

Introduction to the special issue of Shame, Shaming and Online Image Sharing by Amparo Lasén and Gaby David

Abstract

This special issue coedited by Gaby David and Amparo Lasén, compiles 13 articles that explore the articulation of contemporary affective and digital cultures, regarding shame and shaming associated with online image sharing. The convergence of social structures, social norms and digital affordances shapes the vulnerability of different social groups into shame and modulates the potential of that experienced shame to exert a pedagogic and productive effect.

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Introduction

Contemporary ordinary lives exist and circulate online. Bodies, memories, relationships, fantasies, desires, emotions and fears, all inhabit and flow through various digital spaces and media and platforms, thus giving rise to narratives, self-(re)presentations and interactions. An entangled sociability is shaped and afforded by a heterogeneous collective of people, devices, corporations, and institutions, that take part in the production, circulation and archiving of digital inscriptions, such as digital images, texts and sounds. Digital content materialises our emotions and contributes to the configuration and inscription of our bodies, habits, and abilities. Everyday forms of affecting and being affected, of acting and being acted upon (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010) result in the conflicting entanglements of such network. In this digitally mediated and networked everyday life, the visual is pervasive — sustained by the production, circulation and sharing of vernacular mobile images (selfies, dickpics and other personal pictures, videos, memes, etc.).

Circulation and *mobility* are also characteristic features of emotions, which move through bodies, objects and signs, that become *sticky* or *saturated* with affect as sites of personal and social tension (Ahmed, 2004). Digital media and practices afford *affective stickiness* and *affective saturation*. They create this stickiness and saturation as they help to activate bodies, objects and meanings, senses, and therefore activate situations. Over the last years, the politics of emotions has been frequently studied. (Karatzogianni and Kuntsman, 2012; Hjorth and Lim, 2012; Paasonen, 2011; Papacharissi, 2014; Benski and Fisher, 2014;

Lasén, 2013; Serrano-Puche, 2016; Cumiskey and Hjorth, 2017; Lasén and Hjorth, 2017; McDuffie and Ames, 2021; Byron, 2020).

This special issue takes up the debate and revives discussion over the multiple interrelations that exist between digital culture, affective culture, and the politics of emotions. Analysing the circulations and different modes of sharing, the 13 papers explore the sociotechnical implications of the circulation of digital images and also the stickiness of a particular emotion: Shame.

Its first paper, “A meta-analysis review article of mobile image sharing” by Gaby David, provides an introductory frame with a literature review of 13 key cutting-edge articles from the prehistory of smartphones (2002–2008). This review article helps to understand how mobile sharing practices can be theorized and understood. Hence, the mapping of these conceptualizations could later be approached from an affective and emotional point of view — more precisely, from the point of view of the dyad shame-share.

Affective and attention economies of shame

Shame is an ordinary affect (Stewart, 2007), a key emotion regarding sociability and social orderings (Scheff, 2000), as it is elicited by the fear of disconnection from our actual social bonds, or those we aspire to make. It is a mode of affecting and being affected that shapes and mobilizes bodies, ordinary experiences and relationships, which is narrowly linked to the structures of the social order and its exclusions. Shame points to how norms are fixed, maintained, challenged and transformed; to what is appropriate and what is not; who is appropriate and who is not. Shaming others, a common online practice presented and discussed in various contributions to this issue, is also a way of reinforcing these same social orderings and senses. It is a mode of denunciation and discipline, that in its digital enactments creates search engine infamy and unexpected or unwanted visibility (Trottier, 2018).

The articles in this special issue provide a multifaceted, complex map of the effects of shame, shaming, and embarrassment. Of their function in the production of disquiets, vulnerabilities and exclusions in digitally mediated sociability, intimacies, and gender choreographies; and how they are sustained and deployed through the convergence of camera phones, social media, mobile apps, and, on some occasions, broadcast media. These contributions reveal how contemporary online visual practices are haunted by shame. As our visual exposure make us run the risk of becoming inappropriate, and when we are already deemed as inappropriate, they can even make our becoming dangerous. they can even make our becoming dangerous.

