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SEE ME PLAY!
SELF-PORTRAITURE IN PSEUDO-
MUSEUMS AS IMMERSIVE
PLAYSCAPES FOR ADULTS

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Abstract

This article analyzes and deconstructs interactive and immersive 'pseudo-museum' environments, which seem to be all about making the self-documenting player the main exhibit, or spectacle. The research material collected through a visual autoethnographic approach consists of photoplays and videos evidencing the author's visits and adult play in four museums dedicated to selfies during pre-pandemic times (2019-2020), namely the *Museum of Ice Cream* in San Francisco and New York, *Happy Place* and *The Selfie Museum* in Las Vegas. Findings of the autoethnography demonstrate that the play experience based on selfie-taking is both a solitary and social form of play, and to some degree dictated and directed by the exteriors, interiors, rules of engagement and the hosts assisting. Finally, it is argued that self-portraiture in the 'pseudo-museum' context is about the creation of 'playfies', and making a toy out of oneself.

Keywords: *adult play, autoethnographic research, immersive spaces, photoplay, selfie culture*



Figure 1. The author's assisted selfie in the Rainbow Room at MOIC SF.

Introduction

One key aspect of contemporary play is its oculo-centric, or vision-based quality; the documentation and social sharing of one's own play experiences—photographed and video-recorded autoplay. Another one is performative participation,

or "to be part of the art" by selfie-taking, invited and encouraged by many cultural institutions and entertainment spaces, such as museums. Selfies distributed on social media depict the adult player in action, placing the act of adult play in a

public context, making play a political act (de Koven, 2015) and showing, how play belongs to all age groups, and how “play has also an impact beyond play” (Niemelä-Nyrhinen & Seppänen, 2021).

While the playing of games has become a legitimate pastime of adults, other forms of adult play have received less public recognition and academic attention. To exemplify, photography as play represents a form of adult play different from the playing of games, more akin to identity play set in physical space. This article focuses on self-portraiture as a prominent play pattern of adults engaging with immersive experiences offered by entertainment spaces dedicated to the making and taking of selfies. The research explores the social impact of shared self-portraiture in making the adult player a more visible figure in contemporary society and the ludic era (Sutton-Smith, 1997). By doing so, the study presented offers a playful and productive reading of the selfie as a tool for adults to represent their freedom to play in public space as part of IRL experiences.

In an era where technology has disrupted the physical landscape, whether it be retail, hospitality, culture, or entertainment, one thing is clear: at the core, humans are looking for connection amid a world of distractions. Retailers are constantly looking for ways to re-imagine the IRL visitor experience, while battling the disappearance of the “third place”—the place where people spend time between home and work, such as the mall or a local café or bar—which is critical to relationship building. (Eldor, 2019b)

Experiential play spaces seek to fulfil the quest for ‘In Real Life’ experiences in socially shared contexts. While visiting San Francisco in April 2018 for a play conference organized by the U.S. based toy trade association, I was first introduced to the Museum of Ice Cream, a phenomenon of its time recommended by the conferences ‘trend hunter’ team. The curious attraction proved to be extremely popular at the time, with long lines forming outside of its location at 1 Grant Avenue. When passing by I observed the museum visitors for a while. What I saw was a colorful character jumping and twirling around the families with young children. He turned out to be a host leading the crowd into the space. There was no possibility to enter with tickets sold out entirely for most of spring 2018. Although not familiar with the museums concept at all, these observations sealed the thought of returning to visit MOIC during my next trip to SFO.

In this article I will describe a visual autoethnographic study on adult play by drawing from my own experiences related to visits and play at four different selfie-museums also conceptualized as ‘pseudo-museums’, including the aforementioned Museum of Ice Cream.

Global experts operating in the play industry claim that the Millennial generation of parents prefers experience over product (Global Toy News, 2020). Indeed, the number of experiential services, like ‘pseudo-museums’, is growing: For example, in the U.S. in 2020 there were between 250 and 300 experience-based businesses nationwide compared with 130 in 2019 (King, Wall Street Journal, c.f. in Global Toy News, 2020).

Contrary to zoos, natural history museums or living history museums in which naturalism, realism and authenticity are considered important (Bitgood et al., 1990), museums dedicated to experiences like taking selfies offer possibilities to escape the everyday, while they aim to represent the fantastic and unreal in terms of their aesthetics and use of space. Despite grounded in 'IRL', these museums render 'pseudo' experiences challenging realism and embrace the extraordinary. Immersive playscapes of the present aim to function as backdrops for selfie-taking in situations 'out of this world'—like being inside of a box of toys, a movie scene, or inside a digital game. In this way, they provide physical pathways to alternate worlds.

Historically, experiential museums are not a new phenomenon: In writing about exhibitions as media space, Anders Ekström (2019) notes, how international exhibitions, as they developed in Europe and North America from the mid-19th century onwards, allowed visitors to walk into the medium of exhibition itself and became part of its performance. The immersive and participatory nature of the medium of the exhibition itself became the main attraction (Ekström, 2019, p. 27).

Renown scholar of play, Brian Sutton-Smith has famously stated that the 21st century will be the century of play. Play is defined as an activity that is (1) self-chosen and self-directed, (2) intrinsically motivated; (3) guided by rules; (4) imaginative; and conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind (Gray, 2015, p. 125). Any form of play may be investigated through its ludic (goal-driven, even competitive) or paidic (open-ended, unstructured) qualities (Caillois, 1961).

What differentiates play as an activity from playfulness as an attitude and mental predisposition towards various phenomena is that play is behavior (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015)—it is a voluntary, pleasure-driven, and creative interaction with different instruments, people, spaces, and environments—either interactive with others or interactive in terms of the activity itself. Indeed, play is seen as part of everyday life (De Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2008), in adult life, and playful physical space (e.g., Heljakka, 2013; Stenros, 2015; Saker & Evans, 2016). While playfulness in adults' points to mental capacity, play entails action for humans of all ages. Notably, current times have witnessed the rise of *kidults*, playful and playing adults for whom products and services are targeted (Heljakka 2021).

