"My first selfie": Experimenting with shame and visibility

by Leonardo Pastor

Abstract
This article investigates everyday experimentation with shame and visibility in self-photography sharing on digital platforms. Based on empirical data produced in ethnographic research on selfie practice, I discuss the ways in which this type of practice is gradually becoming common place through a learning trajectory related to moments of exposure and shame. The objective is to analyze shame and visibility as practical differences that lead the research participants, each in their own way, to experience a development of exposure, learning, situated performances and impression management. Following a pragmatic perspective, the proposal is not to treat shame as a personal characteristic, or to identify what is visible or not in image sharing, but to treat them as experience. Through ethnographic work on participants’ photographic routines, I demonstrate that shame is part of the daily construction of the selfie as a practice. This is also observable, starting from the participants’ first selfies, when understanding selfie practice as an experimentation and negotiation capable of becoming present in the trajectory of conformation of this kind of image as a form of interaction with the other.

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Introduction
At the intersection of digital photography, self-portraiture and smartphone use, the selfie has become not only a very commonly produced image, but also a practice increasingly associated with everyday life. In this article, following previous research on the phenomenon (Hess, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015; Gómez-Cruz, 2016), I take as a starting point the importance of treating it precisely as a practice, and not just as a type of self-portrait. Like other practices of social interaction and self-representation, it relates to different everyday modes of modulating shame and visibility (Lasén, 2015; Goffman, 1959, 1956; Scheff, 2003, 2000).
Intertwined with daily practices and mediations, the selfie has become the object of different approaches, investigated as a sociotechnical phenomenon (Cruz and Thornham, 2015), developed from networked material-discursive entanglements (Warfield, 2016), as gestural (Frosh, 2015) and conversational image (Gunthert, 2015, 2014), or as a social practice involved in several assemblages (Hess, 2015). Amid a complex set of practices and materialities (Gómez-Cruz, 2016), digital self-photography can be understood through relationships and mobility, without restricting it to the public or the private (Lasén, 2015, 2013). These researchers, through different perspectives, demonstrate how the selfie is part of and transforms everyday practices, especially relative to sociability developed through digital platforms. This article seeks to contribute to this research by considering a particular relationship within these social practices: the daily development and involvement of shame and visibility in digital image sharing.

Although some research has been done on the construction of intimacies and self-representation through shared images (Miguel, 2016; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015), or associated with different forms of exposure and modulation of intimacy (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016; Lasén, 2015; Enguix and Gómez-Narváez, 2018), I would like to pose a specific question regarding how the practice of the selfie is developed in a relationship between shame and visibility. The practice linked to digital self-portraits, according to Lasén (2013), supposes a shared learning in relation to the body, in a kind of volatile materiality, mixing actions and devices. This learning also reveals, as will be discussed in this paper, an experience that goes through the ways in which people negotiate with shame and visibility on a daily basis through the production and sharing of selfies on digital platforms.

Following experience: An ethnographic approach

For the development of this article, I drew on ethnographic research on the everyday practice of the selfie (Pastor, 2020), carried out for two years by observing the photographic routine of different people [1]. The broader ethnographic research had as its starting point a square in the city of Salvador, in Brazil. Considering geographic and digital spaces as a continuous observational environment, I started to know and interact with several selfie practices.

The participants, therefore, emerge from this initial fieldwork in the square, and were observed for an extended period of time, over the whole duration of research. Unlike other ethnographic investigations of selfies (Wargo, 2017; Weilenmann and Hillman, 2020), not only did I follow their posts and interactions on social media (especially Instagram, the most used by them), but I also participated in different conversations and image sharing experiences at different times, both remotely (through Instagram or platforms such as WhatsApp) but most commonly in person. This approach, therefore, allowed me to incorporate aspects of digital ethnography (Hine, 2000; Pink, et al., 2015; Kozinets, 2010) and ethnographic fieldwork of social anthropology (Strathern, 1999). It was developed as an ethnography about practices (Mol, 2002), open enough to follow events in the making (James, 1987), and avoiding boundaries between different digital platforms, social media and public or intimate spaces. Taking as a starting point a square and image sharing on Instagram, the proposal was to follow a practice that develops as an experience that crosses different environments. In addition, the analysis was developed via a pragmatic perspective (James, 2000, 1912; Savransky, 2019; Stengers, 2007), trying to follow the experience related to selfie practice from the practical consequences produced in everyday life.

