

Netnography to uncover the new aesthetic of the *zoomie*

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Abstract

Since the first COVID-19 lockdown, video conferencing platforms like Zoom have emerged as a fast-growing virtual context where people can have experiences such as education, entertainment, and tourism. Even now that restrictions have ceased, people are still seeking virtual experiences, particularly in the context of cultural tourism. This has brought to life a new practice of selfie-taking: the 'zoomie'.

In this paper, we explore the emerging aesthetic of zoomies to understand how self- and place-presentation practices are evolving in virtual contexts. To reach our goal, we conducted a netnography of zoomies in the context of cultural tourism.

Our findings depict zoomie as the repository of three types of tourist gaze and highlight an unkempt aesthetic and comfy culture that differentiates it from travel selfie. We finally elaborate how netnography helped us uncover the zoomie as a new technocultural object.

Keywords: netnography, Zoom, technoculture, travel selfie, self-presentation

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, video conferencing platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Collaborate Ultra, and Zoom offered a lifeline for those sectors severely impacted by virus restrictions, such as education, entertainment, and tourism. These platforms allowed these sectors to adapt their offerings to a virtual format and sustain their businesses (Chen & Chen, 2020). Zoom was especially beneficial to tourism, as it provided a unique experience format that enabled participants to socialize and explore new environments and cultures, even amidst the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

The format was so engaging that even today, when the virus restrictions have been softened, Zoom tourism experiences are still sought-for and popular among

tourists. For example, Airbnb has maintained its Online Experiences launched during the COVID-19 lockdown. They consist of live and interactive sessions conducted over Zoom by experts - mainly tour guides and international Chefs - for small groups of virtual tourists. Over the course of an hour or two, the experts dive into a wide range of cultural, touristic, culinary, and athletic topics through interactive lessons, demonstrations, or live tours, which virtual tourists can experience from the comfort and safety of their homes while socializing among each other (Pogue, 2020).

Over the past three years, virtual tourists have explored and experimented with what they can do on Zoom. It is common now to spot online snapshots of the Zoom screen, taken by a Zoom participant with a smartphone or a webcam, and then posted on social media, displaying the self and other virtual tourists connected to Zoom in the flow of the platform experience. This photo-taking practice recalls the practice of selfie-taking. Drawing on this similarity with the selfie, we term the Zoom online snapshot featuring a techno-mediated self-portrait, 'zoomie'. The zoomie represents a new technocultural (Kozinets, 2019) object that embodies the interplay between technologies, their technical and social affordances - meant as 'the mutuality of actor intentions and object capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action' (Majchraz, Faraj, Kane & Azad., 2013, p. 39) -, and values, meanings, symbols, and discourse used by a person to construct individual and social identities.

In this paper, we dive into the emergent zoomie technoculture (Kozinets, 2019) that depicts the system of meanings, actions, technologies, affordances, objects, places, discourse, and interactions captured by people while presenting their self and building their relationships through zoomies.

We explore the emerging stylistic standards of the zoomie to understand how the tourist gaze including self-presentation and place-presentation practices is evolving in video conferencing contexts like Zoom. In our paper, the notion of 'standard', which the Oxford Dictionary defines as something used as a norm or model, incorporates both material and symbolic

elements. It refers to the combination of self- and place-presentation norms including people's visual appearance and posture, arrangement of backdrop cues, as well as the meanings and values that are captured in a zoomie snapshot and in relevant discourse and conversations (in social media and/or in interviews) and that are representative of the zoomie. Zoomie standards are shaped by factors such as contextual circumstances (i.e. the global pandemic), shared cultural codes, social norms, and interplay with technology over time.

To reach our goal, we conducted a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2020b) in the context of cultural tourism, as it has been the main tourism subfield repositioning its offer through video conferencing formats (Liu, Zhang, & Chen, 2022), especially on Zoom (i.e. SurlaTable, Airbnb). Cultural tourism has been defined as 'an activity in which the tourists' essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a destination' (UNWTO, 2020). It includes a wide range of activities: visits to those architectural and natural sites that have a universal value from a historical, manufacturing, and aesthetic point of view (Csapò, 2012), visits to museums and religious places, and participation in gastronomic activities (Moirá, 2009).