Play is increasingly part of how people engage with digital technologies (Pink et al., 2018, p. 27). Mobile devices have given people increased choice over when and where they access and consume information and media (Anderson, 2019). For example, mobile phones are seen as both a concrete medium and an exemplary technology that is emblematic of a mediatized environment (Hjvard, 2008, cf. in Haller Baggesen, 2019, p. 116). Contemporary third spaces like the 'experiums' or 'pseudo-museums' introduced in this article, blur the boundaries between physical and digital play, and the playfulness of adults, teenagers and children.

This article argues for how mobile technologies invite and persuade adults to partake in play contextualized in the 'pseudo-museum' environment.

In the 21st century mature play often seems to manifest through digital play activities mediated through screens in

forms of photography and videography. Play—both the playing of games and the playing with toys has become more performative thanks to connected devices and developments of social media platforms and services. At the same time, play is often recorded and then shared with smartphones including cameras and with the help of apps. This means that playing involves camera technologies, mobile devices, and social media sharing, and consequently, depends on vision and visual documentation as much as aesthetics of playthings and play environments. Play practices are increasingly affecting our understanding of the camera and mobile devices with camera functions as “toys”, and online photo management services such as Flickr and Instagram as “playgrounds” (Heljakka, 2018, p. 473).

“It appears that prevalent mobile phone technologies and contemporary photo-sharing applications are enabling digital ‘photoplays’ to flourish” (Niemelä-Nyrhinen & Seppänen, 2021, p. 2). Indeed, *photoplay*, or photographic play as a playful practice has been highlighted in earlier research focusing on adult play (Heljakka, 2012; 2013).

Contemporary play may take many forms: it can be solitary or social, embedded in the physical, digital or imaginative, and engaged in by players of different ages, even between individuals of different generations. Furthermore, playing in selfie museums is about self-expression and identity work:

Documenting experiences on social media and posting for museum selfies has thus become part of the museum visit, at least for a significant section of museum audiences; a practice which may be viewed as

both communicative engagement (Budge & Burness, 2018) and as a form of identity work (Kozinets, Gretzel, & Dinhopl, 2017, c.f. in Haller Baggesen, 2019, p. 119).

This article focuses on self-portraiture as a play pattern of adults engaging first, with immersive experiences offered by entertainment spaces dedicated to the making and taking of selfies, and second, with the social platforms for photosharing such as Instagram, where the self-portraits produced are shared with hashtags after curation—selecting, modifying, and editing, or digitally manipulating them.

By discussing the concept of oculo-centricity of contemporary play, arguing for the ‘instagrammability’ of play experiences in the context of documenting play, the performative participation through self-portraiture, and finally, illustrating the process of immersion within physical space, the author conducts a visual autoethnography on self-portraiture in the art-infused, participatory playscapes understood here as ‘pseudo-museums’.

So far, research attempts to position the adult visitor in the aforementioned entertainment spaces as a player seems nonexistent, at least when considering adult play as a form of participatory and hybrid interaction. To bridge this gap, the study at hand takes an interest in analyzing and deconstructing the concept of the interactive and immersive environments of ‘pseudo-museums’, which seem to be all about making the self-documenting player the main exhibit, or spectacle.

The article has a two-way agenda: On the one hand, to contextualize the phenomenon of emerging immersive spaces as

a branch of development of contemporary play interested in spatial engagement and participation through self-portraiture. On the other hand, the goal is to approach this phenomenon through a cultural analysis based on media coverage including news articles, documentaries, and Instagram content and from the perspective of an autoethnographic and empirical account based on adult immersion within four specific playscapes of the present.

The article is structured as follows: In the following section, the history of experiential physical spaces is introduced, followed by an introduction of immersive museums as hybrid playgrounds and a discussion of selfies as a form of 21st Century play. Next, the author presents the method, playscapes and research materials of the study. In the Analysis section, the categories of perspectives are discussed. The author then moves on to elaborate on the findings of the study, and ends with the conclusions, including observations and predictions made about the future of 'pseudo-museums' as immersive adult playscapes.

Background: Experiums (for) staging play

Theatre is sometimes associated with the idea of adult play. Indeed, role-playing and spectacle are largely what many play experiences of the present are about. It is then no surprise that attempts to bridge theatrical performances with participant immersion as a goal, have been made (and proved) successful by, for example, the *Sleep No More* (2011), a site-specific work of theatre and "blood-and-sex filled adaptation of *Macbeth*" (Jamieson, 2018), created by British theatre company Punchdrunk. The presentational

form of this profoundly adult-directed experience (featuring full nudity, bright lights, lasers, fog, and haze) is first described by *promenade theatre* (meaning that the audience walks at their own pace through a variety of theatrically designed rooms, or second, by *environmental theatre* (in which the physical location, rather than being inside a traditional theatre space, is an imitation of an actual setting). Third, *Sleep No More* has also been described as *immersive theatre* (as opposed to interactive theatre) as the interference of the audience, in general, has no bearing on the story or the performers, even though the participants may move through the settings, interact with the props, or observe the actors at their own pace. What is similar between *Sleep No More*, and the immersive, experiential spaces of interest for this study (recently coined as *experiums* by MOIC co-founder Maryellis Bunn), are their spatial constructs: A newsfeed article (Jamieson, 2018) describes the rooms in which theatrical performance takes place in as "elaborately decorated" and as a "fantasy setting": "Each room is a different world—a forest maze, a funeral parlor complete with a coffin, a hospital ward of empty beds, a giant ballroom."

Immersive theatre calls to mind iconic amusement park attractions, especially in the sense of attractions made known by parks such as Disneyland and Walt Disney World, such as the *Haunted House*. Whereas visitors are usually asked to store their accessories elsewhere while enjoying the attraction—and using your camera or mobile phone at for example *Sleep No More* is strictly forbidden—new experiential, immersive spaces, on the contrary, encourage participants to use their mobile device, in order to capture their experiences of engaging with the space of these 'experiums' on camera.