In the second article of this issue, “Shaming alone: Living alone, shame and masculinity in technologically-mediated communications”, Antonio Garca and Carlos López analyse how instant messaging groups and online dating platforms become public arenas for shame for adult straight men who live alone. Experiences of shame might echo technology of the *self* for these men’s subjectivity and self-image, which activate and modulate expressions of modern-day masculinity. In the online game of appearances, gaze and undergoing shaming processes, the expectations and norms of masculinity are at work, when these men activate their defence mechanisms, whilst trying to control or modulate their own public exposure.

The link between masculinity, shame and online dating, is also explored in the paper “‘Men seeking women’: awkwardness, shame and other affective encounters with dating apps”, where Kath Albury, Anthony McCosker and Clifton Evers study which aspects of dating app use make young people feel safer or less safe. They draw on affectively-loaded accounts of app use, about racialized and gendered experiences of ‘awkwardness’, shame, and contempt by young men who used dating apps to meet women, both before and during COVID-19 lockdown. This analysis maps practices of sexual learning in/through apps, in relation to affective responses triggered by observations of others and one’s own bodily desires and capacities. Shame circulates as a pedagogically productive affect (Probyn, 2005) and the affect-response of

shame-humiliation can be turned to a productive, self-reflexive opportunity for improving gendered experiences of app use.

The affective economies of shame — resulting from how shame circulate between bodies, digital spaces and mobile devices — are conditioned by the techno-social features and affordances of the particular digital infrastructures of online image sharing, which are described and discussed by the articles in this issue. It might occur similarly with the constant accessibility of our visual presence to human, and also algorithmic, gaze and grab (Senft, 2013; Paasonen, 2011); the ease to trace and track a rising number of visual digital inscriptions, and the archiving capacities of social media platforms that make digital images shared on the past still available and susceptible to surveillance.

The influence of these online sharing digital affordances in increasing personal exposure and facilitating shame experiences, are discussed in the article by Leonardo Pastor about selfies shared in social media, “‘My first selfie’: experimenting with shame and visibility”. Shame and visibility are practical experiences that led the research participants from São Paulo to learn different ways to manage situated performances and impression management. Following a pragmatic perspective and ethnographic work on participants photographic routine, shame emerges as part of the daily construction and experimentation of the selfie, as a form of interaction with others, mobilizing playfulness and ironic dialogues with oneself.

In “Haunting shame and haunted bodies: Mixed feelings and entangled times in the online sharing of personal images”, Amparo Lasén and Héctor Puente find in their fieldwork in Madrid, the same ambivalence encountered by Pastor in São Paulo. Research participants are ashamed of taking and sharing selfies and other personal pictures, but they do it every day. Taking photos of oneself and sharing them on social media and mobile apps is a practice haunted by shame. Although both the media and popular wisdom view it as a simple example of narcissism and vanity, empirical research into this practice shows contradictions, ambivalence, and tensions explored in this paper. 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. Lasén and Puente explore the time entanglement of both shame and the sharing of personal images online, in which memories of the past are intertwined with continuities and discontinuities with the present, and with the expectation of what will be remembered in the future.

Screenshots are another haunting techno-social affordance of images shared online in respect of their potential for the circulation of shame. They allow things which should have faded into the past to remain persistent, difficult to forget, and disturbing in their continued presence. Their use increases the shareability and circulation of images through different platforms, beyond the intentions of those who first shared these images, and beyond the limits of the intended audiences, space and time. Therefore, taking and sharing screenshots removes the limitations to image exposure and sharing afforded by ephemeral features, such as the stories, or by the delete function. In “Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame”, Frances Corry shows how screenshots violate the assumed boundaries of media environments and move digital information across the divide between seemingly private or privatized realms and public display. They pose the threat of saving and circulating images assumed to be ephemeral. In doing so, they prompt moments of public sensemaking around new media. Corry’s paper offers a qualitative thematic analysis of media related to two public events where screenshot use figured prominently: the cyberbullying and death by suicide, of Canadian teenager Amanda Todd in 2012; and the ousting of New York congressman Anthony Weiner, after screenshots were taken of his quickly deleted sexual tweets in 2011. The framing of screenshots and normative boundaries allowed audiences to make sense of social media rules, while further entrenched existing gendered norms around sexual propriety and public space. The wielding of public shame here reinforces the idea that powerful men might suffer the material consequences of wrongdoing but can avoid shame’s more deleterious forms of moral reprobation, as it is also argued in the next article.

In “Shameless dicks: On male privilege, dick pic scandals, and public exposure” Susanna Paasonen and Jenny