are helpful in beginning to map how we might understand such relationships, because they are a basis for how touch acts as an indispensable mode of everyday social relationships. Furthermore, because touch is embodied, and the technological self includes embodied performances of self, the concept of Touch extends to

**Table 3.1** The (interdependent) fundamental properties of touch, based on Cranny-Francis's (2011b) examination of human–technology relationships of touch

Properties of Touch	Cultural location
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culturally determined or inflected by the distinction of ethnicity, class, gender, disability and age. Dependent on these distinctions, people have social agency to touch or be touched.</li> <li>● Connection and connectedness signified by touch enable us to relate to each other, to objects and to other beings, and to position ourselves reflexively in the world. However, where it occurs without full knowledge and the producer or receiver of the touch does not experience agency, it may be harmful or even disabling to the individual subject.</li> </ul>
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Signified when accompanied by other practices, including visual, verbal, aural and kinaesthetic, because these locate the contact as intentional.</li> <li>● <i>Intentional</i> touch.</li> <li>● "Being with" through contact physically, emotionally (feeling or empathising) or intellectually (understanding or knowing).</li> </ul>
Contiguity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The <i>awareness of</i> boundaries that separate us from others, objects and the world around us. Essentially it alerts us to the <i>conditions under which the connection takes place</i>.</li> </ul>
Differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Signified by the difference between self and other beyond the boundary.</li> <li>● Whereas <i>contiguity</i> is in the <i>awareness of</i> boundaries, differentiation considers <i>beyond</i> the boundaries.</li> </ul>
Positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Signified in multiple senses that can include physical and embodied practice involving emotional, intellectual and spiritual meaning.</li> <li>● If addressed reflectively, it can make us aware of our own social, cultural and ethical positioning.</li> <li>● Awareness of our location in time/space through embodied engagement with the world around us.</li> </ul>

our networked socialities and can be linked to specific research in digitally networked social relationships.

In what follows, I further define the five fundamentals and consider how they can be located in everyday socially networked relationships. In this way, I begin to map the social and cultural significance of digitally

networked social relationships of Touch. Specifically, I focus on selfies and memes as digital social relationships, while highlighting that this map can be extended to other digital (and technological) cultural practices in future research.

## Connection

The connection aspect of touch is illustrated in the well-known ancient Greek myth of King Midas. King Midas was at first pleased with the gift of the golden touch because the power allowed him to turn anything into gold. However, this excitement quickly turned to disappointment when he was left unable to eat or hug loved ones. This myth highlights the extent of connection afforded by touch between individuals, things and other individuals, and how touch can at once be an act of power or intimacy, and an everyday necessity in actions such as eating (Cranny-Francis, 2013).

Connection is culturally determined or inflected by the distinction of ethnicity, class, gender, ability and age. Dependent on these distinctions, people have social agency to touch or be touched. For example, in the case of class, in some cultural traditions, people in lower classes are considered untouchable and without agency; on the other end of the scale, people with power, such as presidents or royalty, are not to be touched but can touch others if they choose. One well-known example in Australia is the historical blunder of the Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, who touched the Queen of England on her back without consent in her 1992 visit to Australia. The outraged English media dubbed the Australian prime minister “The Lizard of Oz”, suggesting that touching the English Queen was scandalous and socially inappropriate for the Australian prime minister’s station. Another example, found in the Christian bible, tells the story of Mary Magdalene, who sought to be cured by touching the hem of the cloak of Jesus Christ. In this story, touch is spiritual and considered to have the power of healing; in many religions, healing is located in touch, such as the laying of hands. The story of Mary Magdalene also associates touch with class systems because Mary is positioned as a lower-class citizen and considered unworthy to touch the hem of Jesus Christ’s

cloak. Through connection with the spiritual figure, the unworthy (in this case, Mary Magdalene) is cured. However, in the example of the English Queen, touch is thought to have sullied the prestigious figure. Connection in these examples is based on hierarchies of class, bodies and cultural understanding of social interactions of touch.

The way we touch each other is significant. In the case of companion species, including humans, tactile contact is fundamental for social interaction (Haraway, 2003). Touch has emotional connotations and has been recognised for the ways it “creates a platform off which trust can be built” (Dunbar, 2010, p. 263). The building of trust relies on communicative interaction involving permissible types of touch, which may include degrees of intimacy or violence (Ascione & Lockwood, 1997; Haraway, 2003), and the strengthening of social bonds through touch (Mondémé, 2021). For example, a firm handshake suggests honesty and competence and a weak handshake may suggest inability or dishonesty. Similarly, a touch on the arm can indicate various things depending on the type of touch. For example, grasping might indicate control over the other or fear; to brush someone’s arm can mean something entirely different.

The term “haptic sociality” (Cekaite & Kvist Holm, 2017; Goodwin, 2017) has been coined in studies of the role that touch plays in social relationships, where touch is considered as a vital part of communicative, embodied, social relationships. Historically, touch has played an essential role in power relations of social status, gender and age (Candlin, 2020; Classen, 2020a). In considerations of touch in human–technology relationships, Cranny-Francis (2011b) suggests that touch can constitute feelings of power for humans because, in human–technology relationships, the boundaries between humans, as well as between humans and technology, are challenged.

Connection can also be gestured through visually represented performance. For example, practices of touch are often used in the performance of gender. Erving Goffman (1979) studied gender in advertisements, dedicating a whole section of his book on the subject to observations of “the feminine touch”. Goffman considered how touch was significant to a social and culturally located performance of femininity. He observed how advertisements represented femininity by nonactive or non-utilitarian types of touching, such as cradling, caressing surfaces and just

barely touching, and lacked any utilitarian type of touching such as grasping, manipulating or holding. Goffman claimed that images of the face, rather than hands, were more often used to convey touch in the case of the feminine body. Touching for the feminine body also often included self-touching that conveyed the feminine body as a delicate thing.

Connection and connectedness signified by Touch are valuable and positive in enabling us to relate to each other, to objects and to other beings, and to position ourselves reflexively in the world. However, touch can also be harmful when it occurs without full consent, rendering the producer or receiver of the touch without agency. As noted in Chap. 2, in their discussion of the agency of selfies, Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015) have used the term “the grab” to refer to the way touch as a connection can both enable and constrain. Here selfies afford the selfie producer agency through connection and connectedness, but they can also be harmful or even disabling to the individual subject if the images are used in contexts beyond the depicted person’s original intent. The same can be applied to photographic memes when images are used beyond the depicted person’s wishes.

The complexity of connection can be explored in more detail through the remaining four fundamentals.

## Engagement

Based on the etymology of the word “engagement” in the notion of to pledge or bind together, the fundamental of engagement recognises touch as “being with”. This can include contact that is physical, emotional (feeling or empathising) or intellectual (understanding or knowing). A term of engagement traditionally precedes marriage, recognising this period as a kind of “being with” in the notion of the term. Similarly, if we say “I have a prior engagement”, we indicate that we have committed to “being with” others.

Engagement as touch can be more intimate than simply connection because it places the toucher in intimate relationship with the touched, an acceptance of “being with” that creates an empathetic relationship between the two. The active acceptance of engagement means that it is

usually intentional and more invested, whereas connections of touch can be unintentional and more casual.

In digital cultures, people experience not only connection but the engagement of “being with” through shared affective affiliations and investment, referred to by Christine Bacareza Balance as “emotional hooks” (Bacareza Balance, 2012, p. 139). Bacareza Balance argues that things spread and become viral because the emotional hooks they project are “key signifiers that catch the attention and sensibility of an audience” (Bacareza Balance, 2012, p. 139).

In the case of photographic memes and selfies, the way people use photography—described by (Shifman, 2013) as prospective photography—gestures to participants to offer creative contributions. Prospective photography hooks people into engagement with the conversation as a part of what Shifman (2013) calls hyper-signification. As we saw in Chap. 2, memes are essentially a group, so these “emotional hooks” of engagement are an essential aspect of memes. Because selfies are not defined in groups, they work a bit differently. Nonetheless, this emotional hooking still works as a part of the engagement in the conversation, for example, in responses specific to the platform where the selfie is shared.

The ways we engage through memes can be explored through the memetic fundamentals (Milner, 2012, 2018) of reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, spread and multimodality (see Chap. 2). Appropriating something is engaging with the original and contributing a new take. Resonance describes how the engagement experienced through memes acts on many levels, including personal, interpersonal and loose general connections with others. Collectivism describes the collective whole of a group of memes but can also suggest the ways people engage in a collective topic or conversation. And how memes spread depends on connections and engagement in the production and sharing. The multimodality of memes as gestures, including combinations of visual, aural, verbal and kinaesthetic practice, can also be considered engagement.

However, the level of engagement can vary, from personal or interpersonal, to broader levels of social engagement. Engagement, unlike connection, is most often gestured as intentional in social contexts through the accompaniment of other (visual, verbal, aural or kinaesthetic)

practices. For example, if we touch someone, we can gesture the intention by looking them in the eye or saying something, as opposed to being distracted by something else and not noticing we brushed past each other.

The memetic fundamentals (Milner, 2018) of reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, spread and multimodality make the gesture of touch intentional through the engaged act. The contrast of engagement as intentional with connection that is often experienced as incidental can also provide a way to think about levels of engagement and how engagement is linked to social spaces. For example, a connection can be experienced as a passing touch on a crowded train of strangers, but engagement is gestured through the intentional touch of someone with whom we share a prior connection. However, connections and engagement sometimes work a little differently in the context of digitally networked visual practices. For example, in the digital space, we might experience engagement with other people even though they are strangers. We might identify with comments or shared images and, therefore, might connect through gestures such as upvotes or likes, thereby experiencing engagement through shared identifications. Indeed proximity (physical and gestured) plays a vital role in the level of engagement. The nature of the type of engagement is always dependent on context.

## Contiguity and Differentiation

*Contiguity* as a fundamental of Touch is signified through awareness of boundaries that separate us from others, from objects and from the world around us, and it is in this way that we are able to locate the specific of the other (Cranny-Francis, 2011b). Franziska Schroeder and Pedro Rebelo write about the importance of interface for the interaction of musicians and instruments, stating that “the performer only becomes acquainted with the ‘thing’ at hand by being able to test boundaries, negotiate subtiles and uncover threshold conditions” (Schroeder & Rebelo, 2007, p. 88). Here the testing of boundaries, negotiation of subtiles and uncovering of conditions are crucial to engagement. The same applies in the context of human–human relationships, where “awareness of boundaries between ourselves and others enables the rich, delicate,

creative exploration of possible relationships between us” (Cranny-Francis, 2011b, p. 475).

Contiguity through Touch in memetic relationships includes the ways people play with boundaries of photographic construction to expose social and cultural ideals through practices of hyper-signification (Goldman & Papson, 1996; Shifman, 2014a). An example is reaction photoshops (as I described in Chap. 2), which usually consist of putting people or objects in different backgrounds or scenes, such as “disaster girl” (an image of a young child with a wicked look on her face that is superimposed onto various crisis backgrounds) (KnowYourMeme, 2021). The manipulation of the images in the memes plays with concepts of photographic evidence and truth, and the practice includes an awareness of the boundaries or limitations of photography as an evidential document. Through this play and shared knowledge, relationships are built.

The genre of stock character macros like “confession bear” and “Asian dad” play with overt stereotypes and cultural constructs. Jacqueline Vickery and Andrew Nelson (2013) have examined “confession bear” and the idea of confession as a private practice. They have explored the ways people experience this meme, which is recognised as having limitations and pushing boundaries by publicly (although anonymously) acknowledging what is typically kept private. Focused on the “Asian dad” meme, Zhao Ding (2015) argues that such memes complicate the construction of racial identities because they act at once as jokes and as representations of the social conflicts surrounding race. Stereotypes are a social construct, and one of the ways this meme works as a joke is by drawing awareness to the boundaries that stereotypes create.

An awareness of boundaries that separate us from others, objects and the world around us can also be identified by examining the spatial relationships of digital cultures. For example, Jason Farman’s (2015) work offers insights into social concepts of embodiment, identity and community in the digital age, highlighting that proximity and location are means through which certain bodies are privileged in digital cultures. Notions of “place” as a space of intimate identification (Hjorth & Hinton, 2019) also deal with Touch as contiguity because the identification of place includes ideas of boundary making in relationships of space. Social boundaries of public and private space continue to be culturally limited



for certain bodies where social gestures are linked to public space (Senft, 2008) and gendered bodies in a history (Andreallo, 2017). The movement of boundaries and spaces has also been examined in concepts of “digital wayfaring” (Hjorth & Pink, 2014), which explains the way selfies act as kinaesthetic practices (Frosh, 2015) that define boundaries of bodies moving through digital social spaces.

The boundaries of selfies and memes can be considered in terms of the way they communicate across time and space, thus minimising boundaries of distance, and for the cultural significance of how boundaries are performed in selfies. For example, gestured handholding, experienced when the extended arm is included in some selfie frames, connects the viewer to the performer (Frosh, 2015). It is a physical representation of boundaries that separate us, but simultaneously gestures towards connection in the act of sharing. Boundaries are also apparent by the conditions that establish the interface between the subject and the viewer. This may be the materiality of the technological device, software such as filters, or the cultural assumptions of individual subjects and viewers. The cultural significance of how boundaries are performed in selfies is seen in the ways selfies have been identified as gendered (Albury, 2015) and performing to social ideals (Tiidenberg, 2018), and how memes work through cultural identifications (Gal et al., 2016).

*Differentiation* is where “touch signifies the difference between self and other beyond the boundary” (Cranny-Francis, 2011b, p. 475). Whereas contiguity is in the *awareness of* boundaries, differentiation considers *beyond* the boundaries. So, in the case of selfies, although the extended arm cut into the frame of a selfie presents an awareness of boundaries, the selfie also moves beyond the boundaries of time and space through the immediacy of its sharing.

Touch as differentiation both connects us to technology and to each other, and differentiates us from technology and each other. In this way, Touch specifies uniqueness from the other—the other body, or the other as cultures outside the one in which we perform—so that as humans, we enjoy an intimacy through connection with other and, at the same time, identify ourselves as unique. Touch has the potential to differentiate human from object, real from not real. This is also an essential aspect of authenticity (Hess, 2015), which is important to social media connection.

Differentiation also has the potential to exclude by defining what bodies are addressed and who forms a community (Farman, 2020), and how platforms are dominated by particular bodies (Massanari, 2013, 2015). Drawing on the concepts of social spaces and proxemics that Farman (2020) discusses, differentiation also has the potential for examining the complexity of agency in online practices such as selfies and memes (Senft, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015) where it can potentially contribute to an ethics of photo sharing.