In this paper, I work on part of that broader ethnographic research and I use the accounts of four participants to question the relationship between shame and visibility on digital image sharing platforms. These accounts presented a period of development of the practice of self-photography in relation to the transformation of shame, starting from their first experiments with the selfie to their current daily practices. The objective is to analyze the question of shame and visibility not as aspects of similarity between the research participants, but as practical differences that lead them, each in their own way, to experience an
everyday learning development of exposure, image sharing practices, situated performances and impression management.

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**Experimenting with shame**

Wearing a tank top, Martim appears in the image looking intently at the camera, showing himself from the waist up. A strong yellow light highlights his face and part of his torso, leaving the rest in a dim light, forming a kind of frame. One hand appears stretched, to allow the selfie to be taken, while the other remains curled up, holding a pink plastic pelican against his body. In the caption of the published image, Martim added the following text: “my first selfie”.

He had forgotten about this photo, but the moment we started talking about selfie practice he remembered it. When we met in person, one of the first things Martim talked about was the existence of his first selfie, taken in 2014. “I may have taken others for recreational purposes, or to test the device at home, but this really was the first selfie I published” — he tells me, right before showing me the image. Martim, a 40-year-old artist, used that selfie to publicize, on his Facebook page, his participation in a television program. “It was in this context,” he explains, “that I felt relatively more comfortable, because there was a certain shame about it until then, to publish this first selfie”.

Although he is accustomed to performing in public in artistic presentations, selfie practice (still something new at that time) represented a barrier to be overcome. It was something that he was gradually learning to get involved with. “My coming out of the selfie closet”, Martim tells me, laughing at the expression used, “happened in a context favorable for me to feel more comfortable with it”. It was, then, his “first assumed selfie”. In other words, he had already experienced selfie practice in some way, but always in private, or at most showing it to his closest friends. That published image, on the other hand, demanded a negotiation with his own shame and the development of some selfie practice learning:

> I remember that Mario [Martim’s husband], who was much more skilled with social media and selfies, he helped me… he almost did a tutorial for me to take this simple and innocent photo. So, I remember that I didn’t even have the corporality of the selfie, because I really did it … the ones I did, it was for my own enjoyment, or for some private purpose, to send to a friend, or to someone, that would not be published.

The selfie, as he says, requires a specific bodily disposition, and that day, with the help of his husband, he tried to begin to understand and learn certain aspects of the posture required for this type of image. “It was a gradual movement of closeness”, he told me. Or, in other words, as we discussed together at that moment: “a bodily learning experience”. In 2014, when Martim published his first selfie, the practice was becoming increasingly popular, and this led many people to have their first experiences and disclosures of self-portraits taken with the smartphone. “There was a fascination there,” he explained to me, “a curiosity about the phenomenon, but there was also shame, almost self-congratulation, or self-exposure”.

This encounter with the phenomenon of selfie, in the case of Martim and also of other participants in the research, meant at the same time an encounter with the embarrassment of photographing himself and making his own image visible. He explained to me that it actually took some time to discover that taking a selfie was not an easy thing for him. His discomfort didn’t take place due to the idea of public exhibition, but in the experience of photographing and sharing this type of self-photography. According to Martim, this tension in relation to his own self-image is something that also originated in his family environment, where he constantly saw his father “running away from looking at the camera”. Like the other men in his family, he says, he ended up initially inheriting this rejection of his own image, creating “a taboo, an
embarrassment regarding how it would affect the perception of the other”. Martim gradually became more confident: “Through a conscious decision to respond to this microtrauma of the father figure, I started to face this experience of … posting photos of myself”. First, he started in a more measured way, publishing images that could generate some engagement to publicize his work, or when he was feeling especially handsome at some point. He then began to think: “I will become more at ease when dealing with my self-image publicly”.