Our findings illustrate the characteristics of three predominant types of tourist gaze portrayed in the zoomie and highlight the emergence of an unkempt aesthetic and 'comfy culture' that emerge as typical standards of the zoomie technoculture.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. The tourist gaze in travel selfies

The tourist gaze encompasses the way in which tourists view the places they visit and attempts to illustrate the visual nature of the tourist experience (Urry, 1990). The tourist gaze usually gets materialized in visual media, such as photographs (Walsh, Johns & Dale, 2019). As such, it depends on the touristic sights, on the people physically present in the environment, and on the technology used to actualize the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

The wide diffusion of ubiquitous and portable technologies, such as smartphones equipped with digital cameras and social networks (Walsh et al., 2019; Urry & Larsen, 2011) has transformed the gaze into a more techno-mediated practice (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung & Law, 2011; Urry & Larsen, 2011). The act of gazing and its materialization in visual media has become intertwined with the smartphone and social media's

affordances. Furthermore, this practice is no longer confined to the tourists' point of view but also influenced by the eyes of their imagined audience (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Canavan, 2020). Social media have offered tourists the possibility to capture and expose their visual representation of the gaze to a large and networked audience, who scrutinizes these visuals and rewards only those deemed aesthetically inspiring, through likes, comments, and shares (Gretzel, 2017). Consequently, tourists feel an ever-present tension to consider their potential social media audience before selecting what to gaze at, how to catch the most engaging destination representation, and how to manipulate and filter it (Gretzel, 2017). This is particularly evident in travel selfies.

The 'selfie' is "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or a webcam" (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). Literature on selfies has explored how individuals use selfies as a self-branding technique to construct and share one's life narrative on social media (Eagar & Dann, 2016) or as collective and intersubjective accounts of events and group identities (Page, 2019), which can be also visually manipulated for narcissism (Taylor, 2019) and self-promotion goals. The intensity with which image-making technology has engendered the ability to generate and share snapshots of the self in different technoscapes has elevated the representation of the self to a cultural fixation (Murray, 2022). For instance, traveling without taking pictures of the self is unimaginable (Gretzel, 2017)

The selfies taken during travel are named 'travel selfies' (Gretzel, 2017; Christou, Farmaki, Saveriades, & Georgiou, 2020). They represent a trendy techno-mediated self-portray conceived as the actualization of a self-directed tourist gaze (Magasic, 2016; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016), wherein the destination view is always mediated by the subject self-display (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Travel selfie subjects strategically pose, frame, and apply filters in this photo format to display a self-portrait of their perfect self (Prideaux, Lee, & Tsang, 2018) and, possibly, an engaging view of a destination.

Travel selfies have reached such a level of aestheticism throughout the years, that many scholars (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Gretzel, 2017; Christou et al., 2020) have explored the stylistic standards of self- and place-presentation performed in this photo format.

2.2. Stylistic standards of self- and place-presentation in travel selfies

Travel selfies are curated representations of the self and of the destination, taken mainly to certify an experience and generate engagement (Dinhopl &

Gretzel, 2016). Gretzel (2017) found that tourists are used to portraying only their upper bodies while assuming perfected poses. They intensively curate the lighting effects during the shot and apply beautifying filters to their visages during the snap. Tourists also assume specific facial expressions to generate engagement in the viewers and online conversations: duck faces, mugging, and expressions of boredom or surprise (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Additionally, it is common for tourists to wear sunglasses either to add specific color tones to the image, to display interesting perspectives gained through the reflections visible in the glasses, or to add a coolness and mysterious effect to their self-presentation (Gretzel, 2017). Finally, tourists position themselves in the foreground and represent destination landscapes as distant backgrounds or completely hide them in the photo (Gretzel & Dinhopl, 2016; Gretzel, 2017; Christou et al., 2020).

Although these are the recognized stylistic standards of self- and place-presentation in travel selfies, it is commonly known that they constantly change as the practice itself evolves (Kozinets, Gretzel & Dinhopl, 2017), due for instance, to the evolving available technologies that allow tourists to shape their gaze in ever-new ways.

In virtual tourism, video conferencing platforms like Zoom are transforming the way people engage in certain aspects of travel-related activities and communication. The integration of Zoom in our daily interactions and its role in connecting people from afar through virtual communication has introduced new technocultural practices that add to the way people experience and share travel-related interactions. Zoom and its users have also introduced new ways of visually presenting and seeing people in meetings, as well as new ways of capturing and storing memories through zoomies. According to the philosopher Walter Benjamin (1936), photography affects the way we perceive and remember the world by freezing certain moments in time creating a visual memory of an experience that can even transcend the human capacity to perceive it in real time. In line with this, we see in the zoomie a technocultural object that can provide a glimpse into the experiences lived by virtual tourists with and through the Zoom digital platform and the significance that these experiences have for them.