## Positioning

The sense of touch includes access to tactile, proprioceptive and vestibular senses, enabling us to position ourselves in space and time. These internal touch sensors “enable us to position our bodies in space, even without visual stimuli, and to achieve equilibrium or balance” (Cranny-Francis, 2011b, p. 476). Furthermore “positioning is always meaningful, and it enacts social and cultural meanings that locate us in our world” (Cranny-Francis, 2011b, p. 476). One way of positioning works in the context of selfies and memes is through the positioning of the viewer—their knowledge of the cultural conversation in time and space is essential to locating the meaning.

In the context of networked social relationships, Touch signifies positioning in multiple ways, including physical and embodied practices that have emotional, intellectual and spiritual meaning. If addressed reflectively, this positioning can make us aware of our own social, cultural and ethical positioning because, physically, “touch creates an awareness of our location in time/space through embodied engagement with the world around us” (Cranny-Francis, 2011b, p. 476). The amount of space something takes up in relation to our body acts as a signifier of our relationship: if something is bigger than us, then that thing or body is signified as having greater power, authority and dominance. When certain bodies are treated as socially invisible or do not have representation, then this signifies that they do not enjoy power, authority or dominance, socially or culturally.

In the use of memes, groups of people identifying and actively participating (Gal et al., 2016; Shifman, 2014b) makes a topic of conversation fill space and, in this way, emphasises a powerful context. Another example of space–power relationships is the way selfies make bodies of women visible in public spaces (Burns, 2015). The dominant female figure is not traditionally accepted, as is evident in a social history of nineteenth-century Europe, where female bodies were limited to private space (Andreallo, 2017; Kessler, 2006). Selfies therefore disrupt traditional concepts of public space as a political arena where visibility for some groups of people is traditionally limited. Furthermore, experiences of selfies disrupt traditional ideas of time and space; for example, one can perform a selfie and share it with another person vast distances around the globe, linking a moment in time and space as experience.

Digital social networks and performance, however, are not utopias of visibility: bodies, visibility and ways of being continue to be in a type of struggle, despite the hopes of early research on participatory cultures. One example of such struggles of visibility is exposed by Burns's (2015) examination of selfies and young women (which I will discuss in more detail in Chap. 4).

## **Touch Is an Essential Aspect of Digitally Networked Social Relationships**

Close examination and mapping of Touch has the potential to reveal things about the society and cultures we live in and ourselves as embodied subjects. Depending on the type of touch, and the bodies, social positioning and spaces involved, Touch can include degrees of both intimacy and violence.

We can use the fundamentals of Touch to understand how social relationships of photographic practices such as selfies and memes act as the skin of culturally inscribed bodies.

In this chapter, I have recognised and located the fundamentals of Touch as embodied practices. The fundamentals of Touch have been derived from diverse literature on how touch functions most broadly in

cultural practices and then linked to the work of scholars explicitly focusing on digital cultures. Close reflexive mapping of the fundamentals of Touch in the space of digitally networked socialities offers a means through which the complexities of the technological self can be examined. Furthermore, this map offers a means for considering an ethics of digitally networked social relationships beyond memes and selfies, and indeed beyond visual, including the ways social relationships both enable and constrain technological bodies and embodied practice.

The focus of this book is specifically on memes and selfies as visual social practices; however, the mapping in this chapter has been approached from general to more specific so that it may also be helpful for future examinations of Touch beyond visual socialities and, more broadly, for everyday networked social interactions. Furthermore, examining visual practices beyond traditional visual limitations aims to locate selfies and memes as multimodal practices of the embodied self that can extend beyond visual contexts of touch.

Although the map of Touch offered in this chapter presents a broad approach to networked, embodied practices of touch, the meaning of Touch is always specific and contextual. With this in mind, the next chapter moves towards a more profound mapping of selfies and memes specifically by considering the example of memes consisting of selfies known as PrettyGirlsUglyFaces.

## References

- Albury, K. (2015). Selfies, sexts and sneaky hats: Young people's understandings of gendered practices of self-representation. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1734–1745. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3132/1396>
- Andreallo, F. L. (2017). *The semeful sociability of digital memes: Visual communication as active and interactive conversation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Technology, Sydney]. OPUS Open Publications of UTS Scholars. <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/120273>
- Ascione, F., & Lockwood, R. (1997). *Cruelty to animals and interpersonal violence*. Purdue University Press.

- Bacareza Balance, C. (2012). How it feels to be viral me: Affective labor and Asian American YouTube performance. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 40(1/2), 138–152. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23333440>
- Bezemer, J., & Kress, G. (2014). Touch: A resource for making meaning. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 37(2), 77–85. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/aeipt.204229>
- Burns, A. (2015). Self(ie)-discipline: Social regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 9(2015), 1716–1733. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3138/1395>
- Butler, J. (2002). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Candlin, F. (2020). Museums, modernity and the class politics of touching objects. In H. J. Chatterjee (Ed.), *Touch in museums: Policy and practice in object handling* (pp. 9–20). Routledge.
- Cekaite, A., & Kvist Holm, M. (2017). The comforting touch: Tactile intimacy and talk in managing children's distress. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 50(2), 109–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351813.2017.1301293>
- Classen, C. (2012). *The deepest sense: A cultural history of touch*. University of Illinois Press.
- Classen, C. (2020a). *The book of touch*. Routledge.
- Classen, C. (2020b). Touch and technology. In C. Classen (Ed.), *The book of touch* (pp. 401–408). Routledge.
- Classen, C. (2020c). Touch in the museum. In C. Classen (Ed.), *The book of touch* (pp. 275–288). Routledge.
- Cover, R. (2015). *Digital identities: Creating and communicating the online self*. Academic Press.
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2009). Touching film: The embodied practice and politics of film viewing and filmmaking. *The Senses and Society*, 4(2), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.2752/174589309X425111>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2011a). The art of touch: A photo-essay. *Social Semiotics*, 21(4), 591–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2011.591999>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2011b). Semefulness: A social semiotics of touch. *Social Semiotics*, 21(4), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2011.591993>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2013). *Technology and touch: The biopolitics of emerging technologies*. Springer.

- Ding, Z. (2015). *The internet meme as a rhetoric discourse: Investigating Asian/Asian Americans' identity negotiation*. Bowling Green State University.
- Dunbar, R. I. M. (2010). The social role of touch in humans and primates: Behavioural function and neurobiological mechanisms. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 34(2), 260–268. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2008.07.001>
- Elo, M. (2012). Digital finger: Beyond phenomenological figures of touch. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 4(1), Article 14982. <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v4i0.14982>
- Farman, J. (2012). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media*. Routledge.
- Farman, J. (2015). Stories, spaces, and bodies: The production of embodied space through mobile media storytelling. *Communication Research and Practice*, 1(2), 101–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2015.1047941>
- Farman, J. (2020). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kinesthetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1607–1628. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3146/1388>
- Frosh, P. (2018). *The poetics of digital media*. Polity Press.
- Gal, N., Shifman, L., & Kampf, Z. (2016). 'It gets better': Internet memes and the construction of collective identity. *New Media & Society*, 18(8), 1698–1714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814568784>
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender advertisements*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Goldman, R., & Papson, S. (1996). *Sign wars: The cluttered landscape of advertising*. Guilford Press.
- Goodwin, M. H. (2017). Haptic sociality. In C. Meyer, J. Streeck, & J. S. Jordan (Eds.), *Intercorporeality: Emerging socialities in interaction* (pp. 73–102). Oxford University Press.
- Grosz, E. (2018). *Space, time and perversion: Essays on the politics of bodies*. Routledge.
- Grosz, E. (2020). *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Routledge.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Hodder Education.
- Haraway, D. J. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

- Hess, A. (2015). The selfie assemblage. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1629–1646. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3147/1389>
- Hjorth, L., & Hinton, S. (2019). *Understanding social media*. Sage.
- Hjorth, L., & Pink, S. (2014). New visualities and the digital wayfarer: Reconceptualizing camera phone photography and locative media. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 2(1), 40–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157913505257>
- Jewitt, C. E. (Ed.). (2011). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis* (1st ed.). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Jewitt, C. (2012). *Technology, literacy, learning: A multimodal approach*. Routledge.
- Jewitt, C. (2017). Towards a multimodal social semiotic agenda for touch. In S. Zhao, E. Djonov, A. Björkqvall, & M. Boeriis (Eds.), *Advancing multimodal and critical discourse studies* (pp. 79–93). Routledge.
- Kessler, M. (2006). Dusting the surface, or the bourgeoisie, the veil, and Haussmann's Paris. In A. D'Souza & T. McDonough (Eds.), *The invisible flâneuse?: Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* (pp. 49–64). Manchester University Press.
- KnowYourMeme. (2021). *Disaster girl*. Retrieved October 30, 2021, from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/disaster-girl>
- Massanari, A. (2013). Playful participatory culture: Learning from Reddit. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 3(IR14). <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/8787>
- Massanari, A. L. (2015). *Participatory culture, community, and play: Learning from Reddit*. Peter Lang.
- Milner, R. M. (2012). *The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas]. KU ScholarWorks. <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/10256>
- Milner, R. M. (2018). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. M.I.T. Press.
- Mondémé, C. (2021). Touching and petting: Exploring 'haptic sociality' in interspecies interaction. In A. Cekaite & L. Mondada (Eds.), *Touch in social interaction: Touch, language and body*. Routledge.
- Rettberg, J. W. (2014). *Seeing ourselves through technology: How we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*. Springer Nature.
- Schroeder, F., & Rebelo, P. (2007). Wearable music in engaging technologies. *AI & Society*, 22(1), 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-006-0071-4>

- Senft, T. M. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks*. Peter Lang.
- Senft, T. M. (2015). The skin of the selfie. In A. Bieber (Ed.), *Ego update: The future of digital identity* (pp. 134–161). NRW Forum.
- Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1588–1606. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4067/1387>
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(3), 362–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013>
- Shifman, L. (2014a). The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 340–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546577>
- Shifman, L. (2014b). *Memes in digital culture*. M.I.T. Press.
- Stein, P. (2007). *Multimodal pedagogies in diverse classrooms: Representation, rights and resources*. Routledge.
- Streeck, J. (2009). *Gesturecraft: The manu-facture of meaning*. John Benjamins.
- Tiidenberg, K. (2018). *Selfies: Why we love (and hate) them*. Emerald Group.
- Vickery, J. R., & Nelson, A. J. (2013). The curious case of confession bear: Analyzing anonymity and online memes. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 3(IR14). <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/9029>
- Warfield, K. (2016). Making the cut: An agential realist examination of selfies and touch. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641706>



**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





# 4

## Mapping Touch of (Ugly) Selfies, Memes, and Jokes as Forms of Intimacy and Violence

**Abstract** To further consider the ways Touch both enables and constrains bodies and ways of being, this chapter examines Touch as including forms of both intimacy and violence. Extending from the implicit understandings of selfies and memes as Touch (Chap. 2) and the initial mapping of Touch (Chap. 3), the PrettyGirlsUglyFaces meme (and the selfies that make up the meme) is used as an example to consider selfies and memes as intimacy and violence. Then, drawing on the fundamentals of Touch (Chap. 3), I begin to plot a map of Touch, identifying how the example meme and selfies act as intimate connections that are positioned in a culture of violence. Central to this chapter is the identification of the joke's importance to the positioning of visual conversations in social networks. As a form of Touch, the joke is identified as both enabling and constraining intimacy and violence. Examining memes and selfies as practices of connectivity and symbolic violence further recognises Touch for the ways it culturally both enables and constrains bodies and identifications.

**Keywords** Intimate touch • Violent touch • Meme intimacy • Selfie intimacy • Technology-facilitated violence • Symbolic violence • Joke • Ugly selfies • Ugly intimacies • Textures of intimacy • Technological connection and engagement • Photography

Selfies and memes are practices of Touch that have mainly been identified for the ways they can involve intimate connection (Humphreys et al., 2013; McGlotten, 2013; Petersen et al., 2017; Prøitz et al., 2017; Van Dijck, 2013); however, they can also be used and experienced as violence (Bailey et al., 2021; Dunn, 2021; Jane, 2016; Senft, 2015). In this chapter, Touch is considered to include forms of both intimacy and violence to contribute to a mapping of cultural Touch (as proposed in Chap. 3). Continuing to focus on selfies and memes as embodied practices of the technological self, where we live *in* media rather than *with* media (Deuze, 2011, p. 138), this chapter considers how social bodies are both enabled and constrained by Touch in the contexts of violence and intimacy.

Discussion of the intimacy of social media focuses on connections. Considered a positive goal for relationships, intimacy is understood to involve sharing emotions, experiences and affective bodily proximities. Describing intimacy of connections as inextricably entwined with social media, Petersen et al. write that “both intimacy and social media allow people to express and share what matters to them, and both encourage personalised connection and inter-activity” (Petersen et al., 2017, p. 4). In addition to this, it is claimed that intimacy has increased with digitally networked social media, as well as a need to communicate the intimacy of self (Humphreys et al., 2013; Van Dijck, 2013). In the work focused on intimacies of self, intimacy has been recognised as involving many textures (McGlotten, 2013), including “ugly” intimacies like heartbreak and loss (Prøitz et al., 2017) that are generally not considered to be positive.

Selfies and memes have been identified as social media that act as intimate connections through displayed gesture (Frosh, 2015, 2018; Senft & Baym, 2015) and the immediacy of the sharing, where the receiver is at one with the selfie producer (Andreallo, 2019). Furthermore, jokes are integral to how memes work to form intimate connections of

identification between people (Albury, 2015; Shifman, 2007, 2014b; Shifman & Blondheim, 2010). Although it is argued that both the architecture of online spaces and the etiquette of behaving within these spaces tend to favour the dense proliferation of intimacies with others (Payne, 2014), there are also experiences of violence in social media.

