Shaming alone: Living alone, shame and masculinity in digitally mediated communications
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Abstract
The analysis of shame, understood as a basic emotion that articulates social relationships, affords insight into the embodied experience of social processes. This paper presents the preliminary results of a research study focusing on how this emotion operates in the relationships and experiences of middle-aged (34–45 years) heterosexual men living alone in Madrid (Spain). We are particularly interested in exploring how shame intercedes when these men challenge or fail to fully adapt to the norms of adult romantic relationships and social expectations regarding having a stable partner. Our analysis aims to characterize this population group and describe how they use instant messaging groups and online dating apps. We focus on how shame is articulated in these interactions and the effects this has on men’s subjectivity and self-image, in order to explore the different ways in which they activate and modulate expressions of modern-day masculinity. In short, we suggest that circuits of shame trigger certain forms of subjection which clearly emerge in mediated communications, an arena in which, in the case of men who live alone, the rupture with the social norm is defensively re-worked, inverting the sense of self and embodying a set of tensions and ambivalences.

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1. Introduction: Alone with shame

Antonio [1] is 45 years old and lives in Madrid. Three years ago, when he split up with his last stable partner, he moved to a small apartment in the city center. He is bothered by certain comments made by his cousins — “the most narrow-minded and traditional ones” who haven’t migrated to the city — when they joke about his bachelor life. He is also upset by those made by his father, who now takes it for granted that his son will never give him grandchildren. But the worst of it is that he detects a similar attitude in some of the comments made by his Madrid friends, whom he admires and who are his true support network. This could “trigger a certain amount of fear” in him.
Jerónimo is unable to explain exactly what bothered him when we talked about experiences of unease in social media platforms, or even to say whether or not he really was bothered, but it is linked to something that happened in a WhatsApp group. Among all the joking and friendly teasing, he detected certain comments that seemed to question his lifestyle, i.e., the fact of his living alone, beyond the mere question of whether or not he currently has a partner. Before, he lived in an apartment in one of the central city neighborhoods, but since the COVID-19 lockdown several months ago, he has been living in the country in an old family summerhouse. **Proud** of his solitary life, he defends his choice and gives short shrift to his would-be critics. “There have probably been some veiled comments, but I just ignored them and forgot about them.” He laughs about it, saying it is better to ignore them, to rise above it, to forget about it. He refuses to let it get to him. He does not really want to talk about it either.

Gregorio has lived alone for the past four years in the house he grew up in, located in one of Madrid’s southern neighborhoods. His parents migrated and he returned to the empty family home when he split up with his last partner, with whom he had been living. He found it hard to adapt to his new situation and decided to see a psychotherapist. Now, at the age of 42, he feels much better. “I’m good,” he tells us, “this is the life I have chosen.” And he is ready to defend it. Nevertheless, he is also aware of the weight of existing norms and expectations regarding being part of a couple, and the gazes that seem to challenge his decision to live alone. He therefore **feels bad about himself** when he thinks about his profile — comprising a photo and some facts about himself — on a dating site. He feels exposed to the opinion of his friends and relatives who may see it and think that he only wants “to get laid” or is ”sexually deprived“. Yet, he remarks, the problem is not with them: “it’s something I have to work on.” It is his decision and he is proud of it. “No one likes to feel ashamed about the way they think.”

Fears, distress and shame are emotions that emerge in narratives about the everyday lives of middle-aged men who live alone. Emotions, at least from a sociological perspective, should be understood as a fabric (Casado, 2014; Casado and Lasén, 2014). We are not interested so much in the individual, appreciable dimension of the emotional experience (although this should not be overlooked), but rather in the network of interactions and frictions in which these emotions are activated, with the aim of identifying the meanings, tensions and ambivalences they articulate.

Emotions are involved in our ways of relating to each other and serve to reinforce certain forms of social interaction that are recursive. Emotions are always pervaded by power relations. Experiencing emotions plunges us into that entangled web of conflicts that we embody in our everyday life. The short anecdotes which serve to introduce this paper reveal the unease and contradictions faced by heterosexual men living alone as they struggle to cope with the pressure to find a partner and the romantic ideals that continue to place couple relationships at the center of normative adult life (Jamieson and Simpson, 2013). Unease is palpable in informants’ narratives, whether it be through the discomfort of stigma (Goffman, 1963), the uncertainty caused by feeling exposed to the judgmental gaze of others (Ahmed, 2004) or the rigors of evaluating oneself in accordance with a series of cultural beliefs (always translated at an individual level) about what adult males should be and how they should live (Foucault, 1985). And underlying all this, hazy and latent but very much there, is shame.

