

Haunting shame and haunted bodies: Mixed feelings and entangled times in the online sharing of personal images by Amparo Lasén and Héctor Puente

Abstract

Taking photos of oneself and sharing them on social media or instant messaging apps is a practice haunted by shame. Although both media and popular wisdom view it as a simple exercise in narcissism and vanity, research into this practice shows contradictions, ambivalence, and tensions. Drawing on an empirical study carried out with young adults in Madrid, we explore the ambivalence, or “conflicting desires” as one interviewee put it, associated with affective and attention economies involved in this practice. Despite being a common, everyday activity, taking photos of oneself, seeing oneself in them, and sharing them generates mixed feelings, ranging from pleasure at seeing and playing around with one’s image, to estrangement and disquiet. We analyze how different kinds of shame are elicited. We also explore the time entanglement of both shame and the sharing of personal images online, in which memories of the past are intertwined with forms of continuity and discontinuity between the past and the present, and with the expectation of what will be remembered in the future.

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Introduction

This paper is part of a research project focusing on shame and shaming in connection with digital photographic practices, specifically selfies, portraits, and videos that we take of ourselves and share on social media and instant messaging apps. In this project, we study forms of attention, attachment, and shared agency between people, devices, and platforms, which occur in the ways of affecting and being affected that are inherent to shame haunting these practices. In sharing our images, we expose ourselves to

the gaze and judgment of others, while at the same time reciprocally participating in the assessment of images shared by third parties. Our analysis explores the public feelings and personal emotions which are mediated by these images, highlighting vulnerabilities associated with sociability and intimacy, fears of disconnection, inadequacies linked to social mandates and expectations, gender relations and meanings, the ambivalence of one's relationship with one's own body, and shaming as a method of social control.

Shame is an ordinary affect: "Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergences. They are things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency"; they are both public feelings and the stuff intimacy is made of [1]. "Ordinary" refers to everyday life and to its mundane, frivolous, banal, and even vulgar aspects; it also refers to order and orders (Goffman, 1959; Garfinkel, 1967), to how rules and regulations are established, maintained, and questioned, to what is considered appropriate and inappropriate, such as rules which determine what is and is not vulgar. These aspects allude to that which is susceptible to shame, as well as to ways of shaming and condemning both practices and people considered inappropriate [2].

Shame is a key affect in sociality (Scheff, 1990) and is linked to adapting (or rather, failing to adapt) to social rules and expectations to which we are subject. It is an ordinary affect not only due to its link to how our lives unfold, but also because it is directly connected to social codes of conduct, *i.e.*, to social processes of structuring and exclusion. From this perspective, shame is a silent and collectively maintained mechanism for social control, which operates at the very core of subjectivity.

Shame is one of the most painful ordinary affects, because it directly affects our sense of our own worth (Scheler, 2004), subjectivity, and configuration as subjects, which are in turn directly linked to dynamics of recognition, mediated by digital practices and online spaces. Shame uncovers the ambiguity of sociability, intensified by the ever-present possibility of exposure and connection enabled by the Internet. Thus, shame is an emotional response to a lack of recognition by others or to misrecognition, such as when, for example, we are identified with a stereotype, as so often happens in online manifestations of misogyny, homophobia, fat phobia, and racism. Additionally, it is also a subjective and social affect, individual and collective; it occurs in the tensions and oscillations that define sociality. This tension is manifested in what Du Bois [3], called the double consciousness, a term coined to explain the experience of the configuration of black subjectivities in a white supremacist social order. This double consciousness refers to the painful experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of those who look at you with contempt and compassion, an image which does not correspond to how you see yourself. This also forms part of the everyday experience of exposing oneself to the assessment of others online. Moreover, the affective economies of recognition and shame are influenced by our specific social position on the hierarchical axes of gender, race, class, and sexuality (among others), meaning that not all social groups are equally vulnerable to shame (Harris-Perry, 2011).

In this paper we explore two aspects found during fieldwork. Firstly, we analyze the ambivalence and tensions that most participants mentioned in relation to taking and sharing personal photos online. Although they continuously engage in this practice, it generates mixed feelings, ranging from pleasure at seeing themselves, playing around with their image and charting their own evolution, to unease and estrangement upon seeing themselves in these digital images. Secondly, we explore the specific temporality of shame associated with these practices. We analyze the link between young adults' current experiences of shame and their experiences of having shared images online in the past, as well as the ways in which they presage and project themselves towards the future. The examples demonstrate how shame circulates and sticks (Ahmed, 2004) through embodied memories of past experiences of shame which haunt participants' current online experiences and sense of shame, even though the physical nature and appearance of their bodies may have changed. "Haunting is the sociality of living with ghosts"; it is a sociability that is at once tangible, tactile, ephemeral, and imaginary (Gordon, 2008), corresponding to how digital mediation intensifies absent presences of past experiences, bodies, appearances, and shame, which are articulated through fears and future projections, thereby sticking the haunting of shame (Javaid, 2019) to these practices.