Quintessentially, this means experimental self-portraiture within the space in question.

Over the past years, the concept of selfie-taking has spread to quotidian contexts. Static immersive elements are embedded in real life settings and “brands are hustling to produce the ultimate social media opportunity” (Eldor, 2019a). Photo walls have made their way from business-to-business marketing and exhibition event spaces to hotels, malls, even singular retail spaces, where the often colorful and texturally interesting, material backdrops offer interest to selfie-taking opportunities. They are, besides backdrops for *photoplay* (e.g., Heljakka, 2012; 2013) in essence, marketing tools and as such, represent the commercialization of the visual and socially shared play experience with accompanying invitations to use certain tags and hashtags, such as the invitation of The Museum of Selfies “tag us @Selfie Vegas”. Key to the ‘pseudo-museums’ installments presented in this article, is besides their ‘instagrammability’, also their ephemerality. (Commercial) Immersive playscapes are often set up as ‘pop ups’—their reason for being is embedded in the idea of temporality and thus, their ‘not to be missed’ nature.

Immersive playscapes of the present aim to amplify what the photo walls offer, by providing possibilities for escapades from reality, and to function as infinite 3D-backdrops for self-taking in surreal situations or curious, fantastic landscapes representing their own ‘pseudo’ reality. Moreover, there is a preconception that the immersion experienced in these playfully engaging spaces will result in socially shared self-portraiture evidencing the intensity with which the player submits herself to the possibilities to interact with the elements

afforded by the play space and the degree of commitment s/he expresses in subsuming to the invitation to interaction through play provided by those elements.

Immersive museums as hybrid playgrounds

...where does one play? On a playground. In its customary sense, *playground* refers to a recreational area, usually outdoors, expressly defined for children’s play. But in a metaphorical sense, *playground* describes the place where play takes place, no matter the type of play. (Bogost, 2016, p. 20).

When considering the affordances of both playthings and playful environments, it is possible to see the player as an observer constantly monitoring and evaluating potential objects, sites and situations for play. This article takes an interest in novel playgrounds—immersive playscapes of the present. One remarkable trend of past years has been the emergence and development of both temporal indoor and outdoor entertainment spaces that label themselves as museums or experiences, and which enable possibilities for location-based, *spatial* play. One example of this development is LuminoCity, a seasonal pop-up show in New York created by 40 artists and inspired by Chinese lantern festivals, which “transforms captivating stories into multidimensional experiences” with an interest to provide audiences of all ages with “spectacular light art displays, live performances, and a celebration of cultures”. Spatial art works known as installations have a longer history than pop ups of this kind: One example is Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrored Room* (2013). Based on the human desire of becoming ‘wowed’ by novel and unexpected (play)

experiences, some playscapes represent more permanent environments with changing exhibits, such as The Museum of 3D Illusions in San Francisco, Candytopia in Philadelphia, Houston and Atlanta, and the Makeup Museum (Bloch, 2019).

Interactivity and participation are considered add-ons that can attract more individuals to museums (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Runnel 2019, p. 145). Both can be considered from the perspective of physical space: Immersive techniques built on spectacular elements and visitor movement in the exhibition space proliferated at late 19th and early 20th century world's fairs and international exhibitions. One example is a funhouse, with a fully furnished room turned upside down and a mirror-hall (Ekström, 2019, pp. 22; 25).

Museums are themselves mediatized spaces and 'pseudo-museums' are no different. According to Drotner et al. (2019) "they present a uniquely media-centered environment, in which communicative media is a constitutive property of their organisation and of the visitor experience". This article demonstrates, how immersive 'pseudo-museums' offer themselves as indoor playgrounds, contemporary funhouses, and spectacular hybrid spaces, in which the visitor through her playful engagement with digital technology and social sharing, becomes the main exhibit, and who through photographs and videos performs play "in action" by mobilizing her body in a static and staged, physical environment.

Selfies as 21st Century documented play

"Contemporary society is enamored with the visual" (Walsh & Baker 2016, p. 3) and human perception is shaped by media

technologies (Drotner et al., 2019a). A key aspect of contemporary play in the playgrounds of the present is its oculocentric, or *vision-based* quality: These designed experiences cater for plenty of possibilities to photographic play (or *photoplay* featuring either the player or playthings, Heljakka 2012; 2013). For example, an article about the LuminoCity experience describes, how "you'll want to have your camera ready for things like a giant glowing donut tunnel" for a "dreamy Instagram shot" (Sutter, 2019).

As Murray notes, "self-imagining is rendering a new consumer-based language in the visual realm" (Murray, 2015, p. 491). Hence, the first major argument presented here is that *homo ludens* of current times with an interest for immersive, spatial experiences, seems to play "doing it for the 'gram". This type of play is popular across generations, inviting players of many ages in self-documentation and social sharing of acts of personal play, authentic or 'staged'. What seems to interest players and what is enabled by the capacities of current mobile technology is the documentation and social sharing of one's own (playfulness and) play experiences—one form of photographed and video-recorded *autoplay* (Heljakka, 2013), often including taking of selfies. As the (playful) quote from the Museum of Selfies (Las Vegas) illustrates, the history of selfies extends beyond the evolution of digital technology:

"Why do people take selfies? The answer to this simple question is surprisingly complex and will take you on a journey through time and across the globe, from the earliest days of human civilization all the way to the most cutting-edge advances in science and

technology." (#Statement, text on wall display, The Museum of Selfies, Las Vegas)

A text on a wall exhibit at The Museum of Selfies speculates, whether painter Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man* (1433) displayed at the National Gallery in London is a 'first panel self-portrait', and whether the first selfie (photograph) is by Robert Cornelius captured in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1839, head-and-shoulders [self-]portrait, facing front, with arms crossed).