Violence includes not only physical, emotional and psychological abuse (United Nations, 1979), but also technological abuse (Simonovic et al., 2018). Technology-facilitated violence, or as Suzie Dunn refers to it “TFV” (Dunn, 2021), is an umbrella term that includes cyberbullying, trolling (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018), online abuse (Matsuda, 2018), cyberviolence (Peterson & Densley, 2017), harassment, technology-facilitated coercive control, symbolic violence (Barratt, 2018; Lumsden & Morgan, 2018) and representational violence (Hall & Hearn, 2019). Research into technology-facilitated violence highlights the extent of gendered violence (Jane, 2016, 2020; Johanssen, 2021; Lumsden & Morgan, 2018), which includes rape and death threats, body shaming (Jane, 2016), misrepresentation and presentations of the feminine as aligned with incompetence or deviance (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018). Selfies and memes act as violence when used against the original producer’s intent or without their consent, violating their agency. Examples include public profile images reused in memes against the producer’s original intent and often in negative ways (Senft & Baym, 2015), as well as the recontextualisation of nude images, and photoshopping or deep-fakes of people into porn images (Dunn, 2021; Hall & Hearn, 2019).

Symbolic violence (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992) has been considered instrumental for examining social media relationships because it provides an explanatory power not provided elsewhere (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018; Skeggs, 2004). Part of this explanatory power resides in how it locates violence beyond physical concepts. In this chapter, I extend on Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic violence, which although limited to considerations of class and race can also be extended to recognise a variety of other power relationships including gender (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018; McRobbie, 2004).

One of the critical aspects of symbolic violence is that it is the violence that is “exercised upon the social agent with his or her complicity” (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992, p. 167). This complicity commonly

occurs in technology-facilitated violence when victims are culturally expected to remain silent and are often socially disciplined to do so through blame (Marwick, 2017), such as suggestions that they deserve the treatment or were asking for it. This is also reinforced by authorities such as police when victims are told to “take a little break from the internet”, or to “use less attractive profile images” and “engage with less provocative politics online” (Jane, 2016, p. 4). The adage of “don’t feed the trolls” also works along these lines of silencing victims (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018).

Symbolic violence and these examples highlight that when we talk about so-called *social* media, we need to acknowledge the contexts of social relationships positioned in cultural structures. The complexity of how forms of Touch such as intimacy and violence culturally enable and constrain bodies and ways of being requires further consideration.

In this chapter, I use the PrettyGirlsUglyFaces (PGUF) meme (and the selfies that make up the meme) (KnowYourMeme, 2021) as an example to consider how the meme is located in social relationships of intimacy in contexts of violence. I employ the five fundamentals of Touch (discussed in Chap. 3) to contribute to a map of culturally meaningful Touch, where intimacy and violence (as forms of Touch) are examined for how they both enable and constrain bodies and ways of being.

In what follows, I first discuss the positioning of the PGUF meme and selfies, which involves understanding what the meme is, who is involved, where it is located and how the social interaction is communicated through the joke. In this context, I then consider the social relationships of Touch as connection and engagement, and contiguity and differentiation, and discuss how violence and intimacy both enable and constrain.

## Mapping Touch Through the PrettyGirlsUglyFaces Meme and Selfies

### Positioning of the PGUF Meme and Selfies

In considering the social relationships of Touch, I will begin with the fundamental of positioning. However, positioning is only one of the fundamentals of Touch and does not function independently. Rather, the

other four fundamentals—connection, engagement, contiguity and differentiation—shape aspects of positioning as much as positioning shapes them. For the purposes of this chapter, I will first establish the positioning of the PGUF meme and selfies before discussing the other four fundamentals.

Positioning is gestured through the point of view: who is being represented as looking or as actively gazing (Berger, 2008; Mulvey, 1989). Positioning is also gestured through the space something takes up, and who is visible or filling a space. The way the PGUF meme and selfies link people with shared political sentiments together, described by Senft (2008) as “networked reflective solidarity”, works to position the participants of the PGUF meme not only as a shared point of view but as a group that has the presence of the space it occupies.

Considering the positioning of Touch in social relationships requires first identifying the bodies involved, and then recognising how they are positioned within social and cultural structures, and how they position themselves in the context of selfie or meme practices. The bodies involved in selfies and memes include whoever is looking and observing, as well as the bodies performing in the selfie or meme. The PGUF meme also needs to be contextualised in time and space to position the meaning of Touch. This can include the social platform context and how the bodies are situated in the platform space, and how they are treated in broader social contexts and reported media. It also includes the history of how the bodies involved have been culturally located through various modes of representation and communication. All these attributes inform meaningful Touch, but the tools of communication are also essential. For example, the PGUF meme uses the communicative tool of jokes, a popular form of networked communication, and understanding how the joke functions socially is key to understanding the social relationships of Touch.

Positioning as a fundamental of Touch is discussed here under four themes: “what”, which introduces the focus example of the PGUF meme; “who”, which defines the looking and touching bodies involved; “where”, which historically locates the bodies and conversation, and reported and networked media conversations at the time of the meme, as well as the platforms (and spaces within and beyond them) in which the conversation takes place; and “how”, which focuses on jokes as a communicative tool employed in the social relationships of Touch.

## What Is the PGUF Meme (and Uglies)?

The PGUF meme makes use of what have come to be known as “uglies” (or ugly selfies). It was Catness\_NeverClean who is claimed to have first posted uglies juxtaposed with “normal faces” on Reddit on 13 July 2012, provoking the popular PrettyGirlsUglyFaces meme (Reddit, 2021a; Fig. 4.1). Since then, the PGUF meme has reached viral proportions and has continued to receive contributions to the Reddit community since 2012 (KnowYourMeme, 2021).

Ugly selfies are the selfies we do not usually share publicly. Some people keep them private, and others actively perform them to send to friends or have accounts dedicated to the performance. They are typically any twisted face or angle that you would not usually want to be captured, or that is considered an improper public performance.

The PGUF meme is not the only version of memes containing uglies, nor are ugly selfies limited to memes. The performance of ugly selfies is thought to have first appeared on Tumblr, but they are also the topic of many “seconds”, or secondary accounts, and private Facebook groups. Subreddits (communities within the Reddit social media platform) include “You are so beaut-OHGOD!” (Reddit, 2021b), and Tumblr uses



**Fig. 4.1** Two examples of the [PrettyGirlsUglyFaces](#) meme. The images here have had a filter applied and colour removed to preserve some anonymity when changing the context of the posts

the tags “pretty girls ugly faces”, “pretty girl ugly face” and “ugly selfie”. Common hashtags on Instagram include #prettygirluglyface and #uglyselfie.

## Who Are the Performers of Touch?

The bodies involved in the PGUF meme are young women aged in their 20s to late 30s. The subreddit includes people mainly from the United States, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom. The gender of the selfie subjects is specified on the site by the title of *PrettyGirlsUglyFaces* that includes “girls”. The concept of the feminine in this site appears limited to female bodies as a gender binary; another site, named *HGUF* (*handsomeguysuglyfaces*), has been produced for male participants. The gender binary is present in the concept of the male body being limited to handsome (a concept for masculine performance) and the female body to pretty, which suggests femininity.

The bodies involved in a meme include not only the bodies that the meme and selfies focus upon, and who is involved in the conversation, but also myself as a researcher. My interest in the PGUF meme was first through involvement directly in the Reddit group and an interest in ugly selfies. Later, this site and meme became the focus of my PhD thesis that investigated networked visual social relationships. As a researcher of this meme aiming towards more reflexive research, I note here that I am a cisgendered woman, identifying as she/her, with a mixed-Italian heritage and living on Australian land. This declaration positions to some extent the ideas and looking practices I have in this context.

## Where Are the Bodies Located in the Practices of Touch?

The PGUF meme is located on the Reddit social media platform. The observations made here apply to selfies uploaded to the *PrettyGirlsUglyFaces* subreddit site between January 2014 and January 2015. The site is still active; however, posts now commonly include more videos than photos.



Furthermore, they are not often uploaded as one juxtaposed image; instead, the viewer has to scroll through from pretty to ugly. At the time of final edits of this chapter the *PrettyGirlsUglyFaces* subreddit appears to be becoming superseded by the “You are so beaut-OHGOD!” subreddit.

Reddit’s culture and the platform support gendered violence (Massanari, 2017; Massanari, 2015). The site is well known to be dominated by geek masculinity that privileges the white, non-disabled, young, straight, cisgendered male over other ways of being (Massanari, 2013; Massanari, 2015, p. 129). The Reddit context of dominant masculinity (Massanari, 2015) and toxic culture (Massanari, 2017) is significant for the PGUF subreddit community, which includes female, feminine performances as practices of engagement and connection. I discuss this further later in this chapter.

The memes and conversations of the PGUF site are public, that is, these images and conversations are publicly accessible to anyone with access to the internet. The presence of the bodies of young women in an openly public space is significant, as such exposure has a long history of being considered limited and taboo. In European history, the female middle-class body has been limited to private space (D’Souza et al., 2006; Pollock, 2018), extending back to nineteenth-century Europe, where the only visible female bodies in public space and streets were sex workers. Middle-class women avoided public spaces to avoid loss of virtue. If a woman was even perceived to have lost virtue, her fortune and future were at threat. Women’s bodies were controlled through this threat. To avoid criticism, women who needed to move through city streets were chaperoned and dressed their bodies in homogeneous dress, covering even their faces with veils of lace (Kessler, 2006).

The idea of female bodies being limited to private space and immoral when in public continues into recent history. The PGUF meme was at its height of popularity during 2012–2015 (KnowYourMeme, 2021), a time in which media reports and online comments targeted selfies performed by young women as something immoral (Burns, 2015), echoing the ancient view of women performing in public space (Kessler, 2006).

## How the Interaction Is Communicated: The Joke

The joke is a popular and common communicative tool in networked social relationships and has long been recognised as a central aspect of digital cultures (Albury, 2015; Andreallo, 2017; Shifman & Blondheim, 2010) and indeed memes (Davison, 2012; Dynel, 2016; Milner, 2018; Shifman, 2014b). In conversation, jokes enhance interactivity by functioning as relief and exposing incongruity, and they can also be used to imply superiority (Billig, 2005; Lynch, 2002; Oring, 2010; Shifman, 2014b). In these ways, they provide cohesion and intimacy amongst the participants of the visual conversation.

Although we often conflate things that make us laugh or are comical with jokes, something comic is not necessarily a joke (Freud, 1976, pp. 39–40). Essentially a joke deals with exposing social or cultural taboo, while something comic is humorous but does not specifically deal with such taboo. The social function of jokes has also been explained through release theory (Spencer, 1875, as cited in Freud, 1976), enabling the discharge of pent-up tension and anxiety.

Freud drew on the work of Kuno Fisher (1889, as cited in Freud, 1976) and Theodor Lipps (1898, as cited in Freud, 1976) to begin to distinguish the joke from the comical, explicitly locating the difference in active behaviour and relationship to the object. He wrote, “the characteristic which distinguishes the joke within the class of the comic is attributed by Lipps to action, to the active behaviour of the subject, but by Fisher to its relation to the object, which he considers is the concealed ugliness of the world of thoughts” (Freud, 1976, p. 40). The joke then provides a way to release social and political pent-up tensions (Benton, 1988; Mindess, 2017; Sykes, 1966), and a means through which to discuss that which is ugly and to cross social boundaries to allow people to say “what they would never dare say blankly” (Shifman & Blondheim, 2010, p. 1349).

The joke plays an integral part in how memes and selfies touch the participants. If we think of jokes as a way to discharge pent-up tensions (Spencer, 1875, as cited in Freud, 1976), then memes and selfies as jokes provide a means to access or identify cultural and social tensions, things

that are perhaps usually assumed, perceived, made culturally invisible or not dared to be spoken openly. On the other hand, if the joke is, in fact, located in the *active behaviour* of the subject and in the *object* of the joke (Freud, 1976), then the behaviour and the object of the joke are a means through which the social tensions can be identified.

Although jokes might touch us by bringing joy or a form of identification, by playing with social and cultural boundaries and tensions, jokes are forms of Touch and explicitly deal with Touch. As you may recall from Chaps. 2 and 3, Touch essentially deals with boundaries: the boundaries of bodies (or entities) that are so close that no space remains between them, and the boundaries of the space in which the bodies perform. It is through these boundaries that the fundamentals of Touch—connection, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning—can be identified. The joke as tensions (Spencer, 1875, as cited in Freud, 1976) is the place where cultural boundaries are crossed. Dealing with boundaries and boundary-crossing, and places of connection and identification, is essential to the joke, and these are also essential elements of the definition and our cultural understanding of Touch.

In the case of the PGUF meme, the active behaviour of the joke (Freud, 1976) is in the performance of ugliness, and the object of the joke (Freud, 1976) is the female, feminine body in public space. Here is a performance that would typically not be done in public, but instead be limited to home and hidden from social view. The distinction between private and public face is signalled by the posts labelled as, for example, “home face” or “at work, after work”. In the PGUF meme, ugly and pretty are defined as a social constraint for the young female body. The joke then is in the subversion of exposing and crossing social and cultural boundaries for female bodies and, in the juxtaposition of difference, contradicting what is the proper, socially accepted performance.

The joke of the PGUF meme is also located in the context of a culture of gendered violence on Reddit, where these posts allow some agency to the female participants. In a context where abusers feel entitled to hack women’s online accounts to steal nude photos and share them on the internet (Massanari, 2017), these photos are publicly shared by the selfie performers. Furthermore, in the context of a platform that relies on

feminine stereotypes (Massanari, 2015), here stereotypes are exposed, and the judgement of being pretty enough for male desires is rejected through the performance of ugly.

## Connection and Engagement of the PGUF Meme and Selfies

As discussed in Chap. 3, *connection* is located as one of the interdependent fundamentals of Touch and is culturally determined by the distinction of ethnicity, class, age, gender and disability. Depending on these distinctions, people have a corresponding agency to touch or be touched.

The fundamental of *engagement* extends beyond simply connection to capture a sense of Touch as “being with”. Furthermore, engagement recognises the polysemy of Touch that can include physical, emotional and intellectual practice, often accompanied by verbal, visual, aural and kin-aesthetic practices that locate the contact as intentional. Engagement as “being with” also directs us to the concept of gesture, which includes the selfie as embodied media (Farman, 2020; Frosh, 2015, 2018) and its interplay with bounded and unbounded social spaces, including public spaces, as well as the intimate identification of “place” (Hjorth & Hinton, 2019).