Methods

The study of shame poses methodological difficulties, since it involves asking people to talk about an affect which itself induces concealment, disconnection, and the tendency not to talk about it and to pull the veil back over what has just been revealed. In our research, we therefore combined online questionnaires with e-mail interviews and in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted in two clearly differentiated phases.

In the case of online questionnaires, anonymity and the lack of interaction was believed to encourage a greater degree of sincerity. In e-mail interviews, the lack of face-to-face interaction and the asynchronous nature of the communication may have helped some more willing to talk about specific issues. Failing to receive recognition and then exposing one's own failure both elicit shame (Ahmed, 2004). Thus, during interviews, direct questions and conversations were avoided, and a roundabout approach adopted, always respecting the pace set by interviewees and their silences. Shame exposes failure and is considered a negative emotion. The need to expose oneself as someone with negative (and therefore inappropriate) feelings made the interviews difficult, since they generated even more shame.

Thus, it was important for the interviewer to listen very carefully to what was said, how it was said and what was concealed. It was also important to pay attention to participants' explicit reluctance to use the term shame. We were sensitive to the shame of feeling shame (Probyn, 2005), proposing instead other terms such as embarrassment, qualms, unease, or discomfort, which provided information about the affects felt and how they were interpreted. When researchers shared details about themselves and their similar experiences, as well as practice autoethnography, this helped the quality of research.

As well as enabling an initial mapping of situations, motives, and types of experiences of shame, the questionnaire was also used as a recruitment tool, since it included an invitation to respondents to continue collaborating, if they were interested. Research experience has shown that having interested participants improves the quality and richness of results obtained, particularly in the case of sensitive issues and affects such as shame.

We received 138 completed questionnaires, 87 from women, 50 from men, and one from a person with a nonbinary gender identity. A total of 16 interviews were held, eight by e-mail (six women and two men, all aged between 22 and 35 years, except for one woman aged 42 years) and eight face-to-face (five women and two men, all aged between 20 and 29 years, except for one woman aged 33 years and one man aged 35 years).

The authors of this article are from Madrid and for reasons of efficiency, proximity, and accessibility, most interviewees lived in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, and most also had mid-level or university education. As regards their professional situations, some were students or unemployed, while others were in either part time or full-time employment. Interviews explored their habits and experiences in relation to sharing content online, which type of personal images they produced and shared and which they did not, their tastes and preferences and their views regarding what was and what was not appropriate to share. At the end of each in-depth face-to-face interview, we asked them to show us some photos they had shared online, and some they had saved on their smartphones. All interviews and data were fully transcribed and coded to carry out a qualitative socio-structural analysis.

Mixed feelings about bodies and their digital images

"I can't imagine a phone without a camera. I mean, for me, 60 percent of my phone is its camera." (woman,

33-year-old) Taking photos, sharing them, and deciding whether or not they should be shared has become a frequent, everyday, material, and discursive practice (Warfield, 2016) which determines the way we see and assess ourselves and how we view our body and appearance, as well as our self (Rettberg, 2014). The reflexivity engendered by the practice of taking selfies and sharing them online (see Pastor in this issue), with the complex game of gazes and positions involved when being at once photographer, model, set designer, audience, and curator (Lasén, 2015), facilitates the emergence of an affect such as shame. Indeed, reflexivity is also a condition of shame, since one is both the subject and the object of this affect in self-evaluation (Ahmed, 2004).

Shame emerges when something matters to us. It is linked to the ways in which our subjectivity is constructed and deconstructed in the play of attachments to objects, people, institutions, and ideas that are important to us and constitute us as subjects. This configuration and transformation of our subjectivity includes processes of embodiment. These affective dimensions that affect and shape our bodies emerge, involving learning to be affected and moved by other entities, both human and non-human (Latour, 2004; Grosz, 1994).

Our bodies are presented, represented, configured, and performed in the act of photographing or videoing oneself and communicating and sharing these images online. The experiences, situations, and emotions studied here are a further example that digital practices are never disembodied. Our bodies are continually affected by what we share, post, read, do, see, and feel online (Lasén, 2020).

