Social distance, mobility and place: Global and intimate genres in geo-tagged photographs of Guguletu, South Africa

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ABSTRACT
This paper documents locative photographic practices on photo-sharing sites Flickr and The Grid and analyses how geo-tagged photographs of Guguletu in South Africa represent interpersonal meanings and social distance. Distinct communicative genres are associated with (i) a tourist view of Guguletu shared via Flickr, and (ii) intimate social exchanges by residents meeting online contacts via mobile social network, The Grid. These differences are a reminder that access to mobility and uses of mobile media vary according to socio-economic status, and that priorities for the design of mobile image-sharing systems may differ in this context, where visual interactional genres and playful interactions appear to supercede locative uses of systems such as The Grid.

Keywords
tourism, geo-referenced photographs, photo collections, social media, mobile photographs, multimodal analysis, social networking, Flickr, The Grid

ACM Classification
H5.2[Information Interfaces & Presentation]:User Interfaces K4.2[Computing Milieux]:Social Issues

INTRODUCTION
Online image archives, such as Flickr, include billions of publically-accessible images. Global inequities of access to communicative networks, bandwidth and consumer electronics means that these archives are currently nowhere near a neutral or complete “record” of contemporary cultural activity. Large numbers of people do not contribute to the collections, disproportionately many of whom live in areas of low connectivity in the developing world.

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Mobile genres for visual interaction

The interchanges associated with online photo-sharing can be seen as multimodal “speech genres” [14]. Here the term “genre” is used to refer to regularities in any form of communication, a particular communicative event recognisable as an instance of a type [15]. Social distance is a key communicative dimension of photographic genres and provides the focus for this project.

Social distance in visual communication

Spatial relations between people are given cultural significance in proxemic systems. Kress and Van Leeuwen [16] connect these everyday proxemic conventions to the meanings of shot scale in photography. Thus social relationships are suggested by the choice of close ups, medium or long shots. These visual proxemics can suggest either intimate or distant social relations between a viewer and the subjects of an image (the represented participants). The coding scheme used in this study is based on the idea that certain kinds of shot can be related to a set of visual meanings and social distances.

Flickr

Flickr is an image-sharing website which is popular with amateur photographers and claims to host more than 4 billion images. Studies of Flickr users have identified novel practices, approaches to privacy and forms of socialization emerging that differentiate them from “Kodak culture” consumer and amateur photographers, notably by sharing photographs with strangers, beyond known networks of family and friends [1].

Mobile platforms in South Africa

In South Africa, landlines and computer-based Internet access are the preserve of a relatively small monied elite, roughly 10 percent of the population. For many young residents of the urban townships of South Africa, the Internet is most accessible via a mobile phone, and is almost synonymous with Internet-based social networks [10, 11, 12, 13] such as MXit, Facebook and The Grid.

The Grid

The Grid’s users are mostly young adults (ages 20-24), 60% are male, and 60% are in employment. Like many other young urban South Africans, 60% of The Grid users first access the Internet via a mobile phone, while 80% primarily use their phones rather than a computer to access the internet. Moreover, they access mobile internet five or more times per day (Vincent Maher, 2010, personal communication, 16 Feb).

METHODOLOGY

Finding photographs from Guguletu

Guguletu is a low-income suburb of Cape Town, created in the 1960s under apartheid policies of racially segregated housing. While residents of this area are currently not likely to use Flickr for photo sharing, many tourists use the platform to share images of their travels through Guguletu. Off the beaten track for most tourists, Guguletu is nonetheless a relatively popular stop on many ‘township tours’. Township tours are a form of “cultural tourism” which offer tourists a glimpse of the everyday lives of ordinary South Africans, but they have been criticized as voyeuristic in that they tend to script urban South African life into a spectacle for tourist consumption [17].

Both Flickr and The Grid have a locative dimension and can link images to spatial co-ordinate data, since Flickr users can geo-tag their images manually or with suitable cameras. All content posted to The Grid is automatically geo-tagged and displayed on a map.

Photographs posted from Guguletu to The Grid before 1 February 2010 were identified via the application’s Area Guide. (A small number of shots posted from neighbouring Nyanga were also included to generate a slightly larger dataset.) A total of 59 photographs and their associated comments were sourced in this way. A Flickr search for geotagged images of Guguletu (67) and Nyanga (3) posted before 1 February 2010 generated the second dataset. The collection includes some images which do not in fact depict Guguletu or Nyanga. The process of geotagging images from digital cameras is still a manual process for many photographers, and since The Grid uses triangulation with cell phone towers rather than GPS and records the place in which images were uploaded rather than where photographs were taken, the locative data is thus also not entirely accurate.

Interactional genres and speech acts

On The Grid and Flickr, a range of interactions took place through geo-tagged photographs and associated text, such as titles, annotations, and comments. These included both interpersonal interactions between friends, and more impersonal genres associated with the mass media. These interactions were coded by considering the social meaning of images and associated text, which were used to identify characteristic genres of interaction on the two platforms.

Flickr photographers had posted an average of 2114 photographs each and only 12% of the Guguletu shots received comments. Titles and annotations along with the subject-matter of the shot were used to code the images within particular communicative genres, sometimes associated with mass media (e.g. documentary or promotional) while others were tourist snapshots.