Photographic self-portraits have existed since the mid-19th century (Holiday et al., 2016). The first documented self-photograph was taken in October 1839 by photographer Robert Cornelius (Grenoble, 2013, c.f. in Holiday et al., 2016). The origins of the term 'selfie' is of more recent origin: "Selfie" was the Word of the Year in 2013 (Oxford Dictionaries). The term is believed to have originated on an Australian online forum in 2002. (Murray, 2015).

Photographs in digital form have changed the way pictures are produced and disseminated. They are instantaneous and easily shared through other digital mediums, particularly photo-based sharing networks such as Instagram, Flickr, and Snapchat (Rettberg, 2014). "The selfie has become a powerful means for self-expression, encouraging its makers to share the most intimate and private moments of their lives—as well as engage in a form of creative self-fashioning" (Murray, 2015, p. 490).

Selfies "show a self, enacting itself" (Frosh, 2015, p. 1621). "The selfie does not simply comment upon a narcissistic need to see oneself in and idealized state, rather it makes

one aware of the predatory nature of looking: the voyeurism in gazing at others and the implied pleasure in knowing that one is being gazed upon." (Murray, 2015, p. 512). To continue, selfies can be quick snapshots to commemorate places or specific occasions, or they can be carefully considered portraiture with a relation to self-branding as a form of identity construction. Selfies, essentially, represent digital and serial photography. "Digital self-presentation and self-reflection is cumulative rather than presented as a definitive whole" (Rettberg, 2014, p. 5).

The effortlessness of photography conducted with mobile devices has increasingly developed this activity towards play—a voluntary, creative, and nowadays an even more productive and socially shared endeavor of those who have access to technology, media, and the resources of time and space (and monetary means) needed for the activity.

As demonstrated in earlier research, 'assisted' selfies share common ground with the proliferation of playful technology that enable self-portraiture. Rettberg (2014, p. 40) notes: "One of the first things you are asked to do when you create a social media account is to upload a profile photo." In this way, selfies have come to serve a strong communication purpose in modern society (Holiday et al., 2016). However, the history of photography as a form of adult play extends to the emergence of photo-booths in entertaining spaces far into the 19th Century:

Although forerunners to the fully automatic photo booths were seen as early as the 1890s (Pellicer, 2010, p. 16), the photobooth was patented in 1925 by Anatol Josepho, and rapidly became a popular

attraction in fairs, amusement parks and department stores. As Raynal Pellicer writes in his well-illustrated history of photoboosts, fun as emphasised in the advertising of this new technology: having your picture taken was 'no longer a chore—now it's a game', the ads proclaimed. Rettberg (2014, p. 42).

As Rettberg's research on the early history of photoboosts illustrates, the open-ended play pattern of having your picture taken was no longer confined to artists' studios but became liberated as a paidic (Caillois, 1961)—creative and increasingly casual form of play. The surrealists saw the photobooth as a tool for self-exploration (Rettberg, 2014), "a game" much like the 'pseudo-museums' of current times, which promote the possibility of experimental (photo)play.

As a locative media—selfies "are about the placement of one's self in a place at a time" (Hess, 2015). The selfie-taker claims a specific point in space for themselves and their digital audience (Koliska & Roberts, 2021) creating a specific realm of action, denoting "Here I am playing" "See me (picturing myself) play!"

Based on these ideas, selfie museums may be conceptualized as today's photo-boosts. But they allow more time, more playful props, and by far, more exciting interiors to involve in the production of selfies, and they provide assistance in taking an unlimited number of selfies, which differentiate them from the photo-booth, more restrained in terms of spatial and narrative photoplay and therefore, play value.

Sutton-Smith (1997, p. 4) has used photography as an example of *solitary play*, but current times have accentuated the

sociality of photoplaying—playing with cameras in groups or player-pairs. In the 'pseudo-museum context', the pleasure of being pictured also stems from the indulgence of having someone else taking time to portrait you, about being in the flow, the immersion and gratification of having your potentially 'Instagrammable' picture taken.

In his account on young women's selfies, Murray writes: "Taken *en masse*, it feels like a revolutionary political movement" (Murray, 2015, p. 490). A deeper reflection on self-photography as play entails ideas concerning current Western societies: the social impact of adult play—about becoming seen as an active agent, breaking taboos of adult play, and making the activity of adult play more visible (and normalized?) in due course.

Interactions within selfies also create places. In this way, selfies also contribute to the public discourse about places. (Koliska & Roberts, 2021, p. 8):

Selfies as representations of social places combine the dimensions of physical (objective), conceived (subjective/mental), and lived (social) space, potentially creating hybrid places of meaning that oscillate between the real, the imagined, and the communicated/represented (Bhabha, 1990, c.f. in Koliska & Roberts, 2021, p. 3).

In this way, selfie museums create huizingian magic circles, safe spaces for playful experimentation, which products are shared voluntarily, yet sometimes after consideration. One further aspect of playing is *performative participation*, or "to



Figures 2–5 The exteriors of MOIC NYC, MOIC SF, The Museum of Selfies and HAPPYPLACE in Las Vegas. Photographs by the author.

be part of the art” by selfie-taking, invited and encouraged by many providers of both cultural institutions and entertaining experiences, such as ‘pseudo-museums’. Their marketing messages send out lucrative invitations to adult players interested in showing their playful side and sharing documentations thereof in the public realms of social media. “The experience is as startling as it is enthralling, and right at the center stage of this glorious artwork is you.” (The Museum of 3D Illusions website)

Another concept of interest for this article is *immersion*. Adjacent to understandings of what it means to be immersed in reference to (digital) games—the player immersion describes a state of the player’s experience related to “being in the game” (Cairns et al., 2013)—being immersed within physical space is to step into an interactive, visually, and materially narrated ‘scene’, in which the player takes part as a creative agent. Following this thought, immersive entertainment spaces of the physical kind function as dynamic sites for storytelling, where space dominates as the main protagonist, but the player defines the level of engagement in terms of interaction and telling stories of his or her own.