The PGUF meme works as a gesture (of “being with”) in which the selfie performance of ugly and pretty is foremost a joke. One of the ways jokes act to expose social and cultural constraints is by exposing that which should not be said (Freud, 1976). Here the “emotional hook” (Bacareza Balance, 2012, p. 139) of shared affective investments in the group works by identifying ideals of performance for young women in Western culture. The statement is more than “I am here” (Koliska & Roberts, 2015) because the joke essentially works to expose social and cultural constraints. These constraints are identified through the performance. This joke also works in the greater public space where people who may not feel an affiliation with the identifications of the group (specifically the contained performance of self as a young, Western female) can still experience the humour of the performance by acknowledging that

the ugly selfie is not socially acceptable public behaviour or representation. Indeed, these are the very performances that Catness\_NeverClean had been told not to perform in public since she was a child (KnowYourMeme, 2021).

Experiences of people participating in the PGUF group where the joke works in the greater public space rather than on a deeper affiliation and identification through contribution can be described as types of connection rather than engagement. A connection that might be understood as similar to the example I explained earlier of brushing by or accidentally touching another, unknown person on a train, as opposed to the intentional touch of someone with whom we share a prior connection.

Engagement in the meme community on the Reddit platform must follow specific rules that are not only specified in the site group rules and defined to some extent in the group title, but identified explicitly by the cultural context of Reddit as a largely misogynistic platform (Massanari, 2017), prone to gendered violence against the bodies performing in PGUF selfies.

The gestural hooks (of “being with”) for those affiliated with the PGUF community are not limited to the meme itself but extend to the intersubjectivity (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018) that includes the re-performance and sharing of the meme, as well as gestures of titling of posts, upvoting and commenting on selfies. Whereas simply commenting or viewing can be considered a form of connection, engagement most often involves more commitment, including actions that show identification with the idea and concept behind the memes such as contributing to the titles or contributing performances of self that affiliate with the group conversation.

The titles of the posts form part of the joke of the PGUF meme and may include sayings, popular culture references, and before and after ideas of public performance. As jokes that are the gestural hook of being with, they do this by exposing an ugliness to the world (Fisher, 1889, as cited in Freud, 1976) where the female body is a site for violence. For instance, some of the titles refer to old sayings or colloquial language such as “hit with the ugly stick”, a saying used to describe women who have suffered domestic beatings and sometimes those considered not pretty enough for feminine performance. Other titles link concepts of prettiness

to virtue, one directly referencing the notion represented in the Robert Louis Stevenson (Stevenson, 1886) story of Jekyll and Hyde and specifically gendering the reference as “Miss Jekyll and Mrs Hyde”, where ugliness is revealed after tricking partners into marriage. Other titles also allude to the idea of the female as a trickster (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018) and concepts of public performance, where examples include “before wedding, after wedding”, or “me at work, me at home”.

In the PGUF meme, the concepts of pretty and ugly are performed in juxtaposition to each other. Ugly is represented by combinations of facial contortions to imply corpulence (many chins), lack of containment or control (tongue spilling out, drool, food falling out of the mouth), a large forehead or an “unnatural” appearance (too much makeup, enlarged staring eyes). Mouths are often open and directed at the camera, and staring, popping eyes intimidate the viewer. Failed selfie attributes that are exaggerated in uglies include poor lighting and the camera angled from below the face. In contrast, “pretty” performances (framed as the usual) include a narrow chin (as a feminine attribute but also in contrast to corpulence) and large eyes (but not forehead), which are also accentuated by the angle of view. The juxtaposition of ugly and pretty creates the joke; the ugly seeks to reaffirm the pretty and point out the containment and unreality of both ugly and pretty. All these entanglements of Touch act as engagement, saying not just “I am here” but also taking part in these limitations, identifications and social constraints.

## Contiguity and Differentiation in the PGUF Meme and Selfies

In Chap. 3, I described how contiguity as a fundamental of Touch is signified through awareness of the boundaries that separate us from others, from objects and from the world around us. Essentially it alerts us to the conditions under which a connection takes place. I also mentioned that in social media and digital cultures such as selfies, contiguity can be understood through the examination of public and private space, and online and offline selves, as well as concepts of place (Hjorth & Hinton,

2019) that include contextualising conversations to platform rules (Katz & Crocker, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2016; Massanari, 2013, 2015).

In establishing the PGUF meme's positioning earlier in this chapter, I presented the context of platform conversations as gendered violence, as well as historical and social spaces. What follows here is further consideration of contiguity and differentiation in the space of the meme, representations and performance.

PGUF performances signify an awareness of boundaries (contiguity) by defining who can perform in this group (young women who can perform pretty). However, by limiting performers to a binary difference, conversations in the PGUF subreddit group are primarily limited to binary notions of gender. Furthermore, understanding culturally situated jokes (such as those I mention in the forthcoming sections referencing types of violence) is part of cultural awareness. Even if a saying is understood as something repeated from previous generations, the repetition of the saying identifies a cultural knowledge and historical awareness of a phenomenon.

The exaggeration of performed ugliness juxtaposed with pretty performance exposes an everyday representation of self as absent. This absence works as "differentiation to what is beyond the boundary" (Cranny-Francis, 2011, p. 475). The pretty selfie is a "typical" selfie or selfie usually shared in public spaces. Thus, naming it as pretty defines pretty as the norm or ordinary representation of self for the participant. Although we might understand what is normal as everyday, "the norm represents the prevailing standard" (Russo, 1994, p. vii), where what is normal is not the same as ordinary (Canguilhem, 1978/2012) or every day; rather it is a culturally performed idea of normal. The exaggerated performance of ugly exposes the polar opposite of pretty as also being a performance. So, here amongst the theatricals, the everyday self remains absent. This absence is significant because that which is excluded is also an essential part of the presentation of self (Van Leeuwen, 2008), where absence can identify the social performative limitations for the performing bodies, as well as social and cultural expectations that constrain ways of being.

In most selfie practices, however, it is the uglies that are edited, cut (Warfield, 2016) and absent from public view. The uglies in the PGUF meme are the performance of self that people do not usually share. More

than this, they include representations of self that do not fit culturally accepted ways of being. Because of this, close consideration of uglies has the potential to define what cultural and social standards are and how they are performed.

Overall, the uglies on the PGUF subreddit site identify the bodies involved as in disorder because they are uncontrolled or out of control, and they include exaggerated attributes of failed selfies. The ugly identifications, unlike the performance of pretty, are far more unique to each participant.

## A Summary of Observations of the PGUF Meme and Selfies as Touch

So far in this chapter, the five interdependent fundamentals of Touch have provided a means through which the example of the PGUF meme and selfies within it can be mapped as relationships of Touch. Before discussing more explicitly how these practices enable and constrain ways of being and identifications, I will briefly summarise the map.

The fundamental of *positioning* focuses on affiliation of participants in the PGUF group identifying as young women and presents the constraints of performing in public contexts and the misogynistic cultural context of Reddit (Massanari, 2015). This is highlighted through the subversive act of performing ugly, which is located as a private or hidden version of self appearing in the public space and the digital platform.

*Connections* are formed through participation in the group, which might include sharing versions of the meme, sharing or simply viewing selfies, plus various other forms of participation. People engage when they identify as part of the group. This form of *engagement* is most commonly accompanied by other practices of contribution, such as producing, uploading, titling, commenting or upvoting, which signify the engagement as intentional. The connections and engagement all occur through identifications specific to the PGUF group, as well as through cultural identifications specific to the context identified by the group's positioning.



Touch as *contiguity* in the PGUF subreddit group is observed mainly through who is included and excluded. Specifically, to engage in this group, people must be young women, who are able to perform social attributes of pretty, have access to media to perform selfies and be familiar contributors (or Redditors) in the context of the platform (Massanari, 2015). Affiliation as part of the group defines the participants in relation to the world outside the group (*differentiation*) and defines the participants of the group in the context of Reddit (*differentiation*) as a misogynist geek culture (Massanari, 2015). The affiliation of who is included in the group is defined in the title and performances of the group in relation to the female body (*contiguity*).

Touch signified through *contiguity and differentiation* also includes the topical discussion of the meme that deals with social and cultural limitations for the female body. Ugly and pretty are presented in juxtaposition, which renders the everyday self as absent. Ugly is that which is outside the boundary of sociocultural norms (*differentiation*). The uniqueness of individual performances of ugly, as well as the unique aspects of self in pretty performance, is observable, but they also present the stereotypical limitations of ways of being in public space, as well as limited ideas of pretty. The limited forms of presenting as pretty and ugly act as a form of continuity because the participants are bound together in this way.

## Violence and Intimacy as Forms of Touch

In this section I will explore how forms of Touch such as intimacy and violence both enable and constrain bodies and ways of being, and the degrees and coexistence of both intimacy and violence in social media contexts. In the case of the PGUF meme community on Reddit, connections are *constrained* to people who have access to the internet to post on the public site. Furthermore, the conversation is constrained to female bodies and performance of femininity, and contributors perform within social constraints of “pretty” and being perceived as a young woman or “girl”. This is further constrained in the template of the meme and the focus of the joke, and identified in the subreddit title of PrettyGirlsUglyFaces.

However, the constraints specified by the title and website and the requirements for the performance of PGUF selfies also *enable* this specific group of people to enjoy engagement through familiar identifications of social constraints and ways of being. To reiterate, it is significant that this public community group has been formed in the social media platform of Reddit that is known for the dominant geek masculinity that privileges the white, non-disabled, young, straight, cisgendered male over other ways of being (Massanari, 2015, p. 129). This is a platform where members of the PGUF subreddit community would not often be welcome or included, and where young women are often stereotyped and objectified. Furthermore, the community began in 2012 (KnowYourMeme, 2021) when selfies performed by young women were commonly demonised in reported media and online comments (Andreallo, 2017; Burns, 2015). This attitude towards young women performing selfies is located in history, limiting the female body to a private space to preserve virtue (Andreallo, 2017; D'Souza et al., 2006; Kessler, 2006). In the contexts of the Reddit platform's male geek culture and negative media targeting this specific group of people, the PGUF subreddit acts as a type of subversive act by *enabling* a conversation and presence for bodies that are excluded from the dominant focus group and conversations of the site. Thus, the selfie and meme producers carve out a space and enable a community to connect by enjoying agency as a photographer and sharing themselves in performance.

This *struggle* of enabling and constraining female bodies can be considered part of a struggle involving symbolic violence (McRobbie, 2004; Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992). An essential aspect of symbolic violence is how the violated bodies remain complicit. To reiterate, one of the ways this is ensured in social media is by the silencing of victims or making certain bodies invisible. Examples include the adage “don't feed the trolls”, which essentially tells victims implicitly to “put up and shut up” (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018, p. 122) meaning to be silent and continue being abused. In addition, Reddit platform communities commonly practise technology-facilitated abuse (Dunn, 2021), including trolling, stereotypical representations of women, and violations of female bodies and representation (Massanari, 2015). In this way, the Reddit culture seeks to uphold the complicity of symbolic violence and maintain a space

for violence and abuse. Furthermore, traditional cultural ideals that the performance of the female body should be limited to private space or risk loss of virtue aim to control a gendered group of people by a form of complicity through fear.

The struggle here involves a group of gendered bodies with common identifications, who are normally constrained in social spaces, subverting those very spaces by enabling community visibility and speech. The PGUF community refuses to be invisible or silent or “take a break from the internet” (Jane, 2016, p. 4). In the context of Reddit, these young women share their images of themselves in opposition to the prevalence of images of women being shared without their consent throughout Reddit (Massanari, 2015) and indeed in many digital contexts (Jane, 2016; Lumsden & Morgan, 2018). This agency is also protected by moderators of the PGUF subreddit who warn that people posting sexist or derogatory comments will be removed (Reddit Pics, 2015). However, being visible, vocal and identifiable in a platform and social contexts that aim to silence presents a struggle, with experiences of violence identified through connections (of Touch).

Another aspect of the struggle and symbolic violence involves the constraint of the meme to aspirations of pretty as a cultural attribute for Western women (Burns, 2015; Lorber & Martin, 2011). Pretty is juxtaposed to ugly by performances presenting only two ways of being. These extremes are vital to the meme’s joke, where an everyday performance of self remains absent. This juxtaposition presents the ridiculousness and architecture of public presentations of self that are performed as ugly, in extreme opposition to pretty. As discussed in Chap. 2, one of the attributes of memes is the way people play with the photograph as truth and evidence (Shifman, 2014a). For example, in the “disaster girl” meme, where the background of the photographic image is replaced, one part of the joke is how it exposes the credibility of photographic evidence. In the case of the PGUF meme, the play of the photograph as an evidential document works a bit differently, but still plays with the idea of the photograph as social and cultural evidence. The presentation of pretty is exposed as performed rather than truth. The ugly representations are ones people would not usually share publicly. They include what is generally edited in the initial performance and through other filters, including the

spaces in which they are shared. More than playing with the photograph as evidence, the aspiration to a performance of pretty is also presented as something expected and essential, and a cultural constraint for young women. In performing ugly, the selfie and meme contributors expose cultural constraints for young women to perform as pretty or pretty enough to be desirable. By performing ugly in public space, the PGUF community refuses to remain complicit with symbolic violence.

Ugliness is essentially that which is cast out (Kristeva, 1980/1982), and historically it is likened to failure and the outcast for a female body. Within the PGUF community, humour, a standard format on Reddit, plays a key role in exposing the social and cultural boundaries for female bodies. The joke across social platforms provides a means of connection (Albury, 2015), as well as a place of discussion and identification through the sharing (Gal et al., 2016), where young people try on and distinguish themselves from social ideals or types. In these social contexts, where the exclusion and violence include body shaming (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018), the joke works as a conversational tool that *enables* the PGUF meme contributor to say “what they would never dare say blankly” (Shifman & Blondheim, 2010, p. 1349). The joke also enables engagement experiences over the commonly identified topic, thus enabling (to some extent) a release of pent-up tensions (Benton, 1988; Mindess, 2017; Sykes, 1966). However, in the context that the joke is essentially the active behaviour and the object involved (Freud, 1976), then the female body and representation in PGUF memes are identified as a cultural joke, because there is no other foreseeable solution to the cultural constraints for this body and representational ways of being.

The joke is also commonly used by perpetrators of abuse to dismiss their actions (Jane, 2016). Violence and abuse have extreme detrimental outcomes for victims who cannot live freely and without fear, but jokes enable abusers to dismiss the consequences of their actions as unimportant and beyond their control. When something is identified as a joke to dismiss poor behaviour, it works as a cultural tool of complicity towards violence where the victim is silenced. However, understanding the joke as Freud defines it, based on action and object, exposes technology-facilitated violence as an action (said or done), and the object (of the joke) as a blatant target and victim. Furthermore, recognising the joke as

that which one “would never dare say blankly” (Shifman & Blondheim, 2010, p. 1349) exposes and situates the abuser’s knowledge that what they are doing is not acceptable in social contexts. In the context of (so-called) *social* media, the question remains as to why this antisocial behaviour and complicity are accepted.