The Grid’s users were far less prolific in sharing their photographs (an average of 1.7 shots were posted by individual users, with 38% of photographers only posting one image). They were far more liberal with their comments though, and shots from The Grid received an average of 2 comments, while 70% received at least one comment. Comments were coded generically as speech acts (e.g. insults, compliments, offers, propositions, and so on).

Social distance

A version of Kress and van Leeuwen’s [16] “grammar” for shot scale and social distance was used in analyzing the images. This study focused on imagined relationships to human participants and coding differentiated between five broad categories: (i) Intimate shots included close-ups
displaying the head only. (ii) **Personal distances** included close personal distances (head and shoulders) and far personal distance (waist up). (iii) **Social coding** was used when images displayed whole figures or seated figures - distant but nonetheless available for social interaction. (iv) **Impersonal or public distances** were found in long shots where participants were perceived to have little connection with the viewer. (v) **No people**: this final category included images of buildings, landscape, or objects without human participants.

**SOCIAL DISTANCE ON FLICKR & THE GRID**

Figure 1 indicates the distribution of images coded for social distance on Flickr and The Grid. Photographs posted to The Grid from Guguletu and Nyanga are significantly more likely to represent participants at personal or intimate distances (p<0.005) while the pictures posted to Flickr are significantly more likely to feature social or impersonal distances (p<0.005). These differences may relate to the different genres of interaction associated with the two sites.

![Bar chart showing social distance in photographs from The Grid and Flickr](http://manyeyes.alphaworks.ibm.com/)

**FLICKR – FAMILY MODE MEETS TOURIST GAZE**

Coded by genre, most of the Flickr shots were tourist snapshots (57%) taken by visitors from the US (35%), the UK (16%) and from other parts of South Africa (25%). A smaller group (28%) suggested documentary genres, and included shots of HIV/Aids orphans and a set of stills from a film student’s documentary about the South African Elections in 2009. A final generic category was promotional shots (12%) for a CD by a local Hip hop crew.

Coded by topic, half of the shots (50%) celebrate friendship or family togetherness and enjoyment against a backdrop of cultural “otherness” (food, patrons and workers at the popular Guguletu eatery Mzoli’s Place). These shots are thus a more youthful and adventurous variant of the “family mode” of holiday photography [18] where families record and construct their closeness and identity as a family by taking photographs of themselves in holiday settings. A smaller set (9%) of pictures suggest the global “tourist gaze” [19] in that they are focused on visual consumption of the township as a place of spectacular poverty. This distanced “objective” gaze documents what is perceived as extraordinary and exotic about the area.

**THE GRID – SELF-PORTRAIT MODE**

Despite the foregrounding of locative features in the interface, spatial documentary genres did not play an important role for The Grid’s users in this sample of images. Most of The Grid photographs were shot indoors, in a domestic interior setting. (In total, 78% were interior shots). A small number of photographs featured a landscape (5%) or other outdoor scene (5%). Almost all (82%) of photos posted on The Grid were self-portraits. Most (68%) foregrounded the user who posted them rather than other people or the setting, while many retained a level of anonymity through the use of cropping or sunglasses. These self-portraits constituted a kind of extended profile, supplementing a low resolution “profile pic”.

**COMMENTING NETWORKS AND COHESION**

The Grid’s comments were coded as speech acts. Figure 2 visualises commenting interactions, revealing that most were compliments or insults of the looks and sexual attractiveness of the subjects of the photographs. The photographs originate within a flow of chat and other communication, only some of which is available for analysis. Coding was challenging when references shared by interlocutors were not made explicit, unlike the documentary-style Flickr photographs. On The Grid, a common sequence of interaction involved complimenting a user’s sex appeal or looks, and then asking for an invitation to chat on MXit, or offering phone numbers or other personal information. This is a major difference from the small, intimate audiences commonly associated with MMS-distributed mobile photography. These social interactions between anonymous contacts are thus not limited to remote communication within existing friendship networks. Given
the games of gradually revealed identity in these early adopter interactions. The Grid’s default use of automatically geo-located public media may be somewhat “out of place”. Users’ play with intimacy and anonymity suggests a need for more control and additional privacy features.

CONCLUSION
This relatively small corpus of images suggests how diverse communicative contexts are shaping practices on mobile platforms. Ito [21] reminds us that mobile technologies do not give all social groups equal access to mobility. Tourists who shared their photographs of Guguletu on Flickr enjoyed easy mobility, and cheap bandwidth. They could represent the places they visited using authoritative documentary genres, convey global or cosmopolitan identities as travelers and establish a level of social distance from the people they encountered, who featured primarily as a backdrop.

The local view of Guguletu and Nyanga posted to The Grid is not a mobile complement filling the gaps in Flickr’s global tapestry. Instead it suggests a different order of intimate interactions where individual identities are foregrounded almost to the exclusion of the spatial context. The Grid’s users network online, interpreting locative features of mobile media through existing practices of interpersonal communication and play. As Ito [21] argues, the local integrity of places is expressed rather than destroyed by mobile technologies. The uses of The Grid described in this paper do reflect local communicative practices, albeit local practices associated with networking tools such as MXit. These practices currently involve intimate interpersonal interaction with new contacts and the extension of the social situation rather than documentation of the local physical surroundings.

REFERENCES