While shame is a fundamental emotion for sociological analysis, it is also extremely difficult to pin down. Following the work of Scheff (1988), we believe that shame is one of the most powerful mechanisms for ensuring social conformity and social bonds. Like the two extremes of an elastic continuum, shame and pride are at the core of all our social interactions. We are subject to their gaze [2] every time we engage in any kind of social exchange, every time we appear in front of others. If what we gain from this exchange (or, to be more precise, if what we believe we gain from this exchange) is positive recognition, we feel proud and secure in our way of being. However, if we perceive (or believe we perceive) traces of reproach or disagreement, this triggers a circuit of shame. We will examine this process in more detail later on, but for now, it is important to understand that from this perspective, shame emerges as a social regulator: a basic social emotion that serves to arrange and order social bonds (Scheff, 2000).

However, this play of attitudes and perspectives is far from simple and is extremely difficult to analyze.
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Shame in itself is shameful: “the bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others as shame.” [3]. As Sara Ahmed explains, shame is an emotion that involves one’s relationship with oneself to the extent that it challenges one’s sense of oneself as a person deserving of being acknowledged and valued by others. This is why it is internalized and experienced as a personal problem, and is rarely linked to the tensions, inequalities and social contradictions in which it is rooted. As Gregorio (one of our interviewees) stated, shame is uncomfortable: he does not want to be singled out for how he thinks. But as he says, overcoming this means working on it internally, with oneself, learning how to avoid the discomfort caused by this exposure, or even to defend one’s decision with pride. It is precisely from this perspective that we aim to interpret the shame felt by men who live alone, striving to gain insight into it not only through the way in which they refer to it (always deferred or displaced), but also, and more particularly, through the strategies for rebuilding the self that stem from their experiences of this emotion. As we describe below, these strategies are related to contemporary forms of constructing manhood.

This approach is resonant of the idea proposed by Elspeth Probyn (2004) regarding the productive nature of shame. Prompted by the unease it usually generates, popular discourses link shame with negative connotations, viewing it as repression, imposition, being singled out. However, if we accept shame as part of a social loop (Scheff, 2000), then we can construe it in a positive light as a basic mechanism for collective organization. Through shame — and shaming — we highlight that which challenges our values and social agreements. For Probyn (2004), shame, thus construed, opens up a new avenue for self-improvement, prompting us to a specific production of self. Feeling that our actions are shameful and inappropriate may articulate process of weakening the self, but also of strengthening it. Shame thus pushes us to “take charge” of a certain state of affairs, not in the sense of accepting its inevitability, but rather challenging us to deal with them, preparing for this task and anticipating our responses. Shame and its management are therefore linked to ways of reconfiguring our pride and self-image, or at least, from an individual point of view, to ways of defending the legitimacy of our life choices, our way of being and lifestyle (de Gaulejac, 1996).

Following Ahmed’s proposal and concerned about the everyday effects of emotions and their simultaneously “sticky” and mobile nature, we view the shame felt by these men as an affective economy: “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation.” [4]. What narratives are articulated to refer to shame and what gender meanings do they reflect? What forms of recognition do men specifically face in relation to shame? How do these webs of meaning run through certain hegemonic discourses and forms of life or come to shape alternative experiences? What happen especially when they have to cope with the rhetoric of adult life as part of a couple? How do experiences of shame mediate in the relationship that men maintain with themselves and in the development of their own idea of what it means to be an adult man?

In this paper we examine the narratives of middle-aged (35–45 years) heterosexual men who live alone and how they struggle with the hazy fog of affects and emotions that articulate shame. To this end, we analyze the digitally mediated communications that contribute to these narratives, from a gender-based perspective. The aim is to understand how experiences of shame articulate a specific technology of the self, in the sense proposed by Michel Foucault, i.e., as an operation which “permit(s) individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” [5] Our hypothesis is that in this fabric made by the entangled web of shame and unease described above, we can identify re-articulations and negotiations with contemporary heterosexual masculinity and interpret ways of experiencing shame as an effect on this same masculinity.