2.3. The rise of the zoomie as a new form of tourist gaze

The widespread adoption of Zoom for virtual tourism experiences has given rise to the zoomie as a new techno-mediated self-portrait. Due to the novelty of this technocultural object, studies are missing that

consider the zoomie photo trend as a new form of self-directed tourist gaze that - similarly to a selfie - captures specific self- and place-presentation practices. Hence, our research questions are: What types of tourist gaze does zoomie offer? What are the specific stylistic standards of self- and place-presentation of the zoomie?

To seek answers to these questions, we adopt a netnographic approach to investigate the zoomie in the context of cultural tourism (i.e. city and/or museum visits, and gastronomic activities like cooking classes), as this is the field where travel live-streaming on Zoom has been most widely experimented (Liu et al., 2022).

3. Method

The novelty of the research area, and the fact that zoomies originate from online experiences and constitute a type of self- and place-presentation practice performed in digital platforms which is generative of conversations and sharing practices on social media, has led us to conduct a netnography (Kozinets, 2020b).

Over the past two decades, netnography has emerged as a valued research technique for studying online communities, virtual and synthetic worlds, social media platforms, and other forms of digital media and mediated technocultural experiences (Kozinets, 2023; Villegas, 2018; Kozinets, 2020b; Kozinets et al., 2017).

Netnography has been repeatedly adopted to study emerging visual phenomena on social media (Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017; Hietala, 2022), including selfies (Kozinets et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2020a; Rokka & Canniford, 2016) and travel selfies (Gretzel, 2017) and how these have generated conversational flows of consumption, desire, and meaning-making. Thanks to its capacity to capture and analyze visual, audiovisual, and textual types of data as unitary subsets of cultural meaning, netnography can get a deep, situated understanding of the aesthetic, social, and cultural experiences offered by the zoomie as a new technocultural object of self- and place presentation.

Our netnography included four phases: investigative, immersive, interactional, and integration (Kozinets, 2020b).

In the investigative phase, we carefully retrieved zoomies from digital archival material published from March 2020 to September 2022 (during and post-Covid-19 lockdowns). Subsequently, we gathered zoomies from Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, because of their visual character and use of searchable hashtags (Kozinets et al., 2017) (see Table 1 for the list of hashtags we identified and analyzed), and from TripAdvisor and Airbnb, due to their focus on travel and tourism and the public availability of data. Our zoomie dataset retrieved from social media is composed of 264

zoomies (see Table 2 for zoomies’ breakdown by platform).

Social Media	First Group of Hashtags	Second Group of Hashtags	Third Group of Hashtags
Instagram	#foodtourism; #virtualcookingclass; #Zoomcookingclass; #virtualtravel; #onlinetour; #zoomtour	#travelthroughfood; #lockdowncooking; #zoomcookingclasses; #virtualexperiences; #virtualtour; #zoomcation	#zoommeal; #cookfromafar #liveonlinecookingclasses, #virtualcookingexperience; #virtualguide, #viajievirtualesrilanka, #maketourism; #virtualwalks
Twitter	#foodtourism; #virtualcookingclass; #Zoomcookingclass; #virtualtravel; #onlinetour; #zoomtour	#virtualcookingclasses; #lockdowncooking; #virtualtour; #virtualtourism; #zoomtravel	#lockdowncookingclass; #onlinecooking; #virtualtour360
Facebook	#foodtourism; #virtualcookingclass; #Zoomcookingclass; #virtualtravel; #onlinetour; #zoomtour	#lockdowncooking; #virtualtour; #virtualtraveller #zoomtravel	#virtualtourism

Table 1. Hashtags analyzed for the social media data collection

We complemented this data collection by filtering the TripAdvisor reviews related to the cultural tourism experiences offered by the 10 leading cities for cultural tourism according to the Euromonitor Report (2021) and focused on those including zoomies. We read all the reviews posted for the “Cooking Online Experiences” (183 classes) and “Cultural City Tours Online Experiences” (71 offerings) offered by Airbnb and retrieved only those including zoomies. We then took screenshots of all the gathered zoomies that contained a minimum of two thumbnails, the photo description, and the #hashtags in the metadata, when present.