When we talked, I showed some old and newer publications on his social media profile. In one of them, in 2017, Martim inserted two images: in the first selfie, taken indoors, he has big curly hair and a mustache, and has a white light on his face, making the rest of the image darker; in the other, he photographed himself in the street, showing a full beard, with short hair, in a more yellowish light. In the caption he wrote the following: “Today-curl-mustache + tbt-pompadour. Salvador-Belgrade, 2017”. Martim explains: “This photo wasn’t for any activity. That picture was brave. Brave for me, right? Because I thought … I was trying to erotically vibrate in the world. Because I felt that I was beautiful”. In that case, then, there wasn’t a negotiation with shame justified by the promotion of some of his work, but simply the idea of making his selfies, taken at different times, visible. On the other hand, he used at that moment (as a way also to dialogue with his shame) the common practice on social media of sharing old images with the hashtag “tbt” (“Throwback Thursday”):

There was this thing a little tbt, and also a conscious exercise like “Martim, stop, it’s okay, post the fucking photo”, “don’t you like the photo of someone you think is beautiful?”, “Don’t you like it when someone, anyway …”, “it’s okay, this is also part of the engine”, “you’re not living off this” — me talking to myself. Because my fear is to turn into a compliment junkie, to post a photo like “love me, I’m needy”. Fortunately, I don’t get to that point. But finally, I think it’s cool to post, to feel wanted, it’s okay.

It is interesting to note that, besides his claim about a family history of shame related to self-image, what seems to make a difference in his daily selfie practice is also a gradual experimentation with digital platforms and ways of exhibiting himself on them.

Like Martim, other participants also created ways to overcome the shame of photographing and sharing their images. Teresa, a 28-year-old psychologist, repeatedly told me that she is ashamed of taking selfies, even though she still takes them on a daily basis. Therefore, she creates situations in which the selfie becomes a playful tool for ironic dialogue with her own practice. For example, she got used to photographing herself in the mirror of her apartment building’s elevator, and shares the images on her Instagram as a way of playing with the language of the selfie, often associated with moments of exhibition. “Where did this idea of taking pictures in the elevator come from?”, I ask. “I think it’s funny,” Teresa explains, “to show that I’m not on the beach, understand? I think it’s cool. And my ‘today’s look’ is always a little upset, because I’m going to work and it’s sunny”. This type of photo, usually taken in the moments when she leaves for work, ended up becoming a part of her routine, even becoming a “highlight” [2] of her Instagram profile stories, named “today’s look”, as a kind of satire on the practice itself. On the other hand, it is this situation generated by play and irony with the practice of the selfie itself that helps her to overcome the discomfort at photographing herself. In this “today’s look” proposal, she shares her selfies trying to parody an imaginary of presentation in which there would only exists the disclosure of good moments:

It goes against the idea of showing the clothes, you know, but showing that I’m working. Life is not that cool. There was a day when I went out very shabby, and with my hair like that, and I looked in the mirror and said “I can’t post beautiful pictures, because most of the time I’m like this”. I was so
fucking tired, with bags under my eyes. So the idea is a little bit like that.

Teresa refers to a sequence of two images, taken in the elevator mirror, published on her Instagram stories. In the first, she is dressed for some occasion, wearing a dress, heels, gold bracelets and, with her hair tied up, she shows gold earrings and make up. Making a montage over the photo, Teresa writes: “this Instagram shows”. In the other selfie, published in sequence, she appears in a more casual outfit, without makeup and with her hair less tidy. In text editing, she now writes: “this Instagram doesn’t show”. “This one, in which I was wonderful, looking like a diva, I would publish this one. This one I wouldn’t publish. This one I would publish”, Teresa tells me, alternating between one image and another with the slide of a finger on the tablet on which I was showing her own publications. “But you published both”, I say. “Yeah … but at the end of the day I publish, understand?”, she replies. There is, then, a joke with what is made visible or not on social media, at the same time that it allows for the creation of mechanisms to insert selfie practice into a playful environment capable of facilitating its realization, and thereby reducing the feeling of shame.