Our argument is based on a preliminary analysis of the results of the fieldwork currently underway involving people who live alone in the city of Madrid (Spain), which in turn forms part of a broader research project focusing on different dimensions and experiences of shame. Although our sample is extremely varied in terms of age, gender and sexual orientation, for the purposes of this study we focus only on heterosexual males aged between 35 and 45. This subsample is of particular interest when examining
circuits of shame and the ambivalent nature of this emotion when mediated by digital technologies. The study is based on seven in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately two hours, conducted between March and July 2020. Although the first interviews were held face-to-face, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the remaining participants were interviewed over video conferencing platforms. The results are presented in three separate sections. The first explores who exactly it is that lives alone through some significant demographic data and the meanings and practices surrounding their experiences of shame in relation to their failure to conform to the social norm of being part of a couple. The next section focuses specifically on how mobile instant messaging and dating apps mediate in these dynamics and how participants cope with them; and finally, by way of conclusion, we propose an interpretation of the results, outlining the relationships which exist between circuits of shame and processes of masculinization.

2. Solo living

According to data published by different statistics institutes about household composition, solo living is a sociocultural phenomenon that is becoming more common in the Western world. For instance, in 2018, 28 percent of households in the United States were single-person households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), and in Europe, the data indicate an even greater incidence: in 2019, 34.6 percent of homes in the EU27 countries analyzed by Eurostat (2020) comprised a single adult living alone, and in one extreme case, Sweden, this figure was 57.3 percent.

The trend seems clear, but it is important to move beyond a general interpretation of the data and to explore the characteristics of people who live alone. If we look at the 2019 data for Spain published by the National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2020), we see that 25.7 percent of households comprise a single person. But not all one-person households are the same. For example, in 41.9 percent of all cases, the person living alone is over 65 years of age, and of these, a very significant 73.3 percent are women. In contrast, among households whose occupants are aged under 65 (which is now the majority case), the gender distribution, in addition to being more balanced, is reversed, with 59.2 percent being men. As Jamieson and Simpson state [6], these trends cannot be analyzed without taking into account both cultural values and national and regional values regarding generational and gender relations. Available data for Spain seem to point to two main archetypes. Firstly, there are women aged 65 and over who have been widowed and whose children have moved out and formed their own households. And secondly, among younger one-person households, a growing number of men are now living alone as a result of the general trend to enter into stable romantic relationships at a later age, the increasing rate of separation and divorce and, more directly, the fact that being part of a couple is no longer a central aspect of contemporary life.

Our fieldwork reveals the diverse nature of the experiences, motivations, meanings and practices of solo living, and teaches us to be cautious when making generalizations. The men we interviewed included those who had chosen to live alone regardless of whether or not they had a partner, those who lived alone in limbo while waiting to find a partner, and those who had simply ended up alone following a separation, a change of city or the decision to leave the family home, and had later come to accept, with alacrity or resignation, solo living like an alternative. This said, the aggregate picture presented by the statistical data reveals one of the main areas of tension around which the male shame of those who live alone is centered. Over recent decades we have witnessed a deep-rooted change in values linked to affective-sexual relationships (Alberdi, 1999). From the social model prevalent during Franco’s dictatorship, which was grounded in the centrality of the Catholic family, we inherited a norm based on marriage, resulting in an entire generation whose lives for the most part unfolded within households made up of parents and children (first their original family and then the one formed with their spouse). However, what we find in households comprised of younger people living alone reflects another cultural amalgam: affectivity seen as something flexible and customizable, the centrality of autonomy as a social value and the pluralization of models and lifestyles that are deemed legitimate (Jamieson and Simpson, 2013).
Not only is this transformation of family models linked to the shame felt by those who live alone, it is one of its main sources (de Gaulejac, 1996). The rapid transformation of values associated with adult life and couple relationships translates into pressure on one’s life choices, as episodes of disturbing external judgments show. And it is precisely from within the family network that the most patent cases of being singled out for not having a partner occur, either in face-to-face gatherings or communications through social media.

... Generally, those comments, well, they’re not exactly pleasant. They’re usually made by someone … I mean, the person who makes them does it to make you feel bad. In other words, although they deny it and claim to be concerned about you or whatever ... the people who really love you just don’t say that kind of thing [...] Occasionally, a distant relative, like an uncle you don’t see much, for example, might come out with something like that during a family gathering held once a year. [...] I suppose at the time I might have occasionally felt ashamed, but I don’t generally take much notice [...]. (Benito, 34 years)

The way my cousin said it that time made me feel a little like I was disappointing him. But, deep down, I don’t really know if he is disappointed; I don’t know. I mean, I don’t think so, I think that ... I mean the world has changed so much, right? Relationships can take so many different forms now, there are so many different ways of relating to someone these days that no, I think there’s a general acceptance that this is normal. (Antonio, 45 years)