Data Collection sites	Type of data collected	Research Engagement (number of zoomies collected)
Archival Materials	Media Articles	31
	Reports	2
	Zoomies from media articles	37
	Zoomies from reports	21
Total of zoomies from Archival Materials		58
Social Media	Zoomies from Facebook	95
	Zoomies from Instagram	110
	Zoomies from Twitter	18
	Zoomies from TripAdvisor	27
	Zoomies from Airbnb	14
Total number of zoomies from social media		264
Total number of zoomies from participant observation		16
Final zoomie dataset		338

Table 2. Zoomie dataset

In our immersive data operations, each of the researchers wrote an immersion journal that resulted in a written narrative of 12,344 words. The immersion journal allowed us to map our research territory, record overview and details of our encounter with data, capture our own experiences with introspective reflection, and integrate our insights coming from the empirical dataset with extant theoretical constructs (eg., tourist gaze, selfie gaze, selfie standards, affordances) and abstractions (Kozinets, 2020b, p. 284). In the end, our journal combined the most compelling and resonant (Kozinets, 2020b, pp. 283 and 288) screenshotted zoomies, hyperlinks, personal reflective notes, and analytical notes on the images, which encircled our data

collection efforts, taking the shape of a ‘carefully cultivated curation’ (Kozinets, 2020b, p. 397). Specifically, the analytical notes derived from a hermeneutic interpretive approach, aimed at identifying standards of self- and place-presentation in zoomies. In doing so, we circled back and forth between the empirical data, the travel selfie literature, and our own interpretations.

In the interactive phase, we directly participated in four Zoom cooking classes hosted by Airbnb Online Experiences. Participation allowed us to better understand the practices of zoomie-taking, the application of beautifying filters or post-production corrections to the photos, and the dynamics of socialization generated by photo-taking. We experienced a total of 6 hours of focused observation, during which we interacted with and asked questions to both host and participants and collected 16 additional zoomies that we incorporated into our immersive journal. Hence, our final dataset consists of 338 zoomies (Table 2).

We then triangulated the data collection with in-depth interviews with the cultural tourism suppliers and virtual tourists who posted or were tagged in the collected zoomies. The interviews allowed us to elicit an explicit comparison of the zoomie and travel selfie, prompting our interviewees to reflectively reconstruct the performative, aesthetic, and emotional practices of taking a zoomie and a travel selfie and their motivations to assume specific gestures, poses, and frames. Moreover, the interviews helped us understand which stylistic differences, values, and meanings the interviewees attach to them. Following a purposive sampling approach, from October to December 2022 we interviewed 10 people, ranging from tour guides, chefs, and virtual tourists (Table 3) on Microsoft Teams. All the interviews were recorded audio-visually and transcribed. All the interviewees were informed about the nature of the study and asked for their consent to the interview, registration, and transcription before the start of the conversation. Although their posting of zoomies was public, all the interviewees agreed to remain anonymous. Hence, in this study, we quoted the different informants through pseudonyms.

Finally, we performed data integration, which involved moving back and forth between analytical coding operations and interpretive hermeneutic procedures. The interpretation was approached as an interactive, iterative process aimed at generating a hermeneutic circle of understanding where each portion of data was interpreted in relation to the developing sense of the whole (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994). The interpretation was enriched by triangulating our insights across the different data sources to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the analysis (Cho &

Trent, 2006). Figure 1 provides an overview of our netnographic procedures.

Coded name of the interviewee	Interviewee	Gender of the interviewee (F= female; M= Male)	Age of the interviewee	Country of origin of the interviewee	Typology of Zoom cultural tourism experience	Date of engagement in the Zoom cultural tourism experience
Paul	Chef (zoomie poster)	M	42	Sri Lanka	Zoom cooking class	April 2020
Rosa	Tour Guide (zoomie poster)	F	31	Italy	Zoom cooking class	May 2020
André	Virtual Tourist (zoomie poster)	M	28	Spain	Zoom city tour	May 2020
Lisa	Virtual Tourist (zoomie tagged participant)	F	24	France	Zoom city tour	May 2020
Mark	Tour Guide (zoomie poster)	M	36	UK	Zoom city tour	September 2020
Cristina	Tour Guide (zoomie poster)	F	40	USA	Zoom city tour	February 2021
Tom	Tour Guide (zoomie poster)	M	27	UK	Zoom city tour	April 2021
Carola	Tour Guide (zoomie poster)	F	33	Italy	Zoom city tour	June 2021
Luca	Virtual Tourist (zoomie poster)	M	40	Italy	Zoom cooking class	September 2021
Kelly	Virtual Tourist (zoomie tagged participant)	F	26	UK	Zoom cooking class	July 2022