## Violence and Intimacy: The Connections and Disconnections of Social Media

This chapter has contributed to a mapping of Touch in social media that identifies how Touch both enables and constrains as forms of intimacy and violence. Touch and connections are not limited to practices of intimacy, and social media also includes antisocial behaviours and disconnections. Of the fundamentals of Touch, connection and engagement are most often considered positive and social; however, contiguity and differentiation are also essential in community identification for connectivity. Despite this, all the fundamentals are essential when considering violence and intimacy because they work interdependently. In this way, they provide a means to explore the textures of Touch, where intimacy is not always wholly positive but can include ugly textures such as heartbreak and loss (Prøitz et al., 2017) and the contextual textures of types of violence and injustice. Furthermore, the interdependence of the fundamentals of Touch provides a basis to understand violence and intimacy as intertwined in everyday relationships, rather than entirely separate. Research today that concentrates on either violence or intimacy alone tends to decontextualise the everyday experiences, where violence often comes without warning (Jane, 2016) and is experienced amongst other intimate relationships.

A mapping of the fundamentals of Touch must include considerations of positioning and how the positioning works to both enable and constrain identifications and ways of being. Although it has been argued that social media must be understood as located in the rules of the platform being used (Kennedy et al., 2016), positioning is also unique to the bodies involved. This is because participants are positioned not only by

platform rules but by how those rules are informed by social and cultural structures that shape limitations of the platform and rules for different groups of people. For instance, in the example of PGUF memes in this chapter, it was significant to position the memes within the community and subreddit rules, as well as how the performances functioned in the context of Reddit geek culture.

The joke as a communicative tool of Touch is also used to both enable and constrain. The joke works as a critical aspect of identifying performance through affiliation as a form of engagement. It also exposes socio-cultural boundaries, differentiation and the positioning of the participants. As an integral component of PGUF memes, and as a common form of engagement in social media and a critical conversational tool, the joke is key to the examination of memes and selfies as a form of Touch. It provides a means through which participants are enabled to navigate cultural restraints, limitations and identifications. The joke, however, is also often used as a social tool that maintains violence through complicity. Abusive actions are often passed off socially as “just a joke” to dismiss severe anti-social behaviour and harm; this is also commonly done by perpetrators of gendered physical violence.

As I have described in this chapter, the joke essentially provides a means through which people play with cultural concepts of Touch because it creates engagement beyond connection. Simultaneously, the joke subverts cultural and social limitations or boundaries and, in this way, can be identified as Touch involving aspects of contiguity and differentiation.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed how Touch enables and constrains by applying a map of the fundamentals of touch to an example of memes and selfies in the PrettyGirlsUglyFaces Reddit community. However, the considerations of the example in this chapter to support the mapping of Touch have been limited to my previous studies (Andreallo, 2017) that included observations of participants in digital conversations such as public blogs, posts, comments and visual communication. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is envisaged that future research using this map can engage with other examples of networked social relationships, as well as extend the map’s use to also include input from individual participants, such as interviews and observations.

## References

- Albury, K. (2015). Selfies, sexts and sneaky hats: Young people's understandings of gendered practices of self-representation. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1734–1745. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3132/1396>
- Andreallo, F. (2019). The selfie generation: A transformation of visual social relationships. *Vista*, 2019(4), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.21814/vista.3019>
- Andreallo, F. L. (2017). *The semeful sociability of digital memes: Visual communication as active and interactive conversation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Technology, Sydney]. OPUS Open Publications of UTS Scholars. <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/120273>
- Bacareza Balance, C. (2012). How it feels to be viral me: Affective labor and Asian American YouTube performance. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 40(1/2), 138–152. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23333440>
- Bailey, J., Flynn, A., & Henry, N. (2021). *The Emerald international handbook of technology-facilitated violence and abuse*. Emerald Group Publishing.
- Barratt, S. A. (2018). Reinforcing sexism and misogyny: Social media, symbolic violence and the construction of femininity-as-fail. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(3), 16–31. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss3/3>
- Benton, G. (1988). The origins of the political joke. In C. Powell & G. E. C. Paton (Eds.), *Humour in society: Resistance and control* (pp. 33–55). Palgrave Macmillan UK. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19193-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19193-2_2)
- Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin.
- Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. Sage.
- Burns, A. (2015). Self(ie)-discipline: Social regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1716–1733. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3138/1395>
- Canguilhem, G. (2012). *On the normal and the pathological* (C. R. Fawcett, Trans.). Springer Science & Business Media. (Original work published 1978).
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2011). Semefulness: A social semiotics of touch. *Social Semiotics*, 21(4), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2011.591993>
- D'Souza, A., McDonough, T., & Mc Donough, T. (2006). *The invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris*. Manchester University Press.

- Davison, P. (2012). The language of internet memes. In M. Mandiberg (Ed.), *The social media reader* (pp. 120–134). New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814763025-011>
- Deuze, M. (2011). Media life. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(1), 137–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710386518>
- Dunn, S. (2021). Is it actually violence? Framing technology-facilitated abuse as violence. In J. Bailey, A. Flynn, & N. Henry (Eds.), *The Emerald international handbook of technology facilitated violence and abuse* (pp. 25–45). Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211002>
- Dynel, M. (2016). ‘I has seen image macros!’ Advice Animals memes as visual-verbal jokes. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 660–688. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4101/1556>
- Farman, J. (2020). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1976). *Sigmund Freud: Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. Penguin.
- Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kineshetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1607–1628. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3146/1388>
- Frosh, P. (2018). *The poetics of digital media*. Polity Press.
- Gal, N., Shifman, L., & Kampf, Z. (2016). ‘It gets better’: Internet memes and the construction of collective identity. *New Media & Society*, 18(8), 1698–1714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814568784>
- Hall, M., & Hearn, J. (2019). Revenge pornography and manhood acts: A discourse analysis of perpetrators’ accounts. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(2), 158–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1417117>
- Hjorth, L., & Hinton, S. (2019). *Understanding social media*. Sage.
- Humphreys, L., Gill, P., Krishnamurthy, B., & Newbury, E. (2013). Historicizing new media: A content analysis of Twitter. *Journal of Communication*, 63(3), 413–431. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12030>
- Jane, E. A. (2016). *Misogyny online: A short (and brutish) history*. Sage.
- Jane, E. A. (2020). Online abuse and harassment. In K. Ross, I. Bachmann, V. Cardo, S. Moorti, & C. M. Scarcelli (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of gender, media, and communication*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc080>
- Johanssen, J. (2021). *Fantasy, online misogyny and the manosphere: Male bodies of disinhibition*. Routledge.



- Katz, J. E., & Crocker, E. T. (2015). Selfies and photo messaging as visual conversation: Reports from the United States, United Kingdom and China. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1861–1872. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3180/1405>
- Kennedy, J., Meese, J., & van der Nagel, E. (2016). Regulation and social practice online. *Continuum*, 30(2), 146–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1143160>
- Kessler, M. (2006). Dusting the surface, or the bourgeoisie, the veil, and Haussmann's Paris. In A. D'Souza & T. McDonough (Eds.), *The invisible flâneuse?: Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* (pp. 49–64). Manchester University Press.
- KnowYourMeme. (2021). *Pretty\_Girls\_Ugly\_Faces*. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pretty-girls-ugly-faces>
- Koliska, M., & Roberts, J. (2015). Selfies: Witnessing and participatory journalism with a point of view. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1672–1685. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3149/1392>
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1980).
- Lorber, J., & Martin, P. Y. (2011). The socially constructed body: Insights from feminist theory. In P. Kivisto (Ed.), *Illuminating social life: Classical and contemporary theory revisited*. Pine Forge Press.
- Lumsden, K., & Morgan, H. M. (2018). Cyber-trolling as symbolic violence: Deconstructing gendered abuse online. In N. Lombard (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of gender and violence* (pp. 121–132). Routledge.
- Lynch, O. H. (2002). Humorous communication: Finding a place for humor in communication research. *Communication Theory*, 12(4), 423–445. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00277.x>
- Marwick, A. E. (2017). Scandal or sex crime? Gendered privacy and the celebrity nude photo leaks. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 19(3), 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-017-9431-7>
- Massanari, A. (2013). Playful participatory culture: Learning from Reddit. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 3(IR14). <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/8787>
- Massanari, A. (2017). #Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society*, 19(3), 329–346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807>
- Massanari, A. L. (2015). *Participatory culture, community, and play: Learning from Reddit*. Peter Lang.

- Matsuda, M. J. (2018). *Words that wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the first amendment*. Routledge.
- McGlotten, S. (2013). *Virtual intimacies: Media, affect, and queer sociality*. Suny Press.
- McRobbie, A. (2004). Notes on 'what not to wear' and post-feminist symbolic violence. *The Sociological Review*, 52(2\_Suppl), 99–109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00526.x>
- Milner, R. M. (2018). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. M.I.T. Press.
- Mindess, H. (2017). *Laughter and liberation*. Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave.
- Oring, E. (2010). *Engaging humor*. University of Illinois Press.
- Payne, R. (2014). *The promiscuity of network culture: Queer theory and digital media*. Routledge.
- Petersen, M. N., Harrison, K., Raun, T., & Andreassen, R. (2017). Introduction: Mediated intimacies. In R. Andreassen, M. N. Petersen, K. Harrison, & T. Raun (Eds.), *Mediated intimacies: Connectivities, relationalities and proximities* (pp. 1–16). Routledge.
- Peterson, J., & Densley, J. (2017). Cyber violence: What do we know and where do we go from here? *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 34, 193–200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.01.012>
- Pollock, G. (2018). *Modernity and the spaces of femininity*. Routledge.
- Prøitz, L., Hjorth, L., & Lasén, A. (2017). Textures of intimacy: Witnessing embodied mobile loss, affect and heartbreak. In R. Andreassen, M. N. Petersen, K. Harrison, & T. Raun (Eds.), *Mediated intimacies* (pp. 60–72). Routledge.
- Reddit. (2021a). *r/PrettyGirlsUglyFaces*. Retrieved January 1, 2017, from [https://www.reddit.com/r/PrettyGirlsUglyFaces/comments/55fb8y/pretty\\_girl\\_ugly\\_face/](https://www.reddit.com/r/PrettyGirlsUglyFaces/comments/55fb8y/pretty_girl_ugly_face/)
- Reddit. (2021b). *r/PrettyGirlsUglyFaces*. *You are so beaut-OHGOD!* Retrieved November 23, 2021, from <https://www.reddit.com/r/PrettyGirlsUglyFaces/>
- Reddit Pics. (2015, December 24). *My sister and I have been perfecting our 'ugly' faces since we were children. You have been warned. Posting rules*. Archived at Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org/>). Retrieved January 30, 2020, from [https://web.archive.org/web/20151224115520/https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/wj849/my\\_sister\\_and\\_i\\_have\\_been\\_perfecting\\_our\\_ugly/](https://web.archive.org/web/20151224115520/https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/wj849/my_sister_and_i_have_been_perfecting_our_ugly/)
- Russo, M. (1994). *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge.
- Senft, T. M. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks*. Peter Lang.

- Senft, T. M. (2015). The skin of the selfie. In A. Bieber (Ed.), *Ego update: The future of digital identity* (pp. 134–161). NRW Forum.
- Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1588–1606. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4067/1387>
- Shifman, L. (2007). Humor in the age of digital reproduction: Continuity and change in internet-based comic texts. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 187–209. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11>
- Shifman, L. (2014a). The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 340–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546577>
- Shifman, L. (2014b). *Memes in digital culture*. M.I.T. Press.
- Shifman, L., & Blondheim, M. (2010). The medium is the joke: Online humor about and by networked computers. *New Media & Society*, 12(8), 1348–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365311>
- Simonovic, D., UN Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, & UN Human Rights Council, Secretariat. (2018). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective*. United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1641160?ln=en>
- Skeggs, B. (2004). Context and background: Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality. *The Sociological Review*, 52(2\_Suppl), 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00522.x>
- Stevenson, R. L. (1886). *Strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Sykes, A. J. (1966). Joking relationships in an industrial setting. *American Anthropologist*, 68(1), 188–193. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/668081>
- United Nations. (1979). *Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women*, New York, 18 December 1979. Retrieved November 23, 2021, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>
- Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- Wacquant, L. J., & Bourdieu, P. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Polity Press.

- Warfield, K. (2016). Making the cut: An agential realist examination of selfies and touch. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641706>
- Zhao, S., & Zappavigna, M. (2018). Beyond the self: Intersubjectivity and the social semiotic interpretation of the selfie. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 1735–1754. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817706074>

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





# 5

## Semeful Sociabilities: Socially Networked Photography as Embodied Relationships of Touch

**Abstract** In this chapter, I define cultural semes in response to academic discussions of technological seams. Discussions of technological seams are divided by aspirations of seamlessness and seamfulness. Seamlessness aims towards technology being seamlessly integrated into our everyday relationships. Arguments of *seamfulness* are driven by a focus on user empowerment and how seamlessness acts as a form of social control. In this context, *semefulness* focuses explicitly on the significance and meanings of Touch in human–technology physical relationships. Identifying social media and the technological self as embodied and drawing on the findings throughout this book, I propose the term “*semeful sociabilities*” to describe networked social media practices of the technological self, recognising visual social relationships as culturally meaningful practices of Touch.

**Keywords** Technological seams • Semes • Semefulness • Seamful design • Social media • Selfies • Memes • Photography • Visual social media • Embodied social media • Sensorily inscribed body • Automated decision-making

So far in this book, I have discussed everyday socially networked visual relationships as forms of implicit Touch, a definition of Touch and how its cultural significance is meaningful, and how Touch might be mapped in social networks where Touch both enables and constrains. Extending on these discussions, I will now focus on socially networked photographic relationships as embodied and sensorily inscribed practices of Touch.

In a context where Touch (with a capital T) is more than just physical, “semes” are the cultural meanings located in Touch practices. “Semefulness” is a term used initially by Anne Cranny-Francis (2011a, 2011b) to describe technological art–human relationships as meaningful. The term is an extension of the technology design concepts of seamlessness and seamfulness. Technology design generally aspires towards seamlessness where people experience immersions within technology. For example, in virtual reality gaming, the participant becomes immersed in the technological space, as opposed to sitting at a laptop where the body and technology are understood as separate physical entities. Debates in technology design also include arguments for seam-full-ness with an aspiration towards utilitarian empowerment where people can have more agency in their use of technology. The term “semefulness” (and the change in spelling of “seam” to “seme”) extends from this argument and identifies the discussion as referring to technological seams but focusing on their cultural significance. In this context, the semes are the meanings in the social relationships of Touch.