On the one hand, the participants in our study defend their choices, argue that their outlook on life is flexible and changing. In this sense, they accept the difficulties and contradictions that exist in couplehood and their lifestyle and, in most cases, they present living alone as a conscious and thoughtful decision. However, this defense becomes entangled with certain feelings of failure or inadequacy. They know they are challenging the family-based model in which they were raised and know (or imagine) that in their parents’ eyes, or from the perspective of the parameters set by a hegemonic rhetoric of love (Esteban, 2008), their lifestyle defies the social norm. Shame links self-consideration to the external gaze, the feeling one has somehow failed in the view of a generalized other (Ahmed, 2004; Scheff, 2000) and is exposed to their judgment.

I guess if I think about it, there’s a little bit of everything. On the one hand I think “keep your nose out of my business,” and “don’t you dare tell me what to do.” But then I think “it’s true; everyone else has a wife and kids, and here am I, by myself. I’d better find a partner.” I’m … how can I put it? I’m the odd one out and no one loves me. Why don’t I have a girlfriend? It’s hard not to think sometimes that it must be because “I’m worthless.” It gets you down. You … what’s the word? You underrate, undervalue yourself. (Gregorio, 42 years)

I think there’s a part of society that judges me for living alone, that says: “Seriously now, you’re 44 years old, right? I mean, have all your relationships gone wrong or have you never met a woman?” Because it seems that that is what we all have to do, right? It’s a bit like that. Sometimes there’s this feeling of something being imposed on you. But I don’t let it get to me.
At the end of the day, the hardest relationship is the one we have with ourselves. (Antonio, 45 years)

In his narrative, Antonio does not only recognize this gaze that judges (and is both ubiquitous and diluted in a vague “other”), he also mentions a key element for understanding the disquiet generated. He does not link this feeling of unease with what people might say (he does not let that bother him), but rather with the relationship we have with ourselves. “If we feel shame, we feel shame because we have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love.” [8] What is this ideal? Can we interpret shame in terms of a failure to adapt to a seamless ideal? What is this ideal like? And how do we relate to it?

An attentive reading of participants’ narratives on solo living reveals the tensions and conflicting messages currently surrounding the idea of love and couple relationships in adult life. Firstly, and in keeping with the conclusions drawn by Hughes (2015) regarding the decentering of couple relationships among young adults living alone in Australia, we found that the ideal of living with a partner is still active in these narratives. Indeed, we deduce from our interviews the three categories that Hughes constructs to identify different approaches to the romantic ideal among those who live alone. Thus, some informants constructed their narrative based on a “desire for a conventional relationship”, viewing their current lifestyle as a transitional period prior to living with a partner or the best alternative in the event of a suitable partner not being found. Others were “ambivalent about partnering”, since despite an abstract desire to form part of a couple relationship in the future, they viewed the implications this would have for their independence and autonomy in a negative light. Finally, we also found a clear example of someone who had opted for the “living apart together” model, or in other words, having a stable partner but not living with them. As Hughes argues, these ways of narrating solo living do not imply a crisis of the couple ideal so much as its late-modern re-articulation which accepts that different lifestyles coexist with certain material conditions and the social values of autonomy and independence that are in conflict with the figure of the traditional couple.

However, the discovery that the couple ideal remains present in these narratives does not fully explain the shameful experiences recounted and the strategies adopted to cope with them. We should explore the “how” of the matter, based on the idea of an economy of emotions in which these experiences are in constant circulation (Ahmed, 2004). Foucault’s (1985) ideas about the relationship between subjectivity and moral ideals, outlined in the introduction to the second volume of his The History of Sexuality are useful in this sense. Understanding how an ideal works involves paying attention to the moral codes inherent to the specific era in question, particularly “the manner in which one ought to ‘conduct oneself’” [9]. In other words, as important as the ideal itself and its reflection in specific values and regulations is the mode of subjectivation, “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obligated to put it [or not] into practice.” [10] From this perceptive, more than shame itself, it is important to explore how people respond to that which is potentially shameful, thus underscoring, as Probyn (2004) suggests, the productive nature of shame. It is in these responses that we appreciate the effects of shame, even though in many cases it operates more as anticipation than as an effective feeling of shame.