This negotiation with shame, on the other hand, ends up being built little by little, through different experimentations. When we talked the first time, Teresa was emphatically disgusted with the practice of selfie, despite the fact that she constantly photographed herself: “I hate taking selfies, I can’t stand it”, she told me at the time. In a conversation almost a year later, her perspective had changed slightly, as did her selfie practice, which, since I started observing, had intensified. Although she still remains uncomfortable in several situations, Teresa says she feels more secure now.

Through greater experiencing, her discomfort with the selfie decreased, even though the shame still remains, generating some moments of conflict over the practice. In one of the images published in her gallery on Instagram, for example, Teresa photographs herself inside a car, from a bottom-up angle, showing her dog’s face in the foreground, resting in her leg, and in the background she shows her own smiling face. In the caption she just put this: “#tbt”. She explained to me that this is a photo taken some time before, but that at the moment she preferred to keep it and not publish it. “Yeah, I didn’t publish it … I’m going to tell you, oh my god, I’m going to tell you it was because of my belly and my arm, do you believe it?”, she reveals to me. “Then I said ‘my god, fuck it’”, Teresa tells me, laughing. And then she decided to publish it, sometime later, using the proposal of the hashtag “throwback Thursday”. “I thought it wasn’t a photo that could go on Instagram. But I love this photo, then one day …” she decided to ignore her shame and share it.

It can be noted that this negotiation with shame involves not only the visibility of a digital self-portrait, but also the way the body engages with the selfie practice itself. According to William James (1950b), emotions (and therefore experiences of shame) are bodily effects. But also, in the case of the experiences followed in this study, it is possible to observe different modes of learning and developing selfie practices through the way bodies affect and are affected by shame in the production and sharing of self-portraits. Teresa, for example, hesitates in the publication of her selfie, feeling ashamed of the parts of her body that become visible after the image is shared, at the same time as it was her bodily posture that guided the production of the image. Martim, as seen before, told me about his gradual learning of a “corporality of the selfie”, directly entangled with a constant experimentation (also through the body) with the embarrassment of photographing himself. In other words, it is about, as Vinciane Despret wrote about emotion and body, “experiences making bodies and bodies making experiences” [3]. This is a joint production of the body and shame that involves images, visibilities, platforms and interactions with others.

Talking with the participants and observing their behaviors, it was possible to analyze, as in the case of Teresa, the existence of a shame that characterizes the practice of the selfie in two (often complementary) ways: one related to the way their own appearance will be received by the other; and the other related to the act of self-photography. Teresa reported situations in which she often felt ashamed to photograph herself in public, stretching out her arm to take a selfie, and also to share this image on some social network. Thinking in terms of Goffman’s (1959) microsociology, these two aspects dialogue with the way in which we present ourselves to the other in our everyday life. According to Scheff (2003, 2000), for example,
shame is not only part of social interactions, it is also the premier social emotion. It is, according to him, what emerges from a threat (or sense of threat) to the social bond. In this sense, shame is part of the “family of emotions and feelings that arise through seeing self negatively, if even only slightly negatively, through the eyes of others” [4].

Considered a very common emotion in everyday life, shame is also related to the gradual introduction of selfies into the participants’ day-to-day lives. Or, in other words: shame is part of the construction of the selfie as an everyday practice. Martim, for example, since his “first selfie”, has gradually grown accustomed to this type of self-exposure on social media, negotiating with the sense of shame and the desire to photograph himself and share his images. Meanwhile, Teresa puts herself in conflict with a practice she has started to develop constantly while feeling embarrassed to show that she practices it (thus developing playful and ironic ways to alleviate the fear of embarrassing certain social bonds). More important, however, in addition to perceiving this construction of shame as an anticipation of a threat to the social bond, as defined by Scheff (2000), is to understand how the relationship between the selfie and shame arises from experience, and how shame is also part of the stabilization of the selfie as a practice. In other words, Martim and Teresa help me to understand, from their first experiments with the selfie, how it can be shaped as a practice of interaction with others. It does not mean that they are no longer uncomfortable when taking a selfie. On the contrary, shame will be present precisely because selfie practice is part of our daily self-presentation to others, when we negotiate (with shame, even) the way in which we manage the impressions we try to produce. As Goffman writes, “embarrassment is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behavior but part of this orderly behavior itself” [5].