Extending on Cranny-Francis’s proposal of semefulness, which considered physical human–technology relationships as culturally significant Touch, I propose the term “semeful sociabilities” to describe networked social relationships as meaningful practices of cultural Touch.

In this chapter, I first define technological seams and seamlessness, and cultural semes and semefulness more fully. I then expand further on social media practices such as selfies and memes as embodied, with a short discussion of the technological self as sensorily inscribed. Drawing on the findings throughout this book, I use semeful sociabilities to describe visual social relationships of memes and selfies. Furthermore, I argue that semeful sociabilities are not limited to visual social relationships but could be extended in future research beyond visual contexts.

## What Are Technological Seams and Semefulness?

### Technological Seams and Seamlessness

Seams are the joints and places where things meet and are bound. In the case of your clothing, it is because of the seams that a garment presents as a whole rather than pieces of fabric. In the simplest terms, seams are essentially the places where two entities or objects meet. You may recall from earlier in this book that this is also the simplest definition of Touch. Seams then are essentially about Touch, and *technological seams* deal with technological aspects of Touch. Discussions of technological seams originated in technology design and include both physical and cultural considerations of human–technology relationships. In this book, I have focused on Touch as culturally meaningful and significant. The concepts of technological seams are helpful because they include how they act as forms of power and control, both enabling and constraining bodies.

In technological design, an aspiration towards *seamlessness* aims to make the technological experience for humans blend seamlessly into our everyday lives. Essentially, this aspiration aims towards experiences where people are no longer aware of the technology, the interface or the differences between human–technology and human–human interaction. Returning to the metaphor of seams in clothing, we can say that we aspire to seamless aesthetics by stitching the seams closely, pressing them flat and making sure they are hidden on the inside so that we wear a garment rather than pieces of fabric. When designers and engineers talk about technological seamlessness, they are often referring to ease of use and convenience. For example, in interface design, an aspiration towards seamlessness ensures the experience for the user flows and is not stressful or irritating. Most of us would have had experiences of poor interface designs or apps in workplaces that make things more complicated and irritating, and have longed for more seamless interfaces. Technological seamlessness can also include less visible screens in new technologies, or virtual reality technologies with a seamless technological design. The aim is to immerse the user experience such that the visual interaction might

be described as inside the screen rather than a body interacting with a digital console or object as separate entities. Similarly, seamlessness in humanoid robotic design aims to make humanoids indistinguishable from a human body.

Seamless design might at first sound aspirational, but scholars have also argued in opposition to seamless design, claiming that seamless technology can also act as social control (Coleman, 2012; Graham & Wood, 2003; Haggerty & Ericson, 2000; Hughes, 1986; Lianos, 2003; Parag & Butbul, 2018), reducing agency and deferring human responsibility. This includes not only types of surveillance but also seamless technology systems. For example, the automated decision-making of government systems that aims to make things streamlined and seamless has had severe consequences worldwide, including injustice, discrimination and deaths (Chiusi et al., 2020). Other examples include the design of anthropomorphic social robots that have exposed and reaffirmed limited representations of gender and race (Andreallo & Chesher, 2019; Chesher & Andreallo, 2021a, 2021b; Howard & Kennedy, 2020; Strengers & Kennedy, 2020). The controversy of humanoid robots that are indistinguishable from living human bodies has also presented social fears, primarily based on automated technology. The remake of the 1973 film *Westworld* to a 2016 HBO series by the same name (Nolan & Joy, 2016–present) remains popular because it presents many of the current fears and ethical problems with an aspired-to future, anthropomorphic, robotic utopia. These examples suggest that aspiring to seamless design does not improve technology for humans, but rather replicates, and often makes more extreme, negative social and cultural issues.

Focused on utilitarian power and control for the user, *seamfulness* enables users to adapt to local conditions (Barkhuus & Polichar, 2011; Wenneling, 2007) and gain greater agency over the “black box” of algorithms (Sahoo, 2020). Scholars asserting towards seamfulness aim towards more transparent processes in human–technology relationships. Arguments for seamfulness aim to make the seams in user–technology relationships more visible. The arguments of seamfulness become complicated when following the historical discussions since the 1990s because the way we use technology today and how technology has developed differ from many early concepts. For example, Mark Weiser’s influential



works that argue towards “invisible” and “ubiquitous” or seamless computer design in fact argue towards agency for users (1991, 1994). Weiser’s work was written before the end of the 1990s, long before today’s far more automated communities. And long before the worldwide reports from the Algorithm Watch (Chiusi et al., 2020) mapped out the ways that seamlessness in technologically automated systems is failing people and reducing agency. This aspect of seams is something I endeavour to explore in my future research and beyond this book.

Discussions of seamfulness reach beyond physical aspects of Touch to also include social and cultural contexts. In contrast, concerns of seamlessness tend to focus mainly on haptics in the development of technical devices and the physical material creations and experiences of technology by engineers and designers. We might say then that while seamlessness aims towards invisibility of seams, driven by ease of integration and streamlining of technology in everyday interactions, seamfulness aims to make relationships visible.

Drawing on humanities research and directing discussions of technological seamfulness specifically to the culturally meaningful, Anne Cranny-Francis coined the term *semefulness* (Cranny-Francis, 2011b, 2013).

## Cultural Technological Semes and Semefulness

The term “semes” locates technological seams as culturally meaningful and identifies discussions of technological seams as also including cultural significance.

Semefulness deals with mapping culturally significant aspects of Touch in human–technology relationships. As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, I have capitalised the word “Touch” throughout the book to highlight that we are talking here about Touch as socially and culturally significant, rather than simply the physical aspects of touch. Cranny-Francis developed the concept of semefulness in considering material object and physical body relationships of Touch beyond haptocentric concepts or grasping (Cranny-Francis, 2011b). These relationships of touch beyond physical have been identified as requiring urgent attention

by scholars in the context of the digital self (Elo, 2012) and, specifically, in the topic of photographic memes and selfies (Senft, 2015).

To explore meanings (or semes) of Touch, Cranny-Francis bases her work in humanities research on the body, including feminist research on sex and gender, and post-structuralist and deconstructivist readings of the mind/body dichotomy of Western thinking. As well as this, she includes embodied perceptions of difference and practices of othering by referencing works on class, race, ethnicity and disability studies exploring “othering”. Describing an approach to semes, Cranny-Francis describes work on Touch as:

*focusing on its accultured meanings, as they are constituted through our tactile interaction with other beings and objects in our world. These meanings are potentially activated when we touch, although the nature of the particular interaction determines which meanings are deployed and to what ends. By exploring those meanings, we are able to map the potentials that are available in every tactile encounter and how they might be mobilized to create the most effective and/or rich interaction.* (Cranny-Francis, 2011b, p. 465)

More than simply physical contexts, discussions of semes are located in concepts of embodiment. Here the body is understood as a text (Grosz, 1990/2020) that is culturally inscribed through relationships of Touch. This makes sense in the contexts of the technological self, social media and photographic socialities, which are also embodied practices because we live in media rather than with it (Deuze, 2011). In discussions considering semefulness and the technological self, work considering the concept of the sensorily inscribed body (Farman, 2009, 2015, 2020), the networked self (Papacharissi, 2011; Quinn & Papacharissi, 2018; Rettberg, 2014), and digital technologies and the self (Cover, 2015; Elo, 2012; Rettberg, 2014) is instrumental.

## The Embodied Technological Self as Semeful

Technological seams are mainly seamless because they are woven into our everyday experiences, but these seams become apparent when technology breaks. Mark Weiser's writings on seams up to the 1990s began to talk about the mobility of technology (or computer technology beyond the desktop) where people would no longer be tethered to a desk (Weiser, 1991). In more recent research on mobile technologies, Jason Farman (2009, 2015, 2020), although not explicitly mentioning technological seams, describes exposed technological seams of embodied mobile media when he describes the loss of cellular signal and suddenly not being able to access the internet. He writes:

*When something breaks, that's when you notice it. This is especially true of technologies that weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life.* (Farman, 2015, p. 108)

Before I continue, I want to highlight Farman's metaphor of fabric that aptly connects to the description of seams earlier in this chapter. More importantly, the "fabric" Farman talks about is explicitly located in everyday life. This weaving into the fabric of life is indeed a form of technological seamlessness. Indeed, so seamless that we are unaware of the seams until they break. However, unlike the previous descriptions of material seams, Farman explicitly talks about the mobile self as embodied. Furthermore, although Farman talks about these experiences of seamlessness as embodied media, he aims to expose the seams as the places that technology and the body rub up against each other, such as when things break.

The places that technology and the body "rubs up" against each other is the way Rob Cover (2015, p. 127) has described seams in his discussion of embodiment and the digital self. Dedicating a chapter to seams, Cover's (2015) book *Digital Identities: Creating and Communicating the Online Self* clearly outlines histories of the body, embodiment and the technological self. Moving past earlier Cartesian concepts of the body as made of meat (body) and mind (thinking), Cover deals with the notion of the immersed technological self—inside the screen and outside the

screen. Then to explain a seamless technological self, where the offline and online selves are often merged, blurred or overlapping, Cover uses the metaphor of water. He explains how the technological self might be like a body wet from humid weather that cannot distinguish different levels of wetness because it is always in a state of wetness from humidity. This wetness is used as a metaphor for a state of seamless experience for the technological self. As already noted, Farman has described this similarly seamless experience as only apparent when things break, exposing the seams.

The “networked self” is another earlier description of the technological self that specifically describes modalities of society and identity performance that develop across online and offline platforms (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2018). The networked self explicitly deals with ideas of offline and online, not as separate spaces, but the ways they blend, blur and merge. Furthermore, Kelly Quinn and Zizi Papacharissi (2018) note how these “performances of the self enable sociability, and for the performer, these socially oriented performances must carry meaning for multiple publics and audiences without sacrificing one’s true sense of self” (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2018, p. 354). These references to meaning and meaning-making in social relationships explicitly acknowledge the *semes* (or meaning) involved in practices of the technological self.

Essentially, discussions of embodiment deal with concepts of spaces and the body (Cover, 2015; Farman, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2020; Hjorth & Hinton, 2019; Hjorth & Pink, 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Quinn & Papacharissi, 2018), as well as concepts of boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1995; Zerubavel, 1993). Farman’s work on mobile technology, which thoroughly considers the body in the movement of spaces and the body as a space of identification and performance, is essential to understanding social media. Farman draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre, who argues that “embodiment is always a spatial practice and conversely, space is always embodied” (Farman, 2012, p. 24). These ideas are supported by other scholars, such as Quinn and Papacharissi (2018), whose work on the networked self includes concepts of spaces of the self, and Covers (2015), whose work on digital identities considers *semes* and the technological self, dealing with spaces of technology and immersiveness. Discussions of context collapse (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) have also

dealt with the ways various public and private spaces have evolved in online contexts. This has also led to discussions of “place” that define more intimate or personal connections in concepts of place in social media (Hjorth & Hinton, 2019).

Just as embodiment is about the relationship of space, Touch and seams are also about relationships of space. In Chaps. 3 and 4, I defined the fundamentals of Touch—connection, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning—through concepts of spaces and merging entities. Connecting or engaging is a form of Touch involving movement of bodies and the spaces in which they interact and inhabit. Contiguity is essentially about boundaries and something that Farman explicitly mentions in the discussion of embodiment and connection. Differentiation is also about spaces and space-forming that can be defined through concepts of the other. Finally, positioning is our place in a space relative to other entities, bodies or things. Through movement and interactive spaces (that can be defined by the fundamentals of Touch), identity, identifications and performances of the self take place. These are never set forms or formations, but are unique to an individual and inconstant process.

## **Semeful Sociabilities and the Sensorily Inscribed Body**

Embodied Touch and semes (meanings) can be understood as part of the sensorily inscribed body. Farman (2012, 2020) proposes the sensorily inscribed body by locating it in six essential elements of embodiment. These intertwined elements are also useful for locating semefulness in socially networked practices or “semeful sociabilities”.

The first essential element of embodiment is that it is always spatial. However, it is not always located in physical space, the second element. When we talk about Touch and technological semes, we are also talking about spatial relationships. However, these are not limited to physical space or material entities. The cultural meaning-making or significance is most often not physical, even though it is related to physical actions. In

this way, it is never outside of culture, the third element. Farman also defines the sensorily inscribed body as never outside culture.

The fourth element of embodiment of the sensorily inscribed body notes that embodiment depends on the “cognitive unconscious” (Farman, 2012, p. 29), the element thus intending to identify how technology becomes an extension of the self. However, it also points towards the fifth element that identifies embodiment as conceived out of biological factors. In the case of semeful sociabilities, or culturally meaningful relationships of Touch, Touch is located as an extension of the self in embodied networked social practices such as selfies and memes.

The fourth and fifth elements locate how embodied practices, including those of Touch, can extend beyond the physical. It is also recognised that action and interaction are meaningful and culturally located. As explored in Chaps. 3 and 4, cultural types of physical touch have social meaning that can be understood beyond the physical interaction.

The sixth element of embodiment of the sensorily inscribed body identifies how “embodiment is always conceived in relationship to modes of inscription” (Farman, 2012, p. 30). This element shapes all the others because it identifies the body as the text (Grosz, 2018, 1990/2020), where Touch can be a form of inscribing the body and inscribing other bodies through culturally located interactions.

The sixth element is also vital to understanding socially networked practices such as selfies and memes as embodied identifications, recognising how they are never fixed but in constant interaction and movement. Recognising how the self is not limited to a particular performance or selfie, Jill Rettberg (2014) described the technological self as a type of “feed” to highlight it as part of the process. Furthermore, Paul Frosh’s proposal of kinaesthetic sociability (see Chap. 2) aims to explicitly describe selfies as a social practice in muscular movements and involving the body in assemblage (Frosh, 2015). The body as an assemblage is also explored through Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink’s term “digital wayfaring” (Hjorth & Pink, 2014), which describes the performance and trying on as part of an embodied interaction and inscription on the body as it passes through contexts, a process where the self is constantly in creation and assemblage. The assemblages, although never fixed, are significant or semeful.