The emotions that emerge during these practices operate to make and shape bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others (Ahmed, 2004). Moreover, shame is characterized by intense physicality, as evident in blushing (Goffman, 1956; Probyn, 2005) and all bodily sensations and gestures in which it is embodied, such as fleeing motions, cringing, and covering our faces to become smaller, shier, and more closed off; in short, to disappear.

The link between body and shame also intersects with inequality and social hierarchies. Those belonging to marginalized and subordinated groups are more likely to have common aspects of their bodies and lives framed as shameful (Probyn, 2005), as a means of social control. This is what happens with the natural hair of some individuals, as well as with menstruation as well as body and pubic hair in the case of women.

Another example of a physical trait culturally framed as shameful in itself is obesity, the ridiculing and shaming of which has been standard practice in popular culture, media, educational, and family contexts and on social media for decades (Hopson, 2019). This is evident in numerous testimonies in our research.

When the subordinate state which intensifies the shameful dimensions of the body coexists with a socialization characterized by being obliged and expected to be pleasing to others (as is the case with women), the result is an acute vulnerability to shame. During our research we came across examples of young women who recall the intense shame generated by posting photos of themselves in bikinis in which their pubic hair was visible. Some also talked about the ambivalence of overcoming this embarrassment in connection with posting photos showing underarm hair or menstrual stains, questioning the meanings connected to the body and women with which this feeling was associated. While they acknowledge that these images challenge gender controls and meanings, some continued to feel ashamed of or shamed by them.

One young female university student recounted how, after she had posted something in a thread in a student Facebook group, another member started to include, in his messages, photos of her with unwaxed underarm hair. This in turn initiated a conversation in which several other male members of the group mocked and insulted her, even posting comments of a sexual nature, thereby nullifying the content of her contribution to the debate, and effectively silencing her. Another example of male shaming used to discredit women, described by another young woman, was that of a former high school teacher. Her political ideals and the ways that she dressed were criticized, described as “slut”.

These examples, and the tone in which young women recounted them, clearly demonstrate how shame, and

its counterpoint, pride, are political emotions associated with our bodies in terms of gender traits, race, and sexuality, among others. They have consequences for public and political participation, because participation implies a demand for recognition, and shame and shaming result from an intentional and systematic lack of recognition. The same is true in frequent cases of slut-shaming suffered by women online, and are explored in several papers in this issue. Thus, shame affects who we are politically, prompting us either to avoid public space or to become angry and mobilize in response to this misrecognition (Ahmed, 2004; Probyn, 2005). In the words of another female interviewee, sharing personal images online “incites conflicting desires” (woman, 22-year-old).

During the interviews we frequently found evidence of this ambivalent attitude to selfies and portraits. Most of the participants, both men and women, admitted to a constant fear of shame since they did not like how they looked in photos and did not consider themselves to be photogenic. The image they had of themselves in their minds or when they looked in a mirror was better than that shown in their photos: “you have an image of yourself, and then suddenly you take a photo and you say: let’s see how it turns out. I’m always much prettier in my head.” (woman, 23-year-old). Participants claimed not to know how to pose, or that they always looked ugly in photos, were worried about looking artificial, did not know how to smile, or always asked friends for advice before sharing a selfie, just to make sure they looked all right in it. They claimed to be constantly (and fairly unsuccessfully) searching for strategies to make them look better in photos, or even, paradoxically, said they purposefully made themselves ugly by pulling faces, “because when you intentionally look awful, no one can say anything about it” (man, 30-year-old). “It’s the face I’m pulling that’s ugly, not me.” (woman, 26-year-old). The deforming gesture does the face-work (Goffman, 1959).

However, despite not liking how they looked in photos and the consequent unease generated by sharing them on social media sites such as Instagram, they admitted to taking a large number of selfies. They did so for themselves, to see how they looked, trying different poses, charting the continuity and evolution of their body, “the progression of my belly” (woman, 26-year-old), or experiment and perhaps surprise themselves: “you may perhaps expect something of your face that can’t be seen.” (woman, 23-year-old) “Because I sometimes say, ‘I’m going to take a selfie,’ but not to send, just really to strengthen my sense of self, or to see how I feel at that moment.” (woman, 26-year-old). “One day I may have used more makeup than usual, so I say: ‘let’s see how cute I look’. But then I don’t post it or anything. I keep it for myself.” (woman, 23-year-old).

When interviewees did not consciously acknowledge this ambivalence, upon being asked at the end of the interview to show us the photos saved on their smartphones, they were surprised at the large number of photos they had of themselves, especially after claiming “I don’t like being in photos; I don’t like either my face or my body.” (man, 22-year-old).