The study reported in this article is guided by the following research questions: RQ1: Which elements of design and strategies of playful persuasion are commonly used in the immersive playscapes dedicated to self-portraiture, and RQ2: How does solitary vs. social play emerge through adult interaction within these designed spaces conceptualized as ‘pseudo-museums’? Furthermore, the research extends to exploring possible rules and regulations challenging or constraining the immersive engagement.

Method

Next, the methods used for this study are elaborated in more detail. This study employs a visual autoethnographic approach meaning that the author as a researcher reflects, interprets and critically evaluates her own experiences related to the phenomenon under inspection. Autoethnographies shed light on their total interaction with a setting by making their actions visible to the reader. In this way, the author as a researcher of the phenomenon, functions as an object of study, as well as a producer of knowledge. Autoethnography can be an “autobiographical genre of writing and research” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000,

Playscape ('Pseudo-museum')	Photographs Assisted selfies/selfies	Other photographs	Videos Player-produced/ play space generated	Artefacts	Number of items collected	Time of day when visited	Duration of visit	Cost of visit (Ticket price)
MOIC SF	34 (23/11)	24	1 (--/1)	1	60	Evening	45 min	Advance \$44,50
MOIC NY	16 (4/12)	62	9 (8/1)	2	89	Late evening	75 min	Advance \$47,50
HAPPY PLACE LV	227 (221/6)	38	4 (4/--)	1	270	Morning	60 min	At site \$35,00
MUSEUM OF SELFIES LV	74 (56/18)	39	2(2/--)	1	116	Midday	30 min	At site \$35,00

Table 1. Research materials.

p. 739). Visual ethnographies utilize photographs and other visual content as central data, which are typically generated by the researcher (Banks, 2007; Pink, 2007).

The autoethnography reported in the study employs visual data collected through *autoexperiential play* in four immersive playscapes based in three cities in the U.S. The research material collected consists of photographs and videos evidencing the author's visits and personal experiences of adult play captured in self-portraiture in four 'pseudo-museums' dedicated to selfies, namely the *Museum of Ice Cream* in San Francisco and New York, and *Happy Place* and *The Selfie Museum* in Las Vegas (see figures 2–5). Despite the personal account and reflexive nature of the research, the study aimed to produce generalizable knowledge about adult interaction with the playscapes.

The empirical materials were collected during 2019–2020. The author conducted the autoethnography by documentation of the play spaces (as perceived physical spaces) and selfie-taking (as part of play), which were later used to analyze the experiences. The duration of one visit (measured from the first photograph taken to the last one) ranged between 30 minutes to 75 minutes. Besides photographs (selfies/assisted selfies), videos and a few artefacts collected at the immersive playscapes under scrutiny (see Table 1.), other research material encompasses online newspaper articles, website descriptions, field notes, etc., which were used to support the thematic analysis of the visual data.

Playscapes of study MOIC SF & MOIC NYC

The first Museum of Ice Cream (not a museum in the traditional, historical sense) opened in New York's Meatpacking

District in 2016. The tickets sold out before the entertainment space was built, with some 200,000 people on the waitlist (Eldor, 2019b). The Museum of Ice Cream (known by its acronym MOIC)—“a sprawling warren of interactive, vaguely hallucinatory confection-themed exhibits” (New York Magazine, October 2, 2017) is currently based in two cities with flagship locations, San Francisco, and New York (Ifeanyi, 2019).

The aim of MOIC is according to its co-founder Bunn, “to build environments that encourage social interaction between strangers” (New York Magazine). The co-founder states: “Our ambition has always been to create experiences that can connect humans to humans and humans to architecture” (Ifeanyi, 2019).

“MOIC is designed to be a culturally inclusive environment and community, inspiring human connection and through the universal power of ice cream. [...] We believe in creating beautiful and shareable environments that foster IRL interaction and URL connections, providing fun, multi-sensorial expressions of ice cream that cater to the appetites of our generation.” (MOIC website)

MOIC San Francisco features 10 exhibition spaces including “imaginative, multi-sensory installations that bring to life your most delightful dreams: Taste exclusive scoops at our new Perfectly Pink Ice Cream Parlor, play dress-up in fashionista Diva-Nilla’s closet, reflect in the Infinity Mirror Room, and of course, make a splash in our iconic Sprinkle Pool. Let your imagination run free in a world where anything is possible.” (MOIC website). Despite this world of possibilities relies on

imaginative stories and scenarios, some exhibits link the experience with physical locality: One installation that connects MOIC SF with the city of San Francisco, is according to the website the “Rainbow Room”, a tribute to the city’s history of gay pride (for reference, see Figure 1.).

HAPPY PLACE Las Vegas

HAPPY PLACE, an interactive, immersive pop-up exhibit with larger-than-life installations and multi-sensory themed rooms, has turned Sin City into “Grin City” with their newest location at Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas. On a mission to spread happiness across the world, “the most Instagrammable pop-up in America” has helped more than half a million people “find their happy” while exploring 12 vibrant rooms. (HAPPY PLACE website). HAPPY PLACE ‘highly encourages’ the visitor to “Capture Your Happy” by “a whole lot of selfie moments” in its “fantasy rooms”, such as The World’s Largest Indoor Confetti Dome, a Giant Rainbow complete with a Pot of Happiness into which guests can jump, and the signature Rubber Ducky Bath Tub of fun. (Ibid.)