The sensorily inscribed body, then, is not simply semeful but located in the movement and interaction of the technologically embodied self. It is a semeful sociability that recognises the networked body as in movement and unfixed, where the body is a type of continuous feed (Rettberg, 2014) or assemblage (Hjorth & Pink, 2014) in movement (Frosh, 2015), but involving culturally located semes (signs) communicated by the relationship, performance and interactions that constantly evolve.

## From Visual Social Relationships to Semeful Sociabilities

Semeful sociabilities recognise the embodied technological self as in meaningful transaction and process in social relationships of Touch. At the same time, Touch as meaning considers embodied subjects as situated in cultures and social practices that are semeful or multiply significant, physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and politically. Essentially, this locates the technological self (Rettberg, 2014) as sensorily inscribed (Farman, 2020), where embodiment includes more than the physical, concerns navigation of spatial arrangements, is always cultural, and understands technology as an extension of the self where action and interaction are culturally significant.

The arguments presented throughout this book point towards networked social relationships as more than visual and offer a description of these relationships as semeful sociabilities. That is semeful sociabilities:

1. Include the ways people connect and identify through everyday practices of Touch such as selfies and memes. Selfies and memes are visual practices implicitly recognised in academic literature as practices of Touch (Chap. 2). As such, they have been identified as gestural (Frosh, 2015, 2018; Milner, 2018; Senft & Baym, 2015; Shifman, 2013, 2014a), embodied (Frosh, 2015; Milner, 2018; Senft, 2015; Shifman, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) and multimodal practices (Milner, 2012, 2018). The proliferation of terms to describe visual social relationships highlights the limitations of visual analysis as an isolated mode.

2. Recognise Touch as culturally significant and meaningful, providing a new dimension to understanding networked social relationships. The fundamentals of Touch—connection, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning—are interwoven in how we practise and understand Touch. Mapping the fundamentals of Touch provides a way to begin to understand how digitally networked social relationships can be considered as cultural Touch (Chap. 3).
3. Recognise the complexity of social media relationships that include social and intimate connections (of varying textures) as well as antisocial practices of violence and disconnections, and can be used to recognise how social media relationships both enable and constrain identification and ways of being (Chap. 4).

Semeful sociabilities also have the potential to guide further, urgently required, research into the extent of the textures of digitally networked intimacy (including ugly intimacies such as loss and heartbreak) (Prøitz et al., 2017). Attention given to digitally networked intimacy has so far tended to mainly focus on specific types of intimate connections, neglecting the “textures” or “broken assemblages” such as affective witnessing of disasters and “ugly feelings” of relationship break-ups. Semeful sociabilities can contribute to a closer and broader examination of intimate connections that include such textures because the fundamentals of Touch provide a means through which the complications and details of touch can be considered.

Furthermore, semeful sociabilities also have the potential for investigating technology-facilitated violence as embodied experiences, and the ways cultural structures support violence and other forms of Touch in relationships of power.

Essentially, semeful sociabilities identify human socially networked relationships as embodied practices that are meaningful and meaning-making, and, as such, a part of the frictions, cracks and pathic exposures of human, as well as technological, limitations. Thus, by examining the social relationships of Touch we can understand ourselves better as humans and identify how understanding social media and technology means close examinations of how culturally situated relationships both enable and constrain bodies. More than this, identifying Touch and social



media as embodied identifies it as situated in a biopolitics of touch (Cranny-Francis, 2013), and identifying relationships of Touch in this way is a potential means to empower bodies that remain limited and constrained, as well as to identify injustices in power relationships that presently remain rather vague, unattended to or dismissed altogether in considerations of technology design and use.

Beyond the scope of this book, future research is required, in direct consultation with participants and considering more diverse examples, to understand our semeful sociabilities or meaningful social relationships of Touch. Future research will also move beyond the context of social media to also understand automated decision-making processes as relationships of Touch.

## References

- Andreallo, F., & Chesher, C. (2019). Prosthetic soul mates: Sex robots as media for companionship. *M/C Journal*, 22(5). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1588>
- Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., & Fugate, M. (2000). All in a day's work: Boundaries and micro role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(3), 472–491. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3363315>
- Barkhuus, L., & Polichar, V. E. (2011). Empowerment through seamfulness: Smart phones in everyday life. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, 15(6), 629–639. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00779-010-0342-4>
- Chesher, C., & Andreallo, F. (2021a). Eye machines: Robot eye, vision and gaze. *International Journal of Social Robotics*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-021-00777-7>
- Chesher, C., & Andreallo, F. (2021b). Robotic faciality: The philosophy, science and art of robot faces. *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 13(1), 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-020-00623-2>
- Chiusi, F., Fischer, S., Kayser-Bril, N., & Spielkamp, M. (Eds.). (2020). *Automating society report 2020*. Algorithm Watch; Bertelsmann Stiftung. <https://automatingsociety.algorithmwatch.org>.
- Coleman, R. (2012). *Reclaiming the streets*. Routledge.
- Cover, R. (2015). *Digital identities: Creating and communicating the online self*. Academic Press.

- Cranny-Francis, A. (2011a). The art of touch: A photo-essay. *Social Semiotics*, 21(4), 591–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2011.591999>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2011b). Semefulness: A social semiotics of touch. *Social Semiotics*, 21(4), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2011.591993>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2013). *Technology and touch: The biopolitics of emerging technologies*. Springer.
- Deuze, M. (2011). Media life. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(1), 137–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710386518>
- Elo, M. (2012). Digital finger: Beyond phenomenological figures of touch. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 4(1), Article 14,982. <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v4i0.14982>
- Farman, J. (2009). Locative life: Geocaching, mobile gaming, and embodiment. In *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference, 2009*. eScholarship, Open Access Publications from the University of California. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/507938rr>
- Farman, J. (2012). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media*. Routledge.
- Farman, J. (2015). Stories, spaces, and bodies: The production of embodied space through mobile media storytelling. *Communication Research and Practice*, 1(2), 101–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2015.1047941>
- Farman, J. (2020). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kineshetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1607–1628. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3146/1388>
- Frosh, P. (2018). *The poetics of digital media*. Polity Press.
- Graham, S., & Wood, D. (2003). Digitizing surveillance: Categorization, space, inequality. *Critical Social Policy*, 23(2), 227–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018303023002006>
- Grosz, E. (2018). *Space, time and perversion: Essays on the politics of bodies*. Routledge.
- Grosz, E. (2020). Inscriptions and body-maps: Representations and the corporeal 1. In T. Threadgold & A. Cranny-Francis (Eds.), *Feminine masculine and representation* (pp. 62–74). Routledge. (Original work published 1990).
- Haggerty, K. D., & Ericson, R. V. (2000). The surveillant assemblage. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(4), 605–622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071310020015280>
- Hjorth, L., & Hinton, S. (2019). *Understanding social media*. Sage.

- Hjorth, L., & Pink, S. (2014). New visualities and the digital wayfarer: Reconceptualizing camera phone photography and locative media. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 2(1), 40–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157913505257>
- Howard, A., & Kennedy, M., III. (2020). Robots are not immune to bias and injustice. *Science Robotics*, 5(48). <https://doi.org/10.1126/scirobotics.abf1364>
- Hughes, T. P. (1986). The seamless web: Technology, science, etcetera, etcetera. *Social Studies of Science*, 16(2), 281–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312786016002004>
- Lianos, M. (2003). Social control after Foucault. *Surveillance and Society*, 1(3), 412–430, 431–448.
- Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>
- Milner, R. M. (2012). *The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas]. KU ScholarWorks. <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/10256>
- Milner, R. M. (2018). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. M.I.T. Press.
- Nippert-Eng, C. E. (1995). *Home and work: Negotiating boundaries through everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
- Nolan, J., & Joy, L. (Executive Producers). (2016–present). *Westworld* [TV series]. HBO.
- Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.). (2011). *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*. Routledge.
- Parag, Y., & Butbul, G. (2018). Flexiwatts and seamless technology: Public perceptions of demand flexibility through smart home technology. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 39, 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.10.012>
- Prøitz, L., Hjorth, L., & Lasén, A. (2017). Textures of intimacy: Witnessing embodied mobile loss, affect and heartbreak. In R. Andreassen, M. N. Petersen, K. Harrison, & T. Raun (Eds.), *Mediated intimacies* (pp. 60–72). Routledge.
- Quinn, K., & Papacharissi, Z. (2018). Our networked selves: Personal connection and relational maintenance in social media use. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of social media* (pp. 353–371). SAGE.
- Rettberg, J. W. (2014). *Seeing ourselves through technology: How we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*. Springer Nature.

- Sahoo, S. (2020). *Soft machine: A pattern language for interacting with machine learning algorithms* [Master's thesis, Umeå University]. DiVA Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1546703&dsid=-6639>
- Senft, T. M. (2015). The skin of the selfie. In A. Bieber (Ed.), *Ego update: The future of digital identity* (pp. 134–161). NRW Forum.
- Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1588–1606. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4067/1387>
- Shifman, L. (2012). An anatomy of a YouTube meme. *New Media & Society*, 14(2), 187–203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811412160>
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(3), 362–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013>
- Shifman, L. (2014a). The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 340–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546577>
- Shifman, L. (2014b). *Memes in digital culture*. M.I.T. Press.
- Strengers, Y., & Kennedy, J. (2020). *The smart wife: Why Siri, Alexa, and other smart home devices need a feminist reboot*. M.I.T. Press.
- Weiser, M. (1991). The computer for the 21st century. *Scientific American*, 265(3), 94–105.
- Weiser, M. (1994). Creating the invisible interface [Invited talk]. In P. Szekely (Ed.), *UIST '94: Proceedings of the 7th annual ACM symposium on user interface software and technology*. Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/192426.192428>
- Wenning, O. (2007). Seamless design—The other way around. In S. Eriksén, B. Westerlund, & J. Beronius (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd Scandinavian Student Interaction Design Research Conference SIDER 2007* (pp. 109–111). Akademi sydost, Southeast Sweden Universities. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.489.6687&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Zerubavel, E. (1993). *The fine line*. University of Chicago Press.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





# 6

## Key Takeaways and Prospective Research

**Abstract** This chapter outlines the book’s key takeaways and future research trajectories, emphasising that Touch is a key cultural communicative aspect of social media relationships, and more broadly of digitally networked relationships. I summarise the key argument of each chapter, then drawing these arguments together, I locate and define the key aspects of “semeful sociabilities” as a means to map Touch of digitally networked social relationships and to describe the technological self as meaningful (semeful) and part of meaning-making processes. Mapping Touch is a means through which selfies and memes (as fundamental elements of everyday cultural communication and embodied networked practices) can be explored as meaningful cultural relationships, exposing the social, cultural and political realities of everyday socialities. Future trajectories for semeful sociabilities include application to a range of other memes and selfies, and to networked social relationships beyond visual. Furthermore, I propose that mapping Touch (to identify semeful social relationships) can provide insight into investigations and mapping of automated systems. Semeful sociabilities has the potential to identify and expose the semefulness (meanings) and impact of seamless systems and gain a better understanding of ourselves as humans as we design our technological futures.

**Keywords** Semeful sociabilities • Cultural touch • Networked social relationships • Automated decision-making • Seamless design • Semes

## Why Touch Matters

The way we touch and how we touch has meaning in everyday physical relationships, just as it does in embodied social relationships of selfies and memes, and more broadly for the technological self. A proliferation of terms seeking to describe social relationships of selfies and memes suggests that everyday meaning and meaning-making are vital. Furthermore, the terms describing how selfies and memes visually communicate are also often implicit descriptions of Touch.

Although Touch as a mode of communication has received some attention across faculties, there is yet to be a thorough and explicit exploration of Touch as culturally meaningful in the context of digitally networked cultures, including social media. This book has begun to address this gap, proposing the term “semeful sociabilities” to describe culturally meaningful Touch in networked social relationships of the technological self.

Touch matters because it is part of who we are as humans, and as we seek to further design our technological futures, it is instrumental that we understand the frictions, cracks and pathic exposures of human, as well as technological, limitations.

## Key Takeaways

1. Selfies and memes are meaning-making and meaningful practices. As such, selfies and memes have been described as implicit practices of Touch through a range of coined terms, including kinaesthetic sociability (Frosh, 2015), cuts (Warfield, 2016), and, more explicitly, as the grab (Senft & Baym, 2015), skin (Senft, 2015) and multimodality (Milner, 2012, 2018).
2. More than just a physical practice or sensation, Touch is culturally significant and a form of everyday meaning-making. The multiple significance of Touch is concerned with social and cultural meanings

that can be physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual or political (Classen, 2005; Classen, 2012, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Cranny-Francis, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Jewitt, 2017; Schroeder & Rebelo, 2007).

3. Touch is an everyday practice that is culturally meaningful. For example, types of handshakes, such as firm or weak, have different meanings; even an absence of a handshake is significant in everyday cultural settings. Touch is also a form of power and control because, culturally, there are bodies that have the privilege to touch and others that do not, and bodies that are touched and others that should not be touched.
4. Locating Touch in the topic of selfies and memes recognises how these practices act to document, analyse, understand and modify relationships between bodies and the environments in which we live. Locating Touch in this way identifies accultured meanings and how these meanings are constituted through interaction with other beings and objects in our world. This includes the way meanings are activated when we touch and how these meanings are contextual to the nature of Touch and the circumstances in which it occurs.
5. The five fundamentals of Touch are connection, engagement, contiguity, differentiation and positioning (Cranny-Francis, 2011b). Practices of Touch in social media can be mapped by careful examination of these fundamentals. For instance, if Touch is understood as “two entities so close that no space remains”, then the fundamentals map the place of meeting through connection and engagement, the boundaries of the entities through contiguity and differentiation, and the context of the space, entities and event through the fundamental of positioning.
6. To understand Touch requires the careful examination of how Touch enables and constrains. For example, violence and intimacy are forms of Touch that both enable and constrain bodies and ways of being in social media. This has been explored in this book by using the fundamentals of Touch to map the example of the PrettyGirlsUglyFaces meme and the selfies that make up the meme.
7. The joke as a communicative tool is also a form of Touch. For example, humour has the potential to bring delight or release pent-up social tensions (Freud, 1976). However, something can also be passed off as a joke to dismiss antisocial behaviour (Jane, 2016). When used in this way, the joke acts as a form of symbolic violence (Lumsden & Morgan,



2018; Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992) that silences the victim. The joke is different from what is simply comical because the joke transgresses social boundaries and potentially exposes an ugliness of the world (Freud, 1976).