Table 3. Overview of the interviews data

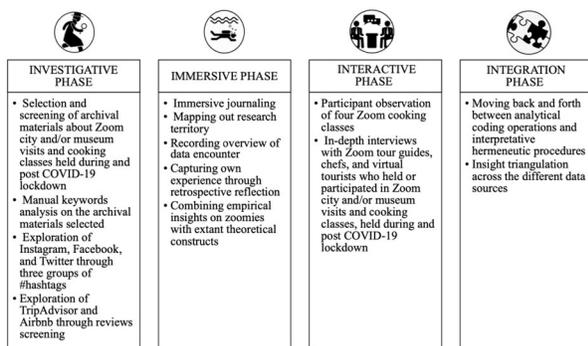


Figure 1. Netnographic research phases and operations

4. Findings

Our analysis highlights three predominant types of tourist gaze incorporating specific self- and place-presentation stylistic standards (e.g., people’s visual appearance and posture, arrangement of backdrop cues, meanings, and values represented) that emerge as typical of the zoomie: performativity; conviviality; teleportation.

4.1 Performativity

Zoomies often portray individuals caught in the act of doing something. They typically appear in the flow of the experience, as opposed to the polished and static poses of travel selfies (Gretzel, 2017). Zoomies are snapped while zoom users (host and participants) are speaking or gesturing (see Figure 2). This is a specific stylistic choice that qualifies the performative culture of the zoomie, where performativity, revealing skillful dexterity, preparation, and attentiveness, emerges as a value that contributes to enhance the professional status of a person. Moreover, the flow of the experience creates an aura of spontaneity that amplifies the genuine passion and dedication to the activity performed.

Performativity is usually reinforced through the use of outfits that convey preparation and absorption, where every single task performed by hosts becomes a meaningful act to capture in a zoomie. In cooking classes, hosts typically wear working uniforms and aprons (Figure 2). Thanks to the recent rise of the transmedia culture tradition of TV programs, books, documentaries, and podcasts elevating cooks and chefs to the status of celebrities and media stars, the apron has emerged as a meaningful cultural symbol of cooking mastery, expertise, professionalism, and commitment, contributing to the chef’s unique personality to admire and take inspiration from.

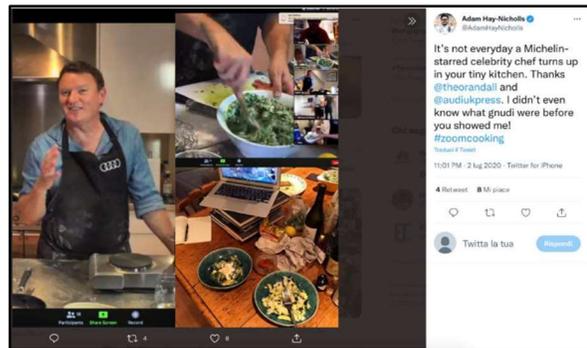


Figure 2. Zoomie capturing the act of a professional performance

Apart from material props (like aprons), hosts can also employ Zoom’s technological affordances to adjust the video layout and assume a prominent role in the virtual meeting (Figure 3). Hosts can pin their thumbnails with the intent of making it clear who is leading the experience and who is simply participating.



Figure 3. The host takes prominence in zoomie

Also background and setting elements can be used to convey the idea of preparation for the performance. As most of the zoom users live-stream from their houses, the arrangement of the furniture is often

strategically managed to control the framing of the setting of the zoomies. In Figure 4, to offer an Italian cooking class, zoom users have arranged their kitchens to show their readiness and enthusiasm in sharing a cooking experience. Before the virtual experience starts, participants receive detailed information on how to prepare for it: lists of ingredients, utensils, recommendations about drinks and devices (where to place them, how to adjust the audio-video setting, and battery).