3. Mediating shame

The results of our fieldwork suggest that when different responses to shame are mediated by digital communications these are configured as a “public arena” (Cefaï, 2002) [11]. Cefaï proposes the concept of an arena rather than notions of space or public opinion in order to emphasize the disputed (combat arena) and performative (arena as a stage) nature of these communications. Moreover, we should not forget how certain digital technologies disrupt relations between the public, the private and the intimate. As Thompson (2011) argues, the incorporation of new communications technologies brings with it a new logic of the invisible. Intimacy increasingly circulates around and remains inscribed in the technological innovations on
which our everyday communications are based, potentially making them more visible. Thanks to these innovations, the dividing line between what is public and what is private is erased, or at the very least becomes blurred, rendering them as necessary as they are turbulent for adult men living alone. Let us analyze this ambivalence in a little more detail. Mainly due to the instant messaging applications they offer, mobile telephones emerged as a key element in the narratives of our participants.

At the end of the day, humans are social beings. I mean ... You’re not a hermit, right? You’re not an ascetic or whatever. Although, to be honest, there’s a bit of that in me (laughs). But seriously ... My phone helps me stay connected to other people, so I don’t feel ... well, like I said, I don’t feel lonely, and that’s mostly due to my phone. (Carlos, 41 years)

It would have been unthinkable. Being here [during the COVID-19 lockdown] without talking on the phone, without making those calls. You may live alone, but you still need to talk. Well, I do at least. (Millán, 38 years)

The men we interviewed described an everyday existence in which their smartphones are the link that bonds them to others. Both when they were asked whether they were worried about falling ill or having an accident at home, and when they talked about feeling down or the potential isolation of living alone, interviewees held up their phones like a talisman. They live alone, but they are not alone; nor are they indifferent to or in the eyes of those around them.

It helps to know that there are people [in WhatsApp groups] who ask you for help when they’re feeling down, or just say “hello” and or send a Hi emoji. And you’re there too — that’s important. It makes me feel good that they count on me. It’s fundamental really. I suppose it also helps do away with that feeling of isolation. I mean, in the end, you’re talking to someone, you’re sharing stuff. (Jerónimo, 45 years)

However, as stated earlier, WhatsApp groups in particular, and mobile communications in general, are ambivalent since they can also be a source of stress, distress and finger pointing. The proliferation of chat groups is seen as an intrusion into one of the main advantages of living alone: being the master of your own time. “The freedom that living alone gives me is indescribable,” said Millán. However, this intrusion can easily be repelled, as indeed our interviewees stated, by limiting the number of groups in which one is active, the frequency with which one posts comments or how many times a day one checks one’s phone.

It is significant who compose the instant messaging groups in which our interviewees participate. Whereas the bonds maintained through smartphone communications are diverse (indeed, participants talked about women, partners, ex-partners or female friends who form part of their primary support network), it is interesting to note that most of the groups in which interviewees were most active were made up exclusively of men: the old gang from school, university friends, work colleagues and the men with whom they play amateur team sports. Men who live alone engage in messaging groups with other (single and partnered) men.

The potential danger of these groups is that they reproduce the dynamics of heterosexual homosociality described by Kimmel (1997). According to this author, normative masculinity is performed or displayed for other men, in whose gaze males seek approval and acceptance of their own manhood. Consequently, Kimmel argues, relationships between men are based on humiliation and shame. Pointing out other people’s faults and failings in the deployment of true and correct masculinity is the best way of strengthening one’s own manhood; gestures which highlight and underscore failings in another man’s manhood serve to reinforce one’s own sense of proper maleness. These dynamics reflect the way in which interviewers use
generally instant messaging groups between friends, with many communications based on the exchange of small jokes and comments about others.

Well, when I have a friend who I think is going a bit far and posting really posey pictures on the social media, I generally call them out [...] I mean, there are several cases, as well as people who I know are posers; and what I usually do is take a screenshot [a photo of the profile screen] and send it to our friends in the WhatsApp group. You know, to embarrass them, to expose them to public ridicule. (Benito, 34 years)

When asked about living alone as a source of teasing and derisive comments, participants were more evasive in their replies. After all, shame shames. Indeed, expressing embarrassment is a major source of shame (de Gaulejac, 1996). Consequently, shame was not often mentioned explicitly in participants’ narratives. As stated at the beginning of this paper, narratives refer to shame more in terms of being bothered or upset, or by talking about that sort of thing which is better ignored. Moreover, a careful review of the narratives revealed that, when faced with the possibility of being singled out due to their solo lifestyle, our interviewees cling firmly to the idea that the best defense is a good offense.