Museum of Selfies Las Vegas

The Museum of Selfies, inaugurated in 2018, displays some ‘facts’ about selfies in a similar manner in which the Museum of Ice Cream informs visitors about select data on ice cream eating habits in the world. The traditional exhibition space in front of the immersive environments also features “First selfie stick 1980”, a family vacation photo taken with “extender stick” by inventor Hiroshi Ueda and the first camera phone from 2000—a Sharp J-SH04 J Phone model, “one of the first

<i>Play space (documented elements) in alphabetical order</i>	MOIC SF	MOIC NYC	HAPPY PLACE LV	MUSEUM OF SELFIES LV
Exterior	✓	✓	✓	✓
Throne				✓
Interior	✓	✓	✓	✓
Backdrop/room for photoplay	✓	✓	✓ (e.g., Flowers, bananas, wings)	✓
Ball pit bath tub			✓	
Bathroom selfie spot				✓
Bouncing 'castle'		✓		
Coin bath				✓
Confetti dome				✓
Facts display		✓		✓
Furniture (identifiable)	✓ (Bench)	✓ (Dinner table, chairs)	✓ (e.g., Cookie table, Lips' shaped sofa)	
Giant ball pit				✓
Giant 'broccoli'			✓	✓
Giant 'cookie'				✓
Giant 'hamburger'				✓
Giant 'sushi'			✓	
Giant 'XD' letters			✓	
Gift shop/items	✓	✓		
Ice cream bath	✓	✓		
Lightning/light display				
Name tag sticker		✓ ('Your ice cream name')		
Note wall		✓		
Rules for interaction	✓ (Carousel)			✓ (Ball pit/Emoji pool)
Seasonal decoration	✓ (Pumpkins)			
Slide	✓	✓	✓	
Sprinkle pool	✓	✓		
Statue holding a phone				✓
Swing	✓	✓		
Thrown				✓
Unicorn	✓		✓	
Upside down room			✓	✓
Visitor photo wall			✓	✓
<u>Photoplay (auto/portrayed interactions)</u>				
Assisted selfie	At entrance In carousel On unicorn At pool In pool	Inside light tunnel In ice cream bath In Sprinkle pool	Upside Down room Sliding Jackpot slide Jump into the ball pit Inside the Confetti dome Looking through Giant letter	Upside Down room In Giant ball pit/emoji pool In Coin bath tub On the Throne
Selfie	In swing In pool	Against pink wall Against cloud wall With hanging bananas	With unicorn Against mirrored wall	In Giant ball pit/emoji pool Against angel wings backdrop Against celebrity selfie photo In Coin bath tub In Coin bath tub (Throwing coins in the air)
Video	Sliding to the sprinkle pool	Subway, DJ deck, Slide	Jump into the ball pit	

Table 2. Documented elements and photoplay (auto/portrayed interactions) summarized.

camera phones sold". What are probably of most interest for the 'Millennial' museumgoer, is the "First Paris Hilton selfie" from 2006 and the first Instagram post from 2010, posted by Instagram co-founder Kevin Systrom from a taco stand in Todos Santos, Mexico.

The Museum of Selfies, a pop up, is now closed. At the time of visit (December 2019), the immersive space, marketed as

"Hollywood's Top Rated Interactive Museum", invited its visitors to:

"Have fun with immersive installations. See the world from our Upside Down Room. Dive into the gold bath. Relax in our emoji pool. Melt your brain in the optical illusion bathroom." (The Museum of Selfies website)



Figures 6–9. Action shots: Assisted selfies taken at the four immersive playscapes.

Analysis

To answer the two research questions, the author conducted a thematic analysis of the research materials consisting of 1) Photographs (assisted selfies/selfies), 2) Other photographs, 3) Videos (player-produced/ play space generated), and 4) Artifacts, altogether 535 research items based on 3,5 hours of (self-)documented play within the four immersive playscapes. The thematic analysis produces a description of the play spaces (documented elements) and photoplay (auto/portrayed interactions) in these spaces, summarized in Table 2.

To answer the first question, *which elements of design and strategies of playful persuasion are commonly used in the immersive playscapes dedicated to self-portraiture*, the thematic analysis of the research materials resulted in categories highlighting the following perspectives: exteriors, interaction with hosts (or guides), rules of engagement, interiors, and finally, the dimensions of the play experiences.

- Exteriors: The design of the *exteriors* of the four playscapes (see figures 2–5) vary greatly. These are entertainment

venues, for which marketing mainly takes place online on behalf of the (photo)playing customers. Word-of-mouth on social media persuades players to purchase (relatively expensive) advance tickets for all experiences online, and to familiarize themselves with the possibilities to play the immersive playscapes offer. Whereas MOIC's locations accentuate the brand before giving a glimpse of their interiors, HAPPY PLACE and the Museum of Selfies offer 'teasers' of the promise of play that the playscapes hold: At the entrance of HAPPY PLACE, one may see what is to be expected inside the playscape. Again, at the Museum of Selfies, one is allowed to try out a Throne and get into the action of selfie-taking right before, or even without a visit inside.

- Interiors: The *interiors* (either multicolor or like at MOIC, often 'pinkified'), obviously, are the main attraction at the immersive playscapes. At MOIC locations, the rooms feature interactive components that are multi-sensorial: animations, colors and light exhibits to be sensed through the sight, fruit-flavored chemicals and edible ice cream treats for olfactory sensations, and surfaces and elements to touch, such as the plastic sprinkles in the sprinkle pool

at MOIC SF). The player is encouraged to be physically active: to slide, swing, jump, bathe, dance etc. while posing for the assisted selfies, for example, by being ‘unified with unicorns’ (see Figure 1.). Movement is then captured by a smartphone for fast action shot features into series of shots or slow-motion videography depicting the player in action (see Figures 6–9 for action shots).