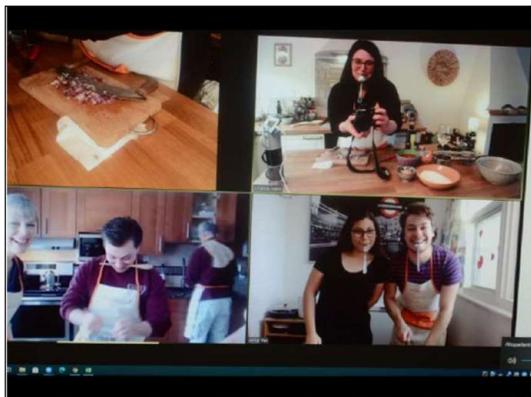


Figure 4. Zoom users' organized kitchens

Paul revealed his awareness of being photographed and hence his effort in staging his kitchen appropriately: *«I knew that the kitchen background would have been visible both during the live session and in the subsequent photos taken. So it was crucial to convey a message of care and attention to the ambiance I was in. This always enhances your professionalism and can lead participants to return or speak highly of you, thereby attracting new clients. So, I organized my space to look clean and orderly. I noticed that people who attend more than one class tend to better arrange the objects in their kitchens after the first class. This satisfied me because I felt that I had conveyed a sense of attentiveness and care toward their working environment».*

4.2. Conviviality

Zoomies also offer representations of individuals captured in moments of conviviality. Participants attach to conviviality strong meanings that may showcase their capacity to overcome difficulties in times of restrictions through fun, sociality, and friendship and/or reveal the carefree joy of a temporary, lighthearted connective experience with fellow peers located elsewhere. Participants appear in zoomies with smiling and cheerful facial expressions that intensify the funny visual realism of their comfy and often messy look. This casual, unkempt look is used as a discursive expedient

through which individuals nurture their conversations and social bonds with the other participants.

In Figure 5, two participants wear sweatshirts, basketball shirts, and caps during a virtual safari held on Zoom. This choice also resonates with the fact that the Covid-19 lockdown has shifted people's focus from the 'outfit of the day culture' to a simpler and more pared-down wardrobe. In times of lockdown when individuals spent their days at home alone, they started to value simplicity and spontaneity in their appearance in virtual gatherings (Howlett, 2022), rather than valuing a polished and beautified image, wearing blazers or putting on lipstick and mascara.



Figure 5. Participants wearing casual clothes during a virtual safari held on Zoom

Casual outfits in zoomies are typically complemented by contextual artifacts that add to the convivial experience. Different from travel selfies, where outfits are usually complemented by beautifying objects that enhance the visual appeal of the person - such as sunglasses (Gretzel, 2017) - in zoomies, zoom users utilize objects that do not embellish their appearance, but rather act as social triggers or facilitators of experiences of conviviality. In Figure 6, zoom users, taking a French wine and cheese tasting experience, are holding wine bottles or wine glasses and are mimicking a toast, which is a common gesture of conviviality. Zoomies are repositories of a comfy, playful, and convivial tourist gaze, aimed at living light, carefree moments of togetherness, which Kozinets referred to as 'consociality' (Kozinets, 2015). While consociality eschews notions of physical (inside-outside) boundaries, it puts an emphasis on what is shared between people in a particular moment (Kozinets, 2015, p. 12). Living a moment of serenity even if temporary and enjoying each other's company bear the meanings of joy and even relief when they constitute memories of resilience and overcoming of past hard times. As André said looking at a zoomie taken during COVID-19: *“When I look at this photo now it reminds me of a moment of serenity during all that dark; when I look at it, I always smile because even today it*

gives me a feeling of relief and joy. So lucky for me, when I took it and posted it I didn't care about the likes”.



Figure 6. Zoom users raising French wine bottles or glasses in cheerful expressions

Zoom users are also keen to take and post zoomies even if their own appearance or that of the others is compromised by technological issues. In fact, in zoomies, users' appearance can be affected by blurring caused by technical problems. In Figure 7, which shows a city tour of Paris conducted through video recordings of the city, the participant in the second thumbnail of the first row appears blurred with frazzled contours. This unpolished and carefree aesthetic is a standard of zoomies that contrasts with travel selfies, as clearly explained by André: *“Travel selfies are always repeatedly snapped until you take the perfect shot, where everyone is posing and on focus. For example, when I take selfies with my bros, I wait for them to come fully on camera, then we wait for the camera to recognize our faces, you know when you see the bold rectangle appearing? When I see that rectangle, I know I can take the picture because faces are in focus.... I posted this selfie because we all looked good, and we were also dressed elegantly in shirts. While this zoom photo was not decent at all. I had just finished a full day of remote work, I was exhausted. As you can see, I'm in my hoodie. But I didn't care, I needed to be with other people and have fun, so I took it and posted it anyway”.*