Quite the opposite — there is a lot of teasing about those with a wife and kids. (Jeronimo, 45 years)

Not really. I mean they do [make jokes about his single status], but it’s all in good fun. Actually, I’m probably the worst tease of all, saying stuff like: “What’s the matter? Is your wife looking over your shoulder? Is she getting out the ball and chain?” Or “every time I see you lot I’m happier that I live by myself.” But it’s just a joke. I’ve got a great sense of humor; we’re always ribbing each other. So, it’s just joking. It’s not serious. (Gregorio, 42 years)

Thus, on the few occasions on which attention is focused explicitly on singlehood, another mechanism is activated for the re-composition of the self, namely pointing out the difficulties involved in living with a partner and deploying an arsenal of sexist ideas and jokes about controlling girlfriends and wives. When we approached this issue in a calmer, more general way during interviews, without focusing attention specifically on instant messaging interactions, participants argued their point in greater detail. Being singled out is not acceptable. Living with and without a partner are both understood as available options and participants’ decision to live alone is, to a certain extent, presented as being the satisfactory result of a conscious choice, free from imposed models and ideals.

You [referring to a friend] are asking me why I don’t have a partner? Well, the feeling I’m getting from you is that you’re not happy with your partner. You say we’re going to meet, and then you can’t because of something going on with your girlfriend. It’s like: “Seriously, you don’t know what it’s like.” That’s how I see it; I tell them straight that they don’t have a clue what it’s like. It’s like you’re stuck in this fiction. Society says you have to have a wife and kids and all that. (Gregorio, 42 years)

... I have friends who have kids now of about two or three, but some of them seem to have lost so much. I get that you gain other things, but to be honest I don’t envy them. (Millán, 38 years)
They’re in a couple, and sometimes I see them and say: “Blimey, man, it must be so great having a kid and all that; it must be amazing” and I’m aware of that. But they don’t seem happy. I think I’m happier alone than they are living as part of a couple. Well, most of them anyway. (Antonio, 45 years)

What is the relationship between statements of this kind and shame? How do men reconstruct the meaning that is given to living alone, facing the shame of not complying with the social norm? What does this tell us about specific forms of subjectivation, and relationship with the rules, in the sense in which Foucault proposes it? The shame felt by the men in our study occurs within their dynamics of masculinization. What we see in other studies as characterizing heterosexual masculinities (García, 2014, 2010) is present here also. Masculinity is a statement, a performative expression of a self that is equated with autonomy, capacity and ownership or lordship — as Segato (2016) so rightly puts it — and is deployed through the proud presentation of that very self and the defense (sometimes even beyond what seems realistic) of its ability to control and make decisions regarding life. Thus, the way in which interviewees advocate the option of solo living is not really that different from the dynamics of masculinity: framing other options as non-autonomous and almost illegitimate due to the unhappiness they engender and talking about other men as being burdened with a couple relationship that challenges their masculine independence. In contrast, although still based on the same logic of male autonomy and defense of oneself that describes modern masculinity, these men also fight to escape others’ judgment, which reduces them to their sentimental situation or characterizes them as incomplete adults.

Yes, there are times when I recognize that it’s like: “Oh come on! Everyone is free to do what they ...” I’m 44 (laughs). I think I know by now what I want, what I’m giving up, what I’m gaining; and when I put it all in the balance, it’s worth it. (Jerónimo, 45 years)

Ultimately, it is a problem of visibility which, as Scheff explains, has a strong gender component: “Boys, more than girls, learn at an early age that vulnerable feelings (love, grief, fear and shame) are seen as signs of weakness.” [12] This became particularly evident in the interviews when the conversation turned to another digitally mediated practice: online dating sites and applications. Whereas managing one’s presence and visibility on instant messaging apps is fairly simple, on dating sites such as Tinder, Bumbl and Happn, the dangers of exposure are more difficult to control. Thus, when we ask about the use of these social networks and how the participants work through profiles with selfies and personal information, they usually talked explicitly about shame.

... Posting photos, for example, and having people I know see me is a bit embarrassing. Yeah, it’s really embarrassing. (Benito, 34 years)

We view dating apps and sites as a public arena (Cefaï, 2002) for shame. Interviewees said that although they would prefer not to post photos, it is almost a requirement if you want to get a date. Thus, a conflict arises between the desire to use these sites and the discomfort caused by feeling exposed in the eyes of acquaintances (work colleagues, childhood friends or sports buddies). It is almost like a boomerang in its return trajectory, with photos posted on these sites sometimes ending up in male instant messaging groups as the butt of jokes and teasing. The threat is very real, and one’s capacity for control, which cannot be exercised over the dissemination of photos on the Web, is reduced to the selection of the material shared and the attitude one adopts in response (here again we return to the need for internal work, with oneself).