These comments reflected, at an experience-based level, Elizabeth Grosz’s (1994) notion of “volatile bodies”. The meeting of bodies, subjectivities, perceptions, and digital technologies and inscriptions reveals the volatility of the materiality of our bodies. We aim to capture it, albeit momentarily, through a photographic practice which, paradoxically, becomes the proof and footprint of the instability and uncontrollable existence of bodies. Being volatile and uncanny bodies may explain one young woman’s interest in the “26,000 photos I’ve taken of myself in the elevator mirror, which I neither share nor delete.” (woman, 21-year-old) The ordinary practice of taking selfies as a pleasurable (or not so pleasurable) means of relating to themselves, without being able to explain why, points to a set of complex dynamics of connection and disconnection with one’s body and with one’s self.

Tensions between affective and attention economies

The ambivalence linked to the shame of displaying pictures of oneself involves both a knowledge and a

feeling of the body as being out-of-place, which in turn force subjects to reassess themselves and their own existence (Probyn, 2005) in relation to current rules and expectations. Shame can then be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative experience (Ahmed, 2004). Shame forms part of our affective economies and sharing images and other online content is also involved. As one woman said in relation to comments and likes posted in response to photos: “They are emotional payment, the currency used for all this. Otherwise, what purpose do they serve?” (woman, 33-year-old).

These practices entangle a tension between affective economies of seeking gratification of recognition and approval, and an attention economy with which recognition is directly related (Marwick, 2015). Attention economies are a central part of social media and online exchanges (Terranova, 2012). Participants explicitly recognized this when they described their photos as a means of saying “look here,” and “look at me,” in a context characterized by an intensification of cries for attention and their commercialization (Lara Rodríguez, 2018).

One of the concerns linked to shame, recognized particularly by women, was that these cries for attention were perceived as inappropriate and egocentric. Men tended more to feel uncomfortable with seeming to need attention (*i.e.*, needing to “be seen”), since this prompted certain suspicions regarding their independence and autonomy. “It’s just, I don’t want to post this for other people (...) nor do I want to give the impression that I want to be seen ... You want people to see you, and see you like that, you know, looking good, or looking strong or whatever, but I don’t like that feeling, that desire, that’s probably behind it. I’ve never felt very comfortable with that.” (man, 30-year-old). Thus, different forms of female and male socialization, with their rules and expectations, also influenced the ways in which men and women were affected by the same unease and threat of shame.

To avoid feeling shame, to avoid failure in these practices, one must measure and calculate how and how much to expose oneself so as not to “bore” or ask for too much attention from one’s contacts. This is a complicated calculation which, paradoxically, requires an increasing amount of effort due to the ever-changing technical and social configurations of these digital spaces and online sharing platforms.

During the interviews, we repeatedly found that the images participants claimed to share were divided into two main categories: attractive photos and funny photos. The first demonstrate technical skill and were designed “to incite envy”. They were shared on Instagram feeds, on which people who do not like how they look in photos do not usually share personal images, since they considered it a space for exhibiting pretty and original things, not one’s personal life, and certainly not one’s face or body, unless they are deemed to be “attractive”. Despite this, however, they admitted (as reported in previous studies) that selfies and self-portraits generated more feedback, attention, and recognition (Lasén, 2015). “I’d post this one, for example, because I look good in it, and I know that it will trigger a more or less affectionate response. But I’m aware when I post a photo like this that that’s exactly what I need — affection; that’s what I’m missing at that moment.” (woman, 21-year-old).

Funny images are photos and videos that are mainly shared in stories and instant messaging apps used with friends and relatives. The feeling of being inappropriate is mitigated by subjects’ attempts to be authentic and to share positive traits, such as being fun and carefree (Kanai, 2019). Aspects that have been already highlighted in ongoing discussion about ephemeral media (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016) and calibrated amateurism to craft contrived authenticity (Abidin, 2017), these images were rewarded with comments from contacts and friends which “are also compliments” (woman, 33-year-old) and served as a form of recognition that dissipated shame. In this case, “looking awful” was a sign of authenticity and intimacy. Moreover, reciprocity exists with those contacts who also share this type of image, with no intention on either side of increasing vulnerability. The temporary display of stories and the ability to decide who will see them are technical traits established to ensure that privacy associated with funny photos generates neither shame nor vulnerability.

Humor helps bestow appropriateness on a physical appearance considered ugly, such as when someone pulls a face or uses the funny costumes filter available on Snapchat (such as dog ears or sex change or baby

face filters). Fooling around or larking about is not something that can be represented; it is embodied, it unfolds through proxemic, expansive communication, with a view to going viral (Martínez de Albéniz, 2017). It becomes a strategy for freeing oneself of the threat of shame. One purposefully fails to reproduce the appropriate “attractive” image, embodying instead the appropriate “funny” image in accordance with humorous logic and memetic aesthetic of digital culture (Goriunova, 2015, 2013). This aesthetic encourages intimacy and participation and modifies the costs and affective economies of showing oneself in an inappropriate manner and failing to comply with norms of appearance.