Carefree conviviality in zoomies is also intensified by a representation of the place that is familiar and welcoming. Unlike travel selfies which more typically represent outdoor places (Gretzel, 2017; Christou et al., 2020), place in zoomies most often portrays familiar and intimate indoor spaces, such as living rooms and kitchens. Familiarity is visually conveyed through the representation of the same kind of private spaces that end up looking all similar to one another and whose juxtaposition in the Zoom thumbnails creates the perception in users to be together in the same place: an extended, inclusive virtual place where people meet, bond and experience each other. This visual similarity

creates a sense of connection and ‘contextual fellowship’ (Kozinets, 2015) that transcends physical boundaries. As Kelly confessed, seeing all Zoom participants connected from similar indoor house spaces creates a sense of closeness among them: *“Seeing all the others seated in their living room, I felt like we were together in the same big house”.*



Figure 7. Technological inferences blurring participants' appearance during a Paris virtual tour

4.3. Teleportation

Zoomies portray individuals who craft their self-appearance to disconnect from reality and live a moment of full evasion from everyday life that projects them symbolically into another place.

Symbols, costumes, and AR filters are used to suggest that zoom users are teleported somewhere else to a third destination that is neither their house nor the platform. In Figures 8 and 9, zoom users are taking a virtual tour of Paris and they are wearing the traditional French beret, in physical or AR form. Lisa says: *“I took these photos to capture a moment when I was escaping from reality and I felt like I was traveling and immersing myself in a new place. By posting these photos, I hoped to inspire my friends to have the same experience”.* This suggests that zoomies are conceived as repositories through which participants save meaningful memories of their interaction with fellow Zoom users, share highlights of their virtual experience, and communicate with and inspire other peers with whom they are connected via the platform.

While in travel selfies, tourists wear costumes to embody the culture of the place being experienced and promote the exotic nature of a place to friends and

families (Suhud, Allan, & Rahayu, 2022); in zoomies costumes are worn to intensify the sense of being transported somewhere else without actually moving.



Figure 8. Zoom users physically wearing a French beret



Figure 9. Zoom users wearing an AR filter reproducing a French beret

To enhance the perception of teleportation, Zoom users use AR to customize backgrounds that reproduce landmarks and contextual cues of a desired location or destination. In Figure 9 backdrops offer different representative views of Paris (i.e. the Louvre, Eiffel Tower, and outdoor cafes), in different seasonal and day-to-night views. It is typical of zoomies to exaggerate backdrops' resolution, exposure, and color saturation compared to realistic framing. Although being portrayed as a distant background, resembling the standard of the selfie-attraction shading effect (Christou et al., 2020) in which the landmark mostly disappears in favor of the selfie-taker, the intensification of color and resolution helps landmarks to stand out in the zoomie as their visual prominence contributes to the feeling of teleportation. Virtual backgrounds offer a 360-degree look at the city. They suggest a new way of gazing at a cultural tourism destination that leverages the zoom users' use of their body appearance, technology, and Zoom affordances to vicariously experience the places and traditions of a culture without any physical displacement. Teleportation is also emotionally felt as

a result of an intense sense of connection created during a Zoom experience that symbolically casts them in the same physical and emotional space. This is evident, for instance, in the following comment posted by Alex on Airbnb along with a zoomie snapshot of a Moroccan family's cooking class experience: *"It's incredible how a family halfway across the world could make us feel like we were sitting in their kitchen, enjoying a meal together. What a wonderful experience for my fiancé and I. An absolute treat"*.

5. Discussion

This study has shed light on zoomie technoculture and its new aesthetic. Zoomie technoculture has brought in a new unpolished aesthetic that reveals stylistic standards such as comfy outfits, natural looks, carefree gestures that are caught in action, cheerful facial expressions, familiar representations of places, casual use of filters and customized backgrounds. All of these represent markers of a simpler and more authentic modality of self-presentation compared to the selfie one.