Well, since they’re always normal photos, taken while traveling
etc., if they take a screenshot and share it, I guess it doesn’t really matter. I mean, in the end, you decide what you want to post. So, it shows your name and surname and your real face? Well, so what? But you have to be careful which photos you post. I’m fairly careful about that. (Millán, 38 years)

The fear of being seen may also end up operating in a more chilling dimension. Controlling which personal images and information you share is easy, you just have to be careful. However, dating sites in themselves are deeply ambivalent. Although they have become increasingly popular in recent years, media discourses about them have also multiplied and their reverberations in ordinary conversations continue to be extremely stigmatizing. As seen a few years ago in a study focusing on online dating sites (Lasén and García, 2015), these applications and platforms are configured as spaces which are uncomfortable for men: not only do they have to display their photos, but they must also expose themselves to the gaze of others who may see them as “sexually deprived”, unable to find a partner or excessively focused on sex.

I do have some reservations, because there was a time (I don’t know if that’s the way it still is) when people just used that site to get laid. So, if you’re on it, you’re basically just looking for sex. And in truth, if you stop and think about it, you say: “Well, yes, I guess I am looking for that. Because of the life I lead, the fact that I don’t have a job and my social life is a bit slow, right now I don’t want a stable partner, all I want is to have a good time with someone for a night.” It sounds a bit harsh, but I guess that’s what it is in the end. So, the attitude people have is: “The only thing he’s interested in is getting laid.” (Gregorio, 42 years)

In short, what emerges from participants’ discourses regarding both their use of instant messaging apps and dating sites and apps is a way of coping with shame that is re-articulated and modulated by visibility. Shame is something to be worked on, which is a job in itself: men living alone incorporate the couple ideal by revising, nuancing and refining it with other values and meanings they highlight as important. But this monitoring also encompasses mediated practices, since interactions are never totally secure and always leave us exposed to other people’s judgments. This singling out, this stigma attached to singlehood and the constant questioning of life decisions or conditions, are never far away. “What I would hate,” sums up Millán, referring obliquely to shame, “is to be pitied.”

As I am right now — yes, I feel privileged in certain aspects of my life. I mean, living alone doesn’t bother me, and I wouldn’t like anyone to feel sorry for me, like saying: “Poor chap, living alone.” Because I say: “But I’m happy living by myself.” I’ve no restrictions; I don’t have to keep up appearances. (Millán, 38 years)

4. Conclusions: (Male) circuits of shame

In April 1994, Artforum dedicated a monograph to masculinities. Under the title “Man trouble” and the editorship of Maurice Berger, a series of academics and artists shared brief texts in which they explored masculine distress and its artistic representations through cultural analysis and personal experience. In his text, the filmmaker Todd Haynes proposed a definition of masculinity based on a highly suggestive image:
“... masculinity’s a thing we characterize through fictions — movies, TV, advertising. It might be described the same way Oscar Wilde described a mirror, as something we use to reflect the masks we wear. Which might also explain why it was never considered very masculine to look at yourself too often — not, at least, until recently. Phallocratic power has not plummeted as a result, but the question remains: if masculinity is suddenly looking at itself in the mirror, what exactly is it seeing?” [13]

Shame can be thought of as one of those mirrors in which contemporary masculinity comes face to face with itself. Shame is relational and emerges in the complex play of gazes, which is why “being at odds with oneself” is by no means a solitary process, despite being experienced alone. Studying how men elaborate the sense of themselves through their narratives about the experience of living alone in relation to the feeling of shame leads us to conclude the following points.

Firstly, it is important to point out that shame has a tendency to try and erase or distract attention away from itself. As Marín-Cortés suggests in his work on cyberbullying among teenagers, “shame is not an emotion that is clearly named [...] it is expressed as relative discomfort over the deterioration of one’s image in other people’s eyes.” [14] Given that shame is itself a source of shame, it tends to form part of a spiral of silence and self-reproduction, making it a fundamental yet evasive object of research. “Shame would be the most frequent and possibly the most important of emotions, even though it is usually almost invisible.” [15] The difficulties, ambivalences and discomforts with which our interviewees mention shame allow us to conclude that we must pay more attention to the emotions involved in maintaining manhood and their intricate modes of subjectivation.