Therefore, as part of everyday social dynamics, the shame linked to the practice of the selfie is not restricted to Martim and Teresa, but is also present in the youngest research participants, Gabriel and Mônica, both students aged 17 and 18 at the time, who were born immersed in a digital culture guided by social media. Gabriel, for example, told me that he felt embarrassed after including me on his shortlist of “close friends” on Instagram stories. Gabriel explained to me: “But, just like that, I thought about the research side, ‘I won’t upset the research, I’ll remain calm’, so only on the first day that I was tense”. Because I was still an unknown person to him, but having access to his most intimate publications (restricted to a small number of followers), I ended up increasing his discomfort in relation to his self-exposure. And this, especially, related to the practice of the selfie, since, in addition to the even more intimate and direct forums such as in WhatsApp messages, the “close friends” Instagram Stories is one of the only environments in which Gabriel usually shares selfies. My presence, however, was gradually diluted among his friends who view and comment on his images.

Shame, for Gabriel, is not only built into the relationship with the specific public that has access to his publications, but also in the very construction of the selfie as a practice that results in a photographic image of oneself. In many of his self-portraits, he creates some ways of hiding part of his face, inserting some text on top, applying distortion effects or choosing a frame that leaves him partially out of the image. He told me the following: “So, 95% of cases I do this, to show a little bit of my face”. In some moments, it becomes something playful (similar to Teresa’s way of negotiating with her shame), when he experiments, for example, with photographing himself together with friends in different poses and sharing the result in a playful manner. Or, it becomes almost an aesthetic characteristic of his stories on Instagram, which ends up connecting directly with the discomfort at photographing himself. It is in the Instagram Stories, therefore, that Gabriel says he feels more comfortable publishing photographs more associated with his daily life, and less focused on a more standard photographic aesthetic. It is there, then, where his selfies normally appear, even with a hidden, partial or cropped face.

Mônica, unlike Gabriel, does not usually hide her face in the selfies she takes, but, like him, she prefers to share some types of images only in her “close friends” shortlist of stories. “I feel more at ease, much more at ease, on close friends to post a selfie than the normal stories”, she tells me, placing great emphasis on the word “very”. Mônica, in fact, is more selective with the photos published in the Instagram “gallery”, while in “stories” it is possible to find ordinary shared moments. When a photo of this type, therefore, becomes “public”, it is usually shared only in the most restricted and controlled public mode possible on Instagram,
in the “close friends” stories. “My Instagram is private,” Mônica tells me, “so I only accept who I want to accept. Even so, I don’t feel comfortable sharing this [selfie] with a lot of people who I don’t usually see every day, that I don’t feel this, you know, closeness”.

In both Gabriel’s and Mônica’s cases, embarrassment, therefore, is best managed in a way in which it is possible to select an audience for their selfies. Not only is the embarrassment of sharing our own image part of the experience of self-photography, it also begins to demonstrate a negotiation that involves the ways in which we present ourselves according to specific audiences. Since Martim with his first selfies, Teresa with her ironies or Gabriel and Mônica with the use of “close friends” list, it is an experimentation not only with shame, but also with visibility.

### Experimenting with visibility

While I followed the participants’ photographic routine, I saw that Teresa had shared on Instagram Stories one of her daily selfies taken in the elevator mirror. In it, she appears with her hair down, covering one side of her face, and wearing a white dress and necklace. At the bottom of the image, in a white font, she wrote: “Images of the dragon coming out of the cave”. As I was curious to know what it was about, I texted her. “Because I spent two days watching Netflix hahahaha”, Teresa answers me. She had enjoyed the holiday resting at home, returning to her work routine that day. It reminded me of the sequence of selfies that I described on the previous pages, in which she wrote “this Instagram shows” in one of them, and “this Instagram doesn’t show” in the other. In addition to functioning as a way of confronting, in practice, the discomfort of photographing herself, these two selfies demonstrate an interesting metaphor of what I am calling, in this topic, “experimenting with visibility”.

It is possible to perceive, through the everyday practice of the participants, a way to interact with the production and sharing of self-portraits that, in addition to incorporating a constant negotiation with shame, is also built into the ways in which selfies become visible or invisible to specific audiences. The choice of recipients, and the performances developed in relation to each audience, become part of a constant experimentation with visibility through the practice of the selfie. The image of the “dragon coming out of the cave”, taken by Teresa, for example, was visible only to those who were authorized by her to follow her personal profile on Instagram. Meanwhile, Gabriel and Mônica, as previously seen, only make their selfies visible to an even more restricted audience, composed of those selected for their “close friends” list.

This negotiation with visibility, in Teresa’s case, is developed slightly differently in relation to the other participants. She currently maintains two separate accounts on Instagram: a public professional profile to publicize her work as a psychologist and mindfulness instructor; and another personal, private account where she shares photos more related to her everyday life with friends. Only on the professional account, for example, do her name and surname appear, while the personal account is purposefully more difficult to find (I, for example, discovered it only after we talked in person). In the first account, there are photos of her lectures, publicity posters and, occasionally, some selfies. In the second one, there are several photos with friends, family, and pets, taken in a home environment, on the beach, in bars, and of course many more selfies.

Even after that separation of her digital presentation of self into two different profiles, it keeps changing. “This second Instagram was supposed to be 30 friends, but they’ve already become 260”, Teresa tells me a year after I met her. Meanwhile, the two different accounts have become even more delimited, even though the personal one has lost some of the intimacy initially imagined by her. “If there were 10 friends, I would be someone else on social media. So, 15 friends, I would be someone else”, she explains to me. Therefore, how she appears on Instagram through her selfies changes not only according to the type of profile created (personal or professional) but also according to the audience she addresses. The selfies that Teresa sends to friends in WhatsApp groups, for example, are different from those shared on Instagram — which, in turn,
differ according to the chosen sharing mode.

“There is a group of friends [on Whatsapp] who are mothers. I’m not a mother, though. There are three of us, and we regularly send pictures of our tired face. They send their pictures of their face, like this, tired, ‘I’m fucked up’, and send a photo”, she tells me. “Is it something that stays in that closed circle, in that specific group?”, I ask. Teresa replies: “Yes, but if I had a little more courage, I would post it on Instagram”. It is a production of shame that also reveals how everyday representations before others translates into different experimentations with what becomes visible or invisible in sharing selfies, in a relationship with networks permeated by specific conditions of visibility.

In Teresa’s case, this difference in impression management (Goffman, 1959) on her two Instagram profiles, involved with each expected or perceived audience, becomes quite evident. Not only do selfies, as images, often appear as visibly distinct, but the selfie practice itself develops in a specific way on each profile, together with the representational practice before the other. In other words, it can be said that it is a multiplicity which James (1950a) named the “social self”. According to him, we present ourselves differently to each group or individual we interact with:

Properly speaking, a man [sic] has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. [...] But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. [...] We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club-companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends. From this there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves [...]. [6]

In these terms, Teresa’s “social self” is developed differently according to the audience with which she is in dialogue: friends in one profile, general public in another, close friends in private messages. In the professional account, for example, whether on Instagram Stories or Gallery, she usually shares selfies taken in environments related to some aspect of her professional activity, such as in her office, before attending a patient, or in her mindfulness meetings. When that doesn’t happen, the place doesn’t feature prominently in the image, and the face in the foreground ends up working as a way of calling attention to the dissemination of some information that will accompany the image in writing (in the caption or above the image), which Teresa herself called “photo-bait”.

Experimenting with visibility, in Teresa’s case, involves managing the representation in each profile, delimiting what can be seen or not depending on the audience with which she is interacting. However, precisely because it is a constant experimentation, the impression generated can sometimes become incompatible with that initially desired. Some selfies can cause embarrassment as they are interpreted as an inappropriate publication for the front [7] developed daily for that specific profile. “I post and I regret it sometimes”, Teresa tells me. Then she told me about a situation in which she published an image and subsequently realized that she had generated an unexpected impression: “The other day I posted and regretted it, my kitchen with my puppy. [...] Then I posted, and a friend said ‘this had to be on the personal [profile], right?’”. “Was it something that you posted on your professional profile?”, I asked, to confirm. “Yes. Then I deleted it immediately”, she told me, showing her concern in maintaining a front suitable for the type of impression she intends to achieve in her professional interactions.

This experimentation with visibility, through the impressions expected of what constitutes professional or personal content, also appears in the daily selfie practice of other participants, but in a less demarcated fashion. As seen in the previous topic, for example, Martim’s professional and personal life mixes different
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selfies on the same Instagram account. A shirtless self-portrait lying on the bed can also help to publicize his next artistic presentation. Or it may simply be a trace of his daily life, of his intimacy. The very character of experimentation with the visibility provided by social media such as Instagram, for example, makes public-private relations re-articulated on a daily basis. Some authors even argue that it is not possible to characterize the selfie as a private or public activity (Walsh and Baker, 2017), since it ends up challenging the very distinction between public and private in social life. Even if this occurs, the interesting thing about following the participants’ routine is to understand how the experience of taking photographs connects aspects of personal and professional everyday life. This is possible when thinking about selfies from a perspective of trajectory capable of connecting different practices and relationships, including those linked to a dynamic of visibility and impression management. The relationship between the public and the private becomes dynamic, reconfigured with each situated performance, that is, through each type of management of representation and impression (and visibility) built into the everyday practice of the selfie. It is an experimentation with visibility that is part of what Amparo Lasén calls “digital remediation of the everyday”, including “the extraordinary of the ordinary, the unsettling and sometimes painful strangeness of the banal and habitual, configured by plots of power and resistance from which emerges entanglements of the public, the private and the intimate, the personal and the political, where we affect and we are affected” [8].

Even in an ambivalence between what is public or private, personal or professional, in two different social media profiles or not, the everyday selfie practice of all participants (each with its own specificities) involves experimentation and negotiation with visibility through the management of their situated performances. And I use this term precisely to call attention to the always situated ways in which experiences develop and situate themselves as relevant (Savransky, 2016). I am not referring to a localized experience in terms of a defined geographical space, but rather to an outline of its trajectory that are important to the formation of a specific situation — in this case, the dynamics of visibility through selfies.

It can be said that this experimentation with visibility, based on the practices (also situated) highlighted in this article, dialogues with what Goffman (1959) studied as impression management in social settings. In his research, the author used a perspective of theatrical performance, based on an “dramaturgical approach”. It is not a matter of perceiving characteristics typical of the theater in everyday life, but of thinking about it in terms of the ways in which the individual performs before others. In this situation, he “will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation” [9]. Therefore, Goffman aimed to understand the everyday techniques we use to try to maintain and control certain impressions. That is, he was concerned with the “participant’s dramaturgical problems of presenting the activity before others” [10]. In other words:

[...] ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. Scripts even in the hands of unpracticed players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify. [11]

It is important to highlight that the study by Goffman (1959) is based only on face-to-face interactions, presenting itself as a sociological perspective focused on the study of social life in a certain delimited physical space. However, there are studies based on Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective to research relationships that go beyond the face-to-face and are not limited to a physical space, therefore involving interactions on digital platforms (Hogan, 2010; Serrano-Puche, 2012). In the case of this paper, this helps me not only to understand how some of the representation and impression management techniques described by Goffman adapt to image sharing social media, but also presents an experience of visibility that is part of everyday selfie practice.

As I have already indicated at some points in this article, Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor (rearticulated
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for an interpretation of the relationships on digital platforms), allows me to understand some strategies used by the participants to perform themselves before others through the practice of the selfie — and, therefore, to manage impressions and to develop a customized personal front for each specific audience. As seen in the previous topic, for example, Mônica says she feels more comfortable when she can control the audience that is able to view her selfies, either by sending them directly to specific friends (through messaging apps like WhatsApp) or using “close friends” on Instagram Stories, where she can specifically select the audience. It is not, therefore, only the shame that is negotiated through the choice of audience, but also an experimentation with visibility that involves a more intimate front development to which only the closest friends will have access. As Gabriel told me in one of our conversations: “I think what the ‘close friends’ opened up, when it was created, was an expression, and even communication, with the most intimate people and as such, with moments that are common, ordinary”. In a way, he ends up talking about an experimentation with visibility, through selfies, which depends on the way in which specific platforms enable or not techniques to control the impressions of a representation, and also to regulate the audiences to which these representations are directed.

As much as, in the context of digital social media, multiple audiences are often imposed at each interaction — requiring some strategies different from those used in face-to-face meetings, as suggested by Marwick and boyd (2011) — platforms like Instagram start increasingly offering mechanisms so that the user can better control their representations according to each audience. The “close friends” feature of Instagram Stories, for example, was implemented in the middle of the fieldwork of this ethnography, currently becoming Mônica and Gabriel’s favorite way to share their selfies. In addition, this management of the public can also be carried out from a private account, restricting who can and cannot follow and view the published images, like Teresa with her personal profile, as well as Mônica and Gabriel. In this sense, the negotiations between shame and visibility, from an experience perspective, are daily transformed through situated practices that involve the production and sharing of self-portraits, but also through a dynamism operated by different digital platforms.

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article was not to treat shame as a personal characteristic, or to identify what is visible or not on image sharing, but to treat them as experience. That is, the intention was not to investigate people’s perception or feelings about shame or visibility, but to understand the practical consequences of shame in their everyday selfie practice, observing what develops in practice, involving image sharing, interactions, platforms and modes of visibility. Through ethnographic work on participants’ photographic routine, I argue that shame is part of the daily construction of the selfie as a practice. This happens, also, in the sense of recognizing it as an experimentation capable of, starting from the participants’ first selfies, becoming present in the trajectory of conformation (and learning) of this kind of practice as a form of interaction with the other.

This article, therefore, proposes the observation of the everyday construction of shame from experience, considering, in this case, the stabilization of the selfie as a practice. The participants, together with the observations of their routines, helped me to understand how the selfie is constituted as a practice of interaction and representation before others. In constant dialogue with different digital platforms, they develop what I called negotiations with shame and visibility, revealing their own ways of performing in relation to different audiences, re-articulations between public and private and daily experimentations with ways of photographing and sharing images.

This article also outlines a proposal to establish some bases of the relationship between selfie, shame and visibility through experience. However, I believe that further research would be necessary to understand more deeply, for example, the actions (including algorithmic) associated with image sharing platforms that affect and modulate some of the everyday experiences of self-photography. Nevertheless, the practices
detailed in this study begin to give some insight into how the management of “social selves”, experimentations with shame and modes of visibility of selfies often develop through the mechanisms from which digital platforms articulate content arrangements, publishing tools and social interactions. In the midst of an intense digital image sharing environment, constant experimentation with selfie practice also shows itself to be a daily experimentation with shame and visibility.

About the author

Leonardo Pastor holds a Ph.D. in contemporary communication and culture at Federal University of Bahia. He was a visiting researcher at the Faculty of Political and Social Science at the Complutense University of Madrid, and is currently a researcher at the Center for Studies on Bodies, Sensitivities and Environments (ECSAS/UFBA).

E-mail: leopbr [at] gmail [dot] com

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES/Brazil).

Notes

1. Unfortunately, for ethical reasons and by agreement with all participants, their images cannot be included in this text. In addition, their names have been changed to avoid possible identification.

2. Although the Instagram “stories” feature is based on sharing images that will be deleted in 24 hours, there is the possibility of keeping some visible in the “highlight” format, displayed on the user’s profile for access at any time by his/her followers.


7. I use the term “front” here in the sense developed by Goffman’s (1959, p. 22) dramaturgical perspective for social micro-relationships: “is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance”.

8. Lasén, 2019, p. 314. Translation by the author. Original quote: “[...] la remediación digital de lo cotidiano, que también comprende lo extraordinario de lo ordinario, la inquietante y a veces dolorosa extrañeza de lo banal y habitual, configurado por tramas de poder y resistencia donde se enredan lo público, lo privado y lo íntimo, lo personal y lo político, dónde afectamos y somos afectados.”


10. Ibid.


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**Editorial history**

Received 25 February 2021; accepted 3 March 2021.

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“My first selfie”: Experimenting with shame and visibility by Leonardo Pastor.

doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11642](http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11642)