- Hosts: The *hosts* (the “Pink Army” at MOIC sites, “selected and trained Happy People” at HAPPY PLACE, youngsters in their regular attire at The Museum of Selfies) are all there to assist the ‘museumgoers’ with their visit as tour guides and to help with the selfies. For example, at MOIC, visitors are dispatched in small groups and the visit is designed to last for 45 minutes. At both MOIC locations visited, the presence of the Pink Army was strong in the beginning of the tour, but there were less hosts around in the rooms closer to the end of the visit. At both MOIC locations interaction with hosts focused on short instances of assisted selfie-taking, as there were other guests waiting to have their photographs taken. At HAPPY PLACE the hosts had more time to interact and suggest poses and camera-techniques to capture interesting shots. At Museum of Selfies, according to author’s field notes, one of the hosts reported not to have had any other training for this, but to be “a Millennial”.
- Rules of engagement: The most profound *rules of engagement* had to do with the one-directional movement within space rule, with no re-entry permitted to the rooms previously visited. According to author field notes from the visit to MOIC New York (MOIC NYC), the host (part of the “Pink Army”) guiding the first part of the tour said, “We only move forward here”.

Another strict rule, for example, concerned devices commonly used for taking selfies: selfie-sticks are not allowed at HAPPY PLACE, but were for rent at Museum of Selfies.

Considering the vast number of mature players visiting the immersive playscapes (“Adults only” section of the Sprinkle Pool hints at this at MOIC NYC), the dimensions of ‘adult culture’, such as alcohol consumption is (perhaps unsurprisingly) allowed at the Las Vegas-based HAPPY PLACE and was so at the now closed The Museum of Selfies. However, this is not clearly visible on the entertainment providers’ websites. According to author field notes from conversations being made with the staff these visits performed under substance influence had rarely caused bad behavior, as is the case with patrons at *Sleep No More*, who have enjoyed too many drinks before joining the experience. Other incidents, such as losing one’s personal items (keys, wallet) inside the ball pit, or ladies skirts being accidentally hitched to their ears once making a jump to the pit, had been noted at HAPPY PLACE.

Findings

This study sought to answer the questions of, on which physical and digital conceptions is the allure of the ‘pseudo-museum’ playgrounds grounded, and which possibilities for solitary and social play do they offer?

The ‘experiums’ invite adult players to participate in the experience through their exteriors, both online and offline. On the one hand, in a physical and material sense, the interiors of the spaces are built to augment and transform the imaginary into a three-dimensional and thus, sensory realm:

visuality, form, and theme are essential triggers for the players' imaginative and bodily interaction. Furthermore, MOIC has included olfactory senses in its offerings, by handing out ice-cream to visitors and the selfie-museums in Vegas allow guests to bring in food and drink for organized events. On the other hand, they allow the most curious interiors for photography, or photoplay, most notably selfie-taking, assisted by the hosts or otherwise.

Without *homo ludens*—the playing human, the spaces appear stage-like and empty. In player interaction the playscapes introduced and analyzed in the article can cater to many kinds of play styles. The author has argued elsewhere that the dimensions of the toy experience are physical, functional, fictional, and affective (Heljakka in Paavilainen & Heljakka, 2018). If the *dimensions of the play experience at the immersive playscapes* discussed in this article were to be categorized similarly, one could argue that the *physical dimension* of play at the analyzed immersive playscapes is their reason for being: Through their material aspects, the player is invited to move within space to immerse herself in different environments designed specifically for playful, multisensory roaming. Simultaneously, the physicality of the space invites certain functions to take place within that space; something that invites multisensory interaction with the installations. In addition, the 'rooms' provide opportunities for photographic play—self-portraiture in particular—and are *functional* in that sense.

Furthermore, each room in the immersive playscapes include a *narrative* (or, fictional) dimension in terms of their design and invite the player to take part in the story—to travel in the

'pinkified' subway (MOIC NYC), or join the 'pride parade' in the Rainbow Room (see Figure 1.)

According to the visual autoethnography at hand, play in immersive playscapes of the present can represent both solitary play and social play. In fact, even solo play becomes social, and multidimensional, participatory play through the technological enhancement of play—through acts of photoplay, social sharing of play, or to sum up, screen-based play (Heljakka, 2016). Furthermore, the experiences live on in the self-documentative portrayals of play and social sharing of photoplay, which may take place when "latergrammin'" as opposed to instant sharing.

Anderson (2019) maintains that the examination of, and naming of, audiences is always a political act. Indeed, by choosing to examine myself and other adults performing in selfie-museums as players, is to label and categorize the visitors as *kidults*—perhaps a too restrictive view to explain the complex phenomenon of adult play. Nevertheless, by using play as a framework for interpretation also reveals how many adults perform as *homo ludens* in encounters with immersive play-grounds of the present, through interaction with exteriors, interiors, hosts, and rules of engagement through photoplay and self-portraiture. Also, by investigating adult interaction within the 'pseudo-museums' of the present, makes a case of proving photography as a definitive play activity, highlighting the societal impact of making adult play more visible in the 21st Century than previously.

Conclusions

This article focused on immersive playscapes of present times. In her investigation of adult play in the pre-pandemic period of years 2019 and 2020 the author conducted an autoethnography including documentation and reflections of four 'pseudo museums' based in San Francisco, Las Vegas, and New York. By discussing the concept of oculo-centricity of contemporary play, arguing for the instagrammability of play experiences, the performative participation through self-portraiture, and finally, immersion within physical space, the author conducted a visual autoethnography on self-portraiture in the art-infused, immersive, and participatory playscapes.

How these entertainment spaces profile themselves as immersive is notable. One explanation for the 'popping up' of immersive spaces, or what have in this article been considered as *experiums*, following MOIC co-founder Maryellis Bunn's notion, is the shifting retail landscape. With the disappearing brick-and-mortar stores the space of retail is restructured and there is a new interest to immerse oneself in immaterial and digital experiences rather than excess materiality, which parallels thoughts about sustainable play (Heljakka, 2022). However, what must be remembered is that there rarely is a commercial experium that would not be followed by a gift store experience, as even museum stores are for some, destinations. In fact, even experiential play environments also sell physical products. 20% of their revenue comes from selling toys in their gift shop. (Global Toy News, 2020)

As shown throughout the article, sharing of self-documentative play, such as selfie-taking in an immersive space extends

the playing and makes the acts of play perceivable. According to an article on MOIC, the acronym, de facto, stands from "Movement of Imagination and Creativity" (Eldor, 2019a). The creativity of the visitor of the commercial, immersive spaces materializes in play. Taking a selfie in an immersive playscape is, when following the notion of *toyification* (Thibault & Heljakka, 2018), in essence, *making a toy out of yourself*.