Today, analyzing this play of appearances, gazes and shaming processes necessarily involves taking digitally mediated practices into consideration also, since it is in these practices that a large part of our everyday interactions take place. “It seems increasingly hard then to find spaces outside of the field of vision of these multiple gazes. The consequences of these changes are still unfolding. That the presence of a virtual gaze may provide a rich context for emotional experience is not surprising.” [16] In this sense, we propose a reading of these practices from the concept of public arena (Cefaï, 2002) that addresses certain mediated spaces such as places of appearance, struggle and performance, in which we collectively dispute the sense of manhood, adulthood and loneliness. Although this applies to almost any population group in contemporary Western society, it is particularly true of men who live alone. The way in which these men think and live their everyday lives involves the use of these mediations, and indeed, this type of communication constitutes one of the principal stages on which they are visible: instant messaging apps and the social media in general. This is due to the fact that they post their privacy in a public arena (Cefaï, 2002).

Secondly, an analysis of the narratives on the interactions that these men unfold in this kind of spaces enabled us to explore some of the circuits of shame experienced by men who live alone in more detail. In addition to the balance they try to achieve in relation to the romantic couple ideal, we have tried to emphasize here the specific nature of shame, which is at once interactive and embodied. This is evident in the fault line — real or imaginary, effective or anticipated — opened up by the gaze of a recognized other. But it does not only reside in this relationship. As Ahmed reminds us, shame is sticky, it adheres and soaks: “Shame involves the intensification not only of the bodily surface, but also of the subject’s relation to itself, or its sense of itself as self.” [17] Thus, shame involves a certain deterioration of the self, or at least, a certain relationship with oneself and the awareness of the self. The shaming gaze ends up materializing, at least in the case of middle-aged men who live alone, in a special disposition of how one sees oneself, as part of a specific process of self-evaluation. We need more research that deepens this self-assessment work that is done on the self and its connections with contemporary masculinity.

In sum, the main conclusion we can draw from this study is that masculinity is at work in this play of gazes which order the shame felt by those who live alone. In the same way, masculinity cannot be understood
outside the emotions — among them, shame — that its embodiment entails. Entangled and in tension with “the couple” ideal and the hegemonic idea of what it means to be an adult, masculinity is articulated in a different way, with these men activating their defense mechanisms while at the same time controlling or modulating their own public exposure. In their composition of manhood, the mode of subjection that causes shame also channels the work carried out by the shamed self into a kind of defensive maneuver. In their attempts to defend their choices, autonomy, independence and decision to break away from conventional models, they have recourse to the same logic of finger pointing, and in many cases the same sexist meanings, as their partnered counterparts.

Thus, the masculinity of men who live alone is influenced by the mandate of masculinity which exists in Western societies and the relationship of ownership in which it is rooted (Segato, 2016). We will have to delve into this emotional dimension of subjectivities and gender relations, because without emotions such as shame it will be impossible for us to understand the effects of gender in our daily practices. Although shame may strain the meanings around masculinity, it by no means dilutes them, since as Haynes reminds us, they are no more — or no less — than one of those male mirrors “we use to reflect the masks we wear.”

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Notes

1. The names used to identify our interviewees are fictitious. In order to protect informants’ privacy, we have randomly assigned them names from a list of early religious hermits.

2. The concept of gaze is complex, and, in this article, we use it in its most general and descriptive acceptance. However, we have decided to name it thus because, although in this article we do not enter into
its discussion and problematization, our approach owes much to proposals from studies of visual culture, feminist theories of spectatorship and psychoanalysis on this notion. In this text we articulate a first approaching to the concept from works focused on emotions that use it (Ahmed, 2004; Scheff, 2006) and some recent works that have applied this notion to mediated contexts (Rooney, 2015).


7. The interviews were carried out in Spanish, and minor changes were made during their translation to render them more comprehensible.


10. Foucault, 1985, p. 27.

11. Daniel Cefaï’s proposal on the notion of public arenas is especially interesting for this article. However, we should clarify that we do not resort to it to carry out a descriptive analysis of the construction of the public discussion around a controversy, but rather we make a more tangential use of it. In the ways in which living alone is discussed in social networks, we recognize some of the characteristics and processes that Cefaï proposes in the definition of a public arena. Undoubtedly, we need more research to confirm this intuition and, in any case, to be able to deepen the description and specific weight of these interactions mediated in the dispute over the meaning of solitary living as a public arena.


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