Not only do these types of photo show positive traits that are rewarded with positive remarks, they also demonstrate that the person posting them understands the medium and its codes, and knows how to behave and how display themselves appropriately: “It’s always a real scream and it’s always a WhatsApp photo, but only because they’re funny and make you laugh. I don’t stop being myself, despite being pathetic; it’s still me and it’s funny, and we’ve all been like that at one time or another.” (woman, 21-year-old). The aim is to avoid the shame of being made to look like a fool through inappropriate embodiment in photos by deliberately making a fool of oneself. Thus, in a somewhat risky balance, that gesture, that face, that extravagant or grotesque pose prevents your body from becoming a joke or a meme, as so often happens, for example, to obese people (Hopson, 2019).

According to some of the young women we interviewed, the “shame/disgust/complex about my body”, coupled with a desire to take photos of oneself and share those images with others, gave rise to other contradictory situations. Ambivalences such as when they are trying to decide whether or not to share pictures of their bodies which could be considered sexy, since they believe they should not exhibit themselves in seductive poses or expose certain parts of their body. “My goodness, that’s so exaggerated! There’s no way I’m posting that!” (man, 35-year-old).

On other occasions, when the photo flattered their figure and they saw themselves as more attractive than usual, they feared seeming unauthentic and being suspected of touching up their photos. They were concerned about posting photos in which they did not look like themselves. This was another recurring ambivalence: fear and shame about being seen as trying to be something they were not, and being judged for it, when being judged and generating opinions was, at the same time, precisely one of the key characteristics and purposes of these spaces and practices and their attention economies.

These practices unfold and embody the ambivalence or impossibility of complying with the social mandates of being autonomous, logical, and in control, since we are all vulnerable, social subjects entangled in interdependent relationships of recognition which make up both our private lives and our public presence. In the words of one young woman whose interview was a succession of paradoxes and contradictory acknowledgments: “I try to maintain as logical a mindset as possible, but in the end, as you can see, it still affects me. And that’s so infuriating because I’d really like it not to affect me. But it does.” (woman, 23-year-old).

This acknowledgment of how she felt affected and of how shame and the threat of shame adhered to these practices told how shame was linked to self-protection based on self-value. This was particularly visible when self-love was frustrated and the situation generated a fear of being objectified, humiliated, or made to look small (Scheler, 2004).

When interviewees talked about not looking good in photos, they were not only referring to seeing themselves as ugly or obese, but also to the fact that they did not always look like themselves, which was itself a kind of misrecognition. They also noted that gestures and attitudes portrayed in some images gave a misleading impression of what was actually happening (it looks like I’m tired, or out of it, or angry, or spaced out). The images that they did not like also included those shared by others in which they themselves or the place in which the photo was taken (their house, bedroom, bathroom, etc.) was not in a state to be seen by others. They were not “perfect”, *i.e.*, they have not done their hair or shaved their legs or were not wearing the right clothes. Not looking good may also refer to the context in which the photo or video was taken and what it says about us: our bedroom was a mess, the sitting room was dirty, there was

laundry all over the bathroom floor. Here again we see the tension around the control and management of impressions made by what was shown (Goffman, 1959), in order to ensure a good image that also avoided criticism and the danger associated with too much perfection, which was perceived as fake. It was the tension between a sociability and attention in which we were recognized in a positive light, and an intimacy in which we were recognized as authentic.

Both types of photos, attractive and funny ones, had one thing in common: they projected a favorable image of the subject and their everyday life, since the etiquette of these online spaces did not allow for sharing troubles, misfortunes or problems, but rather only happy moments. However, since they are spaces of sociability and intimacy, it was also important to develop and maintain a certain degree of authenticity. One must always be careful not to be “too perfect or too interesting” (woman, 23-year-old) or one ran the risk of being dismissed as a show off. As another young woman stated in her interview: “I think the real magic is when a picture seems to reflect something that happened by chance, even though it didn’t really. For me, that’s the secret of Instagram’s success.” (woman, 33-year-old).

Here we see the tension between the need to be appropriate in order to avoid the affective price of shame, and the need to be original or different enough to attract the attention of one’s contacts, without crossing the line separating authenticity from posturing, falseness, and artificiality, particularly given the ongoing threat of potential shame if the fragile balance on which the performance of authenticity rests is upset (Lasén, 2020). This task was rendered even more difficult by the lack of contextual information surrounding these photos and the lack of control about how they were interpreted, as well as by the predominant logic of the moment regarding how to present and represent oneself and how to perform authenticity.