Essentially, photographing oneself in experiential spaces results in *playfies*, defined here as selfies with a purpose to show the playing person "in action" experimenting with one's own identity through playful creativity. According to Saltz (2014) selfies are usually casual, improvised, and fast. In playfies the photo-production is more structured and considerate, an acknowledged gesture of making others know about the adult playing. Further, playfies are more about the players bodies than their faces. Playfies are taken "in action" mode and include some mobility frozen in the shot (see Figures 6-9), or animated in videos, and they reclaim mature players' right to play in space, marking the places as playscapes.

While the documentation of space may be replicated similarly in future studies, the selfie-taking is an individual act that will result in personal outcomes. Another limitation of the study is the ephemeral nature of the playscapes investigated—some of them are no longer in operation, and others may display different features than were offered at the time of research. Moreover, following Atkinson (1997) and Sparkes (2000), Stahlke (2016) notes how autoethnography as a method has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized. However, in the research at hand, the goal was to arrive at more generalizable findings regarding

play as interaction within the 'pseudo-museums', not the aesthetics of the selfies per se.

Whereas play can be a very individual experience, it often happens in relation to the public environment and social others—it is important to understand that solitary play often does not remain a solitary act. Some insights of the autoethnography include an understanding of the role of the hosts responsible for assisting in the 'selfie-taking'. Although a visit to these environments may be carried out alone, the playing in them is sometimes dependent on the assistance needed for (self-)portraiture. Moreover, the experience is to some degree dictated and directed by the recognition of how to pose in the best way, what makes a good picture, the role and interest of a potential spectating audience and consequently the underlying imperative of seeing one interact with the designed immersive space, in other words, the essentiality of showing oneself *playing*. Therefore, the player, through intensive (self-)documentation in and of these spaces turns individual, personal and therefore solitary pleasures derived from the processual enjoyment of play into the *playbor* (Kücklich, 2005) of "gramming"—producing content as results of self-branding for others to consume in the name of playful spectatorship and in this way, social play.

Finally, a relevant question that comes to mind then is then, what would a "device-free" and in this way, non-sharable, solitary immersive experience be like? For someone mostly interested in the visual and social aspects of play, probably a more momentary and ephemeral (and thus, uninteresting?) instance of play, and a less gratifying one seen from a long-term perspective. Another question concerns the fading popularity

of static selfies at the cost of growing interest in animated content, such as TikTok videos. It is possible to envision selfie museums as a fad of the early 2020s, which eventually, will give room to evolved immersive playgrounds, where the engagement with content extends beyond sensorial experiences and more towards cognitively intriguing patterns of play, not unlike escape rooms of current times, affording more goal-oriented and cognitively engaging play patterns.

What then will happen with the 'pseudo-museums', which cater for mature and intergenerational play in the future? A prediction: The future (and present) of immersive play(ful) spaces will probably be what was initiated by multisensory, 360 degrees installation, such as the playable *Meow Wolf*—a 'multiverse' experience—or as it is also known *The House of Eternal Return*—in Santa Fé with new installations set up in Las Vegas and Denver. My prediction is that self-portraiture becomes ephemeral, whereas collaborative immersive spaces infused with installation art, animated immersive exhibits and mystery elements (resembling sand box style play and free roaming within 'artified' space like *Meow Wolf*), become the main attraction. Perhaps in the style of immersive theatre or escape rooms, but with more possibilities for open-ended, playful interaction in terms of cohesive, collective, and even more intriguing storytelling through imaginative scenarios—with possibilities for an occasional selfie when the opportunity arises. Thus, the focus of immersive playgrounds is envisioned to shift from 'pseudo-museums' and 'playfies' interested in the personal, on the bodily and individual experience, to the mental and social cohesion, in which an inward perspective will be replaced by external curiosity motivated by mysteriousness, challenges, deeply gratifying surprises, and

the use of social imagination. In other words, an evolution marking a move away from self-portraiture and “the artwork is You”, to “the experience is Ours”—meaning playing more for the process, and less for the pictures.

Endnotes

- 1 The term third space was coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in *The Great Good Place* (1989).
- 2 The term ‘pseudo’ refers here to what is pretended and not real, a definition attained from Cambridge Dictionary, see <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pseudo>.
- 3 “A kidult is an adult that prefers items that society deems are for a younger person. An adult who plays with toys or games” (O’Keefe, 2005, n.p.). Here we can extend this to playful environments.
- 4 Indeed, one of the locations of interest to this study, MOIC, has been described by *New York Magazine* “like a haunted house for digital natives”. Moreover, co-founder of MOIC Maryellis Bunn, has been dubbed “The Millennial Walt Disney” (*New York Magazine*, October 2, 2017).
- 5 Playing out on the idea of FOMO, a slang term for the ‘Fear of Missing Out’.
- 6 For an introduction on LuminoCity, see: <https://www.luminocityfestival.com/about-us#luminocity-introduce>
- 7 A phenomenon of anticipation that reminds of the launch of the original Star Wars action figures, when Kenner unable to deliver the toys for the Christmas market, sold coupons which could later be traded for the action figures.
- 8 URL refers to Uniform Resource Locators, the address of a website.
- 9 According to the website, the other location of HAPPY PLACE is in Philadelphia.
- 10 For reference, visitors of Color Factory are encouraged to “Lose yourself in 10,000 colored ribbons, sink into a giant yellow ball pit, catch some rainbows, smell colorful memories.” (*New York Magazine*). Interestingly, this immersive ‘experium’ is the only one which refers to playing in terms of the interaction with their exhibit (Color Factory website).
- 11 The sprinkles in the sprinkle pool in MOIC NYC were made of foam at the time of visiting.

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