8. The term “semeful sociabilities” describes how people connect and identify through everyday practices of Touch such as selfies and memes. Situating embodied subjects in cultures and social practices that are semeful (meaningful) or multiply significant (physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and politically) essentially locates the technological self as sensorily inscribed (Farman, 2020). As sensorily inscribed, embodiment includes more than just the physical, concerns navigation of spatial arrangements, is always cultural and understands technology as part of the self where action and interaction are culturally significant.

Semeful sociabilities therefore:

- (a) Highlight how Touch and the semes (meanings) of Touch are understood as embodied practices, where the embodied technological self is in meaningful transaction and process in social relationships of Touch.
  - (b) Recognise Touch as culturally significant and meaningful, providing a new dimension to understanding networked social relationships. Mapping the fundamentals of Touch provides a way to begin to understand how digitally networked social relationships can be considered as cultural Touch.
  - (c) Recognise the complexity of social media relationships that include social and intimate connections, textures of those intimate connections that include “ugly feelings”, as well as antisocial practices of violence and disconnections. Because semeful sociabilities recognise the complexity of relationships, they can also be used to recognise how social media relationships both enable and constrain identification and ways of being.
9. To paraphrase Anne Cranny-Francis’s (Cranny-Francis, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) work on cultural Touch and to recontextualise it in the context of social media, semeful sociabilities essentially identify human socially networked relationships as embodied practices that are

meaningful and meaning-making. As such, they are a part of the frictions, cracks and pathic exposures of human, as well as technological, limitations. Thus, examining the social relationships of Touch provides a way to better understand ourselves as humans.

## Future Research and Limitations

Semeful sociabilities can be used in future research to map and understand a variety of selfies and memes. In this way, it will locate a type of discourse of Touch. However, future examinations of this type must recognise the ways that Touch both enables and constrains and focus on careful consideration of positioning to be valid. This includes the ways bodies are enabled and constrained in social relationships of Touch beyond forms of violence and intimacy and recognising textures of intimacy as more than simply positive connections.

Semeful sociabilities also have the capacity to guide further, urgently required, research into the extent of the textures of digitally networked intimacy (that include ugly intimacies such as loss and heartbreak) (Prøitz et al., 2017). They also have the potential to investigate technology-facilitated violence as embodied experiences. Currently, such violence is often dismissed in social structures as separate and not as serious as physical or “offline” violence (Dunn, 2021). Semeful sociabilities also provide a way to explicitly recognise experiences of violence as embodied and how they impact people’s lives as practices of Touch. Furthermore, semeful sociabilities expose how cultural ideals support violence and other forms of Touch in power relationships, thus providing a starting point for conversations and mapping of Touch as an ethics. This mapping of ethical relationships of Touch or ethics of semeful sociabilities can also draw on what Paul Frosh has called an “ethics of kinesthesia” (Frosh, 2018, p. 161).

Beyond selfies and memes, and indeed visual practices generally, semeful sociabilities can contribute to Algorithm Watch, an initiative that includes discussions and mappings of the automation of society. Algorithm Watch describes itself as “a non-profit research and advocacy organization ... committed to watch, unpack and analyze automated

decision-making (ADM) systems and their impact on society” (Algorithm Watch, 2021). In Australia, the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) includes researchers working across social services, health, medicine and engineering. The work is as diverse as are the automated systems in our everyday lives. However, it also includes mapping and investigating automated systems that include apps, robotics, bots, programs and other technological systems that aim to streamline systems worldwide.

The concept of semeful sociabilities can be used in future research to help identify complex relationships of automated systems aspiring to seamless design. Further thought is required into the semes (meanings) of these automated systems as relationships of Touch. Research in seamless design has to date mainly focused on systems of surveillance and control. However, seamless design in a variety of forms in ubiquitous technology, including apps, robotics and systems currently used in health, medical, government and social services, requires further consideration. For example, seamless designs aim to make systems more streamlined, but focusing on the semes (meanings) of technological systems, designs and objects has the potential to recognise how seamless designs impact and Touch the people and organisations involved. Furthermore, semeful sociabilities has the capacity to identify where aspirations towards automation are culturally located in power relationships that both enable and constrain. In this context, semefulness then has the potential to recognise how particular seamless design systems act as practices of Touch and how these cultural and social systems are meaning-making and meaningful.

Because Touch is a key element in how we communicate in everyday relationships, and the *self* of the selfie and the *me* of memes are fundamental elements of everyday cultural communication, understanding Touch in digital contexts such as selfies and memes means understanding ourselves. This book has contributed ideas of how we can begin to consider Touch in networked social relationships. But, as is evident, there is considerably more work to be done in examining Touch in a broader variety of cultural contexts. Looking closely at Touch as meaningful exposes the social, cultural and political realities of everyday socialities.

## References

- Algorithm Watch. (2021). *Home page*. Retrieved October 24, 2021 from <https://algorithmwatch.org/en>
- Classen, C. (2005). *The book of touch*. Berg Publishers.
- Classen, C. (2012). *The deepest sense: A cultural history of touch*. University of Illinois Press.
- Classen, C. (2020a). Fingerprints: Writing about touch. In C. Classen (Ed.), *The book of touch* (pp. 1–9). Routledge.
- Classen, C. (2020b). Touch and technology. In C. Classen (Ed.), *The book of touch* (pp. 401–408). Routledge.
- Classen, C. (2020c). Touch in the museum. In C. Classen (Ed.), *The book of touch* (pp. 275–288). Routledge.
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2009). Touching film: The embodied practice and politics of film viewing and filmmaking. *The Senses and Society*, 4(2), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.2752/174589309X425111>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2011a). The art of touch: A photo-essay. *Social Semiotics*, 21(4), 591–608. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2011.591999>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2011b). Semefulness: A social semiotics of touch. *Social Semiotics*, 21(4), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2011.591993>
- Cranny-Francis, A. (2013). *Technology and touch: The biopolitics of emerging technologies*. Springer.
- Dunn, S. (2021). Is it actually violence? Framing technology-facilitated abuse as violence. In J. Bailey, A. Flynn, & N. Henry (Eds.), *The Emerald international handbook of technology facilitated violence and abuse* (pp. 25–45). Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211002>
- Farman, J. (2020). *Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1976). *Sigmund Freud: Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. Penguin.
- Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kineshetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9(2015), 1607–1628. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3146/1388>
- Frosh, P. (2018). *The poetics of digital media*. Polity Press.
- Jane, E. A. (2016). *Misogyny online: A short (and brutish) history*. Sage.

- Jewitt, C. (2017). Towards a multimodal social semiotic agenda for touch. In S. Zhao, E. Djonov, A. Björkvall, & M. Boeriis (Eds.), *Advancing multimodal and critical discourse studies* (pp. 79–93). Routledge.
- Lumsden, K., & Morgan, H. M. (2018). Cyber-trolling as symbolic violence: Deconstructing gendered abuse online. In N. Lombard (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of gender and violence* (pp. 121–132). Routledge.
- Milner, R. M. (2012). *The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas]. KU ScholarWorks. <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/10256>
- Milner, R. M. (2018). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. M.I.T. Press.
- Prøitz, L., Hjorth, L., & Lasén, A. (2017). Textures of intimacy: Witnessing embodied mobile loss, affect and heartbreak. In R. Andreassen, M. N. Petersen, K. Harrison, & T. Raun (Eds.), *Mediated intimacies* (pp. 60–72). Routledge.
- Schroeder, F., & Rebelo, P. (2007). Wearable music in engaging technologies. *AI & Society*, 22(1), 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-006-0071-4>
- Senft, T. M. (2015). The skin of the selfie. In A. Bieber (Ed.), *Ego update: The future of digital identity* (pp. 134–161). NRW Forum.
- Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1588–1606. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4067/1387>
- Wacquant, L. J., & Bourdieu, P. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Polity Press.
- Warfield, K. (2016). Making the cut: An agential realist examination of selfies and touch. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641706>

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



# Index

## A

Agency, 7  
Algorithms, 88  
Algorithm Watch, 107  
Antisocial behaviours, 76  
Antisocial practices, 106  
Automated decision-making, 88  
Automated systems, 108

## B

Bacareza Balance,  
    Christina, 67  
Barker, Jennifer, 4  
Barthes, Roland, 3, 16  
Baym, Nancy, 19  
Berger, John, 17  
Butler, Judith, 38

## C

Classen, Constance, 36  
Codes, 8–9, 25  
Connection, 29, 42–44, 67–69, 71  
Contiguity, 46–49, 69–72  
Cover, Rob, 91  
Cranny-Francis, Anne, 11,  
    89, 90, 106  
Cultural meanings, 104  
Cuts, 22, 104

## D

Differentiation, 48, 69–72  
Digital self, 90  
Digital wayfaring, 94  
“Digit” in digital, 4  
Disconnections, 106

Disconnections of social  
media, 76–77

Dunn, Suzie, 59

## E

Elo, Mika, 4, 37

Embodied, 20, 31, 38–39, 91, 96

Embodied practices, 94

Embodied technological self, 91–93

Embodiment, 9, 92

Emotional hook, 67

Engagement, 44–46, 67–69

Everyday photographs, 15

## F

Farman, Jason, 31, 32, 91–93

Freud, Sigmund, 65

Frosh, Paul, 4, 20, 38, 94

Fundamentals of Touch, 40–42, 105  
table, 41

Future research, 107–108

## G

The gaze, *see* Mulvey, Laura

Gendered violence, 68

Gestural hooks, 68

Gesture, 29–31

The grab, 19, 104

Grosz, Elizabeth, 38, 94

## H

Haptic sociality, 43

Hinton, Sam, 93

Hjorth, Larissa, 93, 94

Hyper-mimetic logic, 25

Hyper-signification, 25

## I

Intimacies of self, 58

Intimacy, 3, 5, 10, 11, 26,  
31, 43, 48, 50, 58,  
60, 65, 72–77, 96,  
105, 107

Intimate connections, 96, 106

## J

Jane, Emma, 59

Jewitt, Carey, 37

Jokes, 11, 26, 47, 58, 61, 65–68, 70,  
75, 77, 105

the comical, 65

discharge pent-up tensions, 65

social function, 65

social tensions, 66

touch, 66

ugly, 65

## K

Key takeaway, 104–108

Key terms, 5–9

Kinesthetic sociability, 20, 104

## L

Limitations, 107–108

Lumsden, K., 59

## M

Mapping, 96

Mapping Touch, 60–67

Massanari, Adrienne, 64

Meaningful, 29

Meaningful practices, 104

Meaning-making, 29, 104



- Memes, 104  
 definition, 23  
 Kilroy was here, 23  
 photo fads, 26  
 photo-based, 23–29  
 PrettyGirlsUglyFaces (PGUF), 10,  
 60–67 (*see also*  
 PrettyGirlsUglyFaces (PGUF))  
 reaction photoshop, 26  
 social relationships, 25  
 stock character macros, 26  
 You are so beaut-OHGOD!,  
 11, 62, 64
- Milner, Ryan, 27
- Modes, 40  
*See also* Multimodality
- Morgan, H. M., 59
- Multimodal, 51
- Multimodality, 8, 28, 39–40  
 modes, 8, 28
- Multimodal visualities, 31–32
- Mulvey, Laura, 6, 17, 61
- N**
- Networked reflective solidarity, 61
- Networked self, 9, 32, 92
- Networked social relationships, 96
- Normal, 70
- P**
- Papacharissi, Zizi, 92
- Performativity, 9
- Photo-based memes, 23–29
- Photographic truth, 25
- Photography  
 ekineesthetic, 4  
 everyday photographs, 15  
 skin, 3, 16, 19  
 socially networked, 3–5  
 the tactile eye, 4  
 umbilical cord, 3, 16
- Pink, Sarah, 94
- Place, 69, 93
- Platform rules, 70, 77
- Positioning, 49–50, 71
- Power and control, 105
- Practices of looking, 6–7
- Pretty, 72
- Pretty and ugly, 69
- PrettyGirlsUglyFaces (PGUF), 60–67
- Pretty selfie, 70
- Prospective photography, 25
- Prospective research, 104–108
- Q**
- Quinn, Kelly, 92
- R**
- Reddit culture, 64
- Reflexive research, 63
- Rettberg, Jill, 38, 94
- Robotics, 108
- S**
- Seamfulness*, 88
- Seamless design, 88, 108
- Seamless experience, 92
- Seamlessness, 11, 87–89
- Seams, 11, 87–90
- Selfies, 16–22, 104  
 failed selfies, 71  
 immorality, 18  
 narcissism, 18  
 power relationships of looking, 17  
 public space, 18

- Selfies (*cont.*)  
 relationships of looking, 18  
 uglies, 62–63
- Selfie skin, *see* Photography, skin
- Semeful, 91–93
- Semeful sociabilities, 11, 93–97, 106
- Semefulness, 11, 87–90, 93, 108
- Semes, 11, 108
- Senft, Theresa, 3, 19, 61
- Sensorily inscribed body, 90, 93–95
- Shifman, Limor, 23, 26
- Signification, 8
- Signifiers, 8
- Signs, 8
- Social boundaries, 65
- Socially networked photography, 3–5
- Social media, 58
- Social robots, 88
- Social spaces, 67
- Stereotypes, 26, 67
- Symbolic violence, 59, 73, 75
- T**
- Technological seams, 11, 87–91  
*See also* Seams
- Technological self, 9
- Technology-facilitated abuse, 73
- Textures, 96
- TFV, 59
- Time and space, 61
- Touch, 36, 37, 50–51, 89, 90, 104  
 covid crisis, 2  
 definition, 2, 6, 10  
 seams (*see* Touch as an ethics)
- Touch as an ethics, 107
- Touch enables and  
 constrains, 77, 105
- Types of touch, 43
- U**
- Uglies, 70
- Ugliness, 70
- Ugly, 58, 71, 75
- Ugly and pretty, 72
- Ugly feelings, 96, 106
- Ugly selfies, 11, 62, 68  
 #uglyselfie, 63
- Ugly textures, 76
- V**
- Violence, 3, 5, 10, 11, 43, 50, 59,  
 64, 66, 68, 70, 72–77, 96,  
 105, 107
- Visibility, 6–7
- Visual, 28, 31
- Visual culture, 6
- Visual internet, 28
- Visuality, 6–7
- Visual social relationships, 9,  
 95–97
- W**
- Warfield, Katie, 22
- Z**
- Zappavigna, M., 68
- Zhao, S., 68