Self-presentation captured in a zoomie reveals a shift from the beautifying and curated culture of selfie to the unkempt and comfy culture of zoomie. While selfies 'publicize the private gaze', carefully embellishing the self and the places with contrived authenticity and commoditizing them as objects of consumer desire; zoomies, in contrast, 'privatize the public gaze'. In zoomies, people openly invite others into the intimate spaces of their lives and make them part of a flow of experience where the self and the places are always crafted in connection with other people. This also highlights that zoomies serve as a form of collective memory (Benjamin, 1936), capturing temporary moments of consociality (Kozinets, 2015) where the serenity of just being there in the moment with fellow peers is materialized and perpetuated in a zoomie snapshot and in its sharing on social media.

The result is a new form of tourist gaze lived through and with Zoom as a shared moment of lighthearted togetherness where Zoom users are intensely hustled in their doings and may feel projected to a vicarious place of escape or united in the cozy space of an imaginary big collective home. This new form of tourist gaze is supported by Zoom affordances that allow individuals to adopt self-presentation practices that are more authentic, casual, and genuinely social rather than self-contained, polished, and beautifying as in travel selfies (Gretzel, 2017). As individuals become more comfortable using novel technological opportunities to represent themselves, they overcome the tension between their physical and cyber selves, as recently claimed by Siegel and colleagues (2022) in travel selfies.

6. Methodological reflections

Online platforms have become predominant and preferred sites of connection, commerce, consumption, and creativity that contain rich and continuous streams of conversation and the exchange of cultural meanings (Kozinets, forthcoming, p. 1). Netnography enables researchers to understand broad multi-platform behaviors, topics, and trends, as well as focused, platform-specific, emergent cultural phenomena, such as zoomie. In this latter case, netnography allows to dive deep into, compare, and contrast phenomena across platforms and technological devices, like for instance selfies and zoomies.

In our study, the great value of netnography is that it allowed us capturing the zoomie as a technocultural object that combines visual and discursive elements. An object that brings in a novel aesthetic while also playing out as a repository of narratives, meanings, memories, values, emotions and social bonds.

First, netnography helped us depict the specific stylistic standards that constitute the new zoomie aesthetic. During capturing, scraping, collating, and saving our zoomie snapshot dataset, the different visual characteristics of the zoomie were identified and analyzed (e.g., facial expressions, outfits, postures, gestures, backdrop elements, filters, and affordances). Then, during the interactive and immersive research operations, we curated, refined, and enriched the zoomies, crafting their multifarious embodiments by combining their visual characteristics with relevant discursive elements referred to the zoomies (e.g., comments, emotions, memories, confessions, and stories), which we retrieved from online conversations and interviews. In fact, netnography enabled us to achieve a broader conception of the zoomie that transcends its visual format to incorporate the narratives and the meanings that are attached to it by individuals while interacting on social media platforms and in interviews.

Zoomie-relevant data gathered on the different social media platforms also helped us craft and orient our interview guide and purposively select our interviewees for additional data collection. This triangulation allowed us to explore more in-depth the zoomie not just as a static Zoom snapshot shared on social media platforms, but also as a lived experience to which Zoom users attach meanings, and through which they express emotions and live temporary life moments in communion with others. This lived experience was corroborated and nuanced while participating in Zoom cooking classes, where we interacted with hosts and participants and elicited further visual and discursive

data to enrich our understanding of the zoomie standards.

Zoomie snapshot visualizations and relevant discourses populated the pages of our immersion journals. Through immersive journaling, we integrated our reflective notes and hermeneutic interpretation to combine the visual and discursive elements that craft the zoomie as a technocultural object. We then identified through a process of abstraction the types of tourist gaze incorporating specific self- and place-presentation stylistic standards that emerged as typical of the zoomie. In doing so, our immersion phase also incorporated a dynamic comparison between selfie literature and our zoomie dataset to spotlight the differences between selfie and zoomie as distinct technocultural objects in the cultural tourism context.

7. Limitations and future directions

In this paper, we collected data from Zoom users who are engaged in leisure activities. In the next steps, we are planning to expand our research context to include different kinds of events to explore the standards of zoomies taken and circulated during more formal meetings (i.e., Zoom weddings and funerals). Expanding our research context will also allow us to investigate the dark sides of zoomies, which are more likely to emerge during business or professional gatherings rather than during leisure activities.

Finally, our findings are specifically grounded in the travel selfie literature. To refine our zoomie standards, in the next steps of our research, we will incorporate the more general selfie literature as well as include relevant themes from travel photography literature.

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