This tension was further exacerbated when people appeared in images posted by others. As several participants stated, we all apply a “filter” when we share photos of ourselves. In other words, we all apply a series of selection criteria designed to project a good image of ourselves and control what we post, but we tend not to use these filters when posting photos of others. Group photos were one specific example of this kind of post, with participants saying they often thought that they looked terrible in them or were not ready for the photo or video to be taken. This disquiet was further intensified by the contrast between those for whom the image was flattering and those for whom it was not, as well as by what was considered carelessness (or even callousness) on the part of the person who took and then decided to post a specific photo. This type of action was seen as a violation of unwritten rules of sociability and privacy.

This pointed to a double failure that generated shame: the failure of the person who was not able to prepare themselves to look good in a photo, and the failure of the person who decided to share an image without first checking that it was flattering to everyone, thereby showing a lack of the consideration expected from a friend. This often resulted in shaming the author of the post and asking them to remove a specific photo. This in turn generated a circle of shame and exchange of reproaches, since some were accused of worrying too much about their specific image, of being mistaken in thinking they did not look good in the photo or being too controlling. Deciding which pictures to share was considered part of a friendship, and was therefore interpreted as deference or a lack thereof. Being the only one that looked ugly in a group photo may have made the person in question feel “like they are not part of the group, like the others don’t care how they look in the photo.” (woman, 26-year-old).

Deciding what was appropriate to share and when it was appropriate to do so implies paying attention to technical and regulatory aspects of devices and platforms, as well as obligations, expectations, and rules of etiquette linked to sociability. This assessment also depended on the platform on which an image was shared, a perception of the expectations of contacts and tensions which existed between wanting to project a good image and “incite envy” and a need to appear authentic, fun, and carefree.

These last two aspects revealed how emotions moved and circulated between bodies and devices, and how they became entangled in paradoxical combinations. One example was jealousy felt over those who did something considered shameful, such as sharing pictures of their faces and bodies. This was further exacerbated if they received positive feedback for these images. In the words of one young female

interviewee: “I see this person, who I personally don’t think has a great figure or is particularly good-looking, and I think gosh, how can they post that and not care? And they even label it ‘getting ready to hit the beach’ or ‘getting ready for I don’t know what’, and everyone says ‘wow!’ And I have to admit that I feel a bit jealous in that sense.” (woman, 26-year-old).

The entangled times of embodiment, online sharing, and shame

Ordinary affects are experienced in the present moment, such as the twinge of shame that causes us to blush. However, they also move and circulate in time (Bericat, 2012), in processes in which they stick to and become unstuck from bodies and objects, contributing also to the experience of motion and the unfolding of everyday life and one’s own biography in a tangle of things both remembered and forgotten.

Most of the people in our study had been taking photos of themselves with their smartphones on a daily basis and sharing them online since adolescence. They talked about the concern and unease caused by the circulation of these pictures, particularly given the lack of control over their present and future exposure and the constant accessibility of present and past digital inscriptions.

The mark left by these past experiences was evident in present unease and shame, either because present shame was a continuation of that felt in the past, even though bodies may have changed, or because it was a discontinuity with the past that elicited shame. In the first case, the present feeling was an embodied memory of shame felt in situations of harassment and humiliation experienced during adolescent sociability, often linked to obesity, sexism, or indifference towards posts. These memories influenced a subject’s present assessment of these practices, their ambivalent desire to accumulate likes and comments, and their perception of their body and attractiveness, even though their bodies had changed.

In the second case, subjects no longer recognized themselves in past digital states, yet their online presence continued to identify them with past images. Subjectivity and subjects were made and unmade, threatening the way they represented themselves in performances of authenticity. During this retrospective evaluation, practices and images that they formerly deemed appropriate now caused shame. Such practices included posting a large number of selfies, using heart filters, not ensuring the technical quality of images, expressing opinions that they no longer held and tastes they no longer had or engaging in friendships they no longer wished to be a part of. As in past research, we found that the process of maturing as a person was assessed in relation to digital use and practice: I was no longer a child or teen because I no longer used social media in the same way; continuing to do so indicated failure in my progression towards adulthood.

One female interviewee confessed to feeling a sense of shame in relation to past photos taken in festive contexts that were at odds with her current lifestyle, characterized by being a mother and looking after her child. This unease was also ambivalent, since the participants recognized that the pictures represented happy moments and, in many cases, reflected an ease and carefree attitude towards taking and sharing pictures of oneself that they no longer had. Here we found a certain degree of affective ambivalence generated by an adult future with obligations and expectations, not wanting to appear childish, while at the same time feeling slightly nostalgic about their once carefree past.

Being obese — losing or gaining weight — emerged time and time again in both participants’ memories of past shame and in feeling ashamed today when they examined photos of their larger past selves. A fat body may be a key reason for not sharing photos online, due to both shame and fear of the consequences of exposing oneself to the gaze and comments of others (Lupton, 2018; Hopson, 2019).

Disquiet and discomfort persisted when sharing photos of oneself online today, despite now having a slimmer body and being more active. The scars of past shame, which prompted some to choose not to be present online or not to share photos, became a source of discomfort and insecurity. An ambivalence was

present, since the persistence of unease regarding appearing in photos shared online coexisted with the pleasure of taking selfies in order to see oneself appearing slim and attractive. These photos were not shared outside a circle of close friends, saved on smartphones for their own consumption and enjoyment gained from contemplating slimmer selves.

Concern over the performance of authenticity also considered that this performance was carried out over time, thereby making consistency difficult. This explained some reluctance to share, albeit ephemerally in stories, flattering pictures in postures or situations in which they had not appeared before.

The risk of feeling ashamed or seeming inappropriate was not linked so much to the content of the photo itself, reproducing poses common in this environment, but rather to an inconsistency of a picture with an image that they had constructed of themselves online. As with face-to-face presentations of the self, a good impression involves many different meanings of “good”: favorable, flattering, truthful, consistent, and authentic. Thus, in many cases, flattering pictures were saved only for the pleasure that they gave the subject and were only shared with a chosen few.

The technical requirements of the digital world force us to think about the permanence and duration of digital content beyond the moment in which pictures were taken and shared. This is even more acute in the case of erotic photos, the exchange of which is characterized by the immediacy of the present moment, imbued with pleasure and desire (Tiidenberg, 2017). These fears are felt more intensely by women than by men, since women are the ones who usually suffer from public disapproval in the form of “slut-shaming” (Ringrose and Harvey, 2005). Nevertheless, they are present in the discourses of both gay and heterosexual men, even though they do not seem to be affected in the same way. Men seem more confident that these pictures of themselves will not be disseminated, since the practice is reciprocal, although they do not expressly refer to the gender asymmetry which exists in relation to disapproval targeted at men and women. There seems to be no male “slut-shaming”. Differences in the way cases are dealt with in the media when the subjects of the photos are male (see the paper by Paasonen and Sunden in this issue) also serve to exacerbate this asymmetry.

Two strategies were used to cope with the weight of the past and uncertainty about the future of images once they had been shared: the common practice of periodically reviewing and deleting old photos; and saving photos not shared online on one’s smartphone (Lasén and Hjorth, 2017). These filtering practices corresponded to both affective and attention economies. The aim was to limit the potential negative affective cost of failing in the pursuit of personal display and the performance of authenticity (“overloading” sites and contacts, boring or overwhelming people, and losing the attention of their contacts due to excessive demands for attention).

Participants were in two groups: those who almost never deleted photos and claimed to suffer from “digital Diogenes syndrome” (woman, 33-year-old), and those who periodically “cleaned” their devices and were even “obsessive about technological hygiene” (man, 22-year-old), for both technical (to free up storage space and make it easier to find what they are looking for) and social reasons (so as not to run the risk of others seeing inappropriate photos).

The practice of saving photos without sharing them, either for one’s own pleasure at seeing how good one looked or for charting some kind of evolution, was present, for example, among men who were overweight in the past. They claimed both to feel uncomfortable sharing current photos and to enjoy saving these photos so as to look at them every now and again, with the memory of their former bodies and the displeasure it generated being key to understanding both affects.

Some of the photos saved were those considered inappropriate for sharing; they were neither attractive nor funny, were not consistent with their current selves, or featured other people, such as minors, who had not given their consent for online posting. However, participants said they believed they were worth saving in order to be remembered, an attitude based on a belief that anything not reflected in a photo or digitally inscribed in some kind of device will be forgotten.

Photos and videos were recognized as a means of documenting the present and turning these fixed, captured moments into memories that would be mobilized at some point in the future. Participants believed that anything not featured in a photo would not be reflected in memory and cannot therefore be shared in the future. This belief also played an important role during the selection of which photos were kept and deleted, as well as in the practice of taking and saving photos that were never shared.

One example found in our research was the practice of saving photos that had a special personal meaning, evoking feelings of tenderness: a selfie of a boyfriend or girlfriend in a characteristic pose of them, a picture referring to a private joke among friends, a cute picture of a pet. It was a means of facilitating future nostalgia for those feelings of tenderness, feelings which extended also to the relationship with the self and its vulnerability. This was the case, for example, with photos that appeared inappropriate to share, such as selfies taken by girls in sexy poses, clothes or make-up, which they nevertheless enjoyed looking at in an intimate relationship with themselves that was governed by criteria other than rules of sociability.

The recognition of this memory-related function of photos bestowed moral value on the practice, influencing the resolution of tension generated by sharing unflattering photos of oneself online. If a moment was registered and saved for posterity, then it did not matter how you actually appeared. What was reprehensible would be not to photograph and register that moment or to avoid any testimony of your presence at that moment with others, thereby precluding the possibility of subsequent recall. As one young man said when talking about the intense physicality of those digital practices: “I blush with shame” (man, 35-year-old) when others share photos that are less than perfect. “I can’t believe how ridiculous I look!” (man, 35-year-old). But since the photos in question were taken to record a wedding between friends, the feeling of looking ridiculous was bearable and its power to shame modulated.

Concerns about the future and its uncertainty also unfolded in the act of saving photos one was not sure one liked or would use in the future. These images were the digital equivalent of objects stored in the attic, “just in case” they were needed later. Subjects recognized that the criteria governing what was and was not appropriate, what may or may not generate shame, may change in the future, just as they had in the past, prompting a sharing of photos long after they were taken.

The “Diogenes syndrome” to which some interviewees mentioned was justified by their lack of knowledge about their future. They understood that they would change over time, as memories, photos, and digital contents attested, so they expected change in the future. Uncertainty also characterized their perceptions of their own subjectivities and future as subjects.



Conclusions

In our study we saw how shame, as an ordinary affect, structured and ordered the mundane digital practice of sharing personal images online, in accordance with contextual rules of appropriateness and inappropriateness that established boundaries of embarrassment and shame. These ever-shifting boundaries were rendered more complex by certain specific time-related aspects of these practices. Thus, we found shame as memory, emerging in the presence of the past which affected the present. Sharing provided a contextual and collective means of performing an authenticity relative to one’s body and self in its current context; photos shared online also remained as digital inscriptions of past performances.

This permanence and presence of the past, visible to the eyes of old and new audiences, generated a sense of unease, which was also intimate, just like a feeling of being ashamed of oneself. Temporal complexity was also directly linked to the demands of constructing a narrative, since online profiles and accounts were sequential performances with requirements of consistency and continuity imposed constantly.


Shame was at once both subjective and social. It was, at the same time, a public feeling and a private affair,

since connections and disconnections it established occurred not only in relation to others, but also to oneself. This process was evidenced in the shame generated by the public display of a disconnection between one's present and past selves, intimate disconnections that brought forth tensions of projecting a "good image" and perhaps even disconnections with our own self-image.

We found a series of paradoxes, tensions, or "conflicting desires" linked to sharing pictures, something which was part of obligations and expectations surrounding an online future. Despite being a common, everyday practice, displaying oneself online was also perceived as both dangerous and problematic. This contrasted sharply with simplistic descriptions and assessments offered by the media, which viewed these activities as mere manifestations of vanity and narcissism (Senft and Baym, 2015).

The practice also presented paradoxes of subjectivation and recognition, our subjection to an image of ourselves that we projected, for others and for ourselves, and the obligation and desire to ensure consistency and continuity: What was authentic? What was not? What was appropriate? This practice also brought forth our own estrangement. The recognition of the uncanny was facilitated by digital inscriptions that fostered reflexivity and the act of seeing ourselves through other individuals.

The contradictory desires which arose from the practice, its habits, demands, and expectations were transformed into frequently heard expressions such as "I want people to see me, but not like that," "I want to be connected but also want my privacy, but I feel ashamed if I don't share," and "I feel ashamed of these photos of my body, but I like to keep them to look at them in private, by myself."

These tensions and the shame connected to digital images revealed the powerful capacity to affect and be affected through these practices. The ordinary affects generated through them helped give everyday life the quality of ever-shifting movements of relations, scenes, and emergences, in entanglements of continuity and discontinuity with the remembered past and uncertain future. 

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Notes

1. Stewart, 2007, pp. 1–2.

2. In relation to our research group's interest in studying the multiple meanings of ordinary, see Ordinary Sociology www.sociologiaordinaria.com.

3. Du Bois, 1989, p. 3.

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Haunting shame and haunted bodies: Mixed feelings and entangled times in the online sharing of personal images

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