The Conceptual Blurriness of Perpetual Motion

Challenges of Studying Looping Visual Social Media

**Project: Visual Cultures of Social Media**

Visual content is a ubiquitous part of everyday social media activity and digital cultures. From memes and selfies to emoji, infographics, and profile pictures, the online visual takes many forms, which have attracted a wealth of research covering perspectives from the popular to the political (see Serff & Bavn, 2015; Shifman, 2014). With this ubiquity comes a need for extended research into the cultural practices and forms around visual content on social media.

This specific work focuses on looping visual social media, such as animated GIFs/Vine clips, and instant on repeat created with Boomerang.

**What role does repetition, through the loop, play in creating meaning with visual social media?**

**How does this differ between different looping forms, such as GIFs and Vines?**

Is repetition reflected in (or shaped by) the affordances and cultures of platforms and formats?

How should looping visual social media be conceptualised and presented within research?

**On the loop**

Looping visual media differ from both static images and video through automatic repetition. Through repeating movement, reactions, and emotions, these media draw attention to particular actions, but shows a silent information, present affect, highlight moments; and set up and resolve comedy and tragedy alike (see Ash, 2015; Chia, 2015). They encourage users’ own creativity, through creating their own visuals and playing with the loops, and the duration of existing loops appropriated for new contexts.

**Various fandoms** see GIFs to focus on characters, reactions, and interactions within popular culture texts, including the creation of fan fiction, imagettes, and mash-ups (see Thomas, 2013). The circulation of pornographic GIFs, meanwhile, puts emphasis on action that are highly repetitive themselves, while cinemagraphs are artistic loops isolating a sudden movement within a scene.

Each of these looping forms offers their own particular affordances, limits, cultures, and characteristics. Loops made with Vine have a maximum length of six seconds and mix sound and vision; GIFs are a flexible, silent format but their support varies on different platforms (see Shifman, 2014). There are connections between these different loop types and earlier forms of visual communication (such as flipbooks, lenticular art, and zoetropes), and other practices around repetition such as music sampling.

The online setting offers further applications and accessibility for creating and experiencing loops. This is connected to other forms of repetition within internet cultures. Repetition is seen in how memes are recycled by many, adapted for different contexts yet maintaining the same structure (whether through templates in the form of macros, or by building upon previous examples) (Shifman, 2014).

**Conceptual**

Conceptually, the loop is temporally unstable: it exists in perpetuity with its own digital sentry (Mait & Wennif, 2014), and while some may offer a clear narrative that repeats, others may loop endlessly without a definite start or end.

Impact and meaning are created through repetition, yet the number of repeats is variable: the interpretation of a loop can depend on how long it is experienced. As the content loop, it becomes self-referential (Poulaki, 2015); it creates its own narrative of changing content accompanied by evolving perception. The content of the loop may be taken from another source, such as GIFs drawn from television or film, but it becomes decontextualized and self-contained within the loop.

The intent of the loop varies for some; the creation of a perfect loop, of seamless repetition, is ideal, but for others, the loop serves to reiterate a structure of set-up and resolution. In other cases, too, the loop may simply be an affordance of the media format or platform used rather than a critical aesthetic choice.

**Communicative**

Looping visual social media also raise clear communicative challenges, not least how to feature the content within studies. GIFs and other looping content can be embedded within presentation slides, but this capability does not extend to other publication options beyond online publication or digital appendices (see Newman, 2016).

Distilling a GIF to a single frame (or isolating multiple frames) arguably dilutes, or obscures completely, the cultural context and the powerful elements of the medium. Through meaning is created the movement and the repetition depicted within a loop.

**Methods**

The initial work carried out draws upon samples of GIFs and loops drawn from Tumblr and Vine, focused on particular hashtags and contexts. Relevant media are located through sourcing platforms, searches for relevant keywords, hashtags, and content types. Visual analysis and content analysis are used to examine both the visual media themselves, and their underlying contexts, the purposes for which they are employed, within posts and communities. Additional observations are drawn from Instagram’s video and Boomerang formats.

These initial studies have underlined how looping visual social media are popular and versatile, creating and extending meaning through repetition. The same format might be used to express emotion, convey a message, or to highlight individual creativity or to provide humor among other functions. This diversity in forms and practices raises and heightens conceptual and communicational challenge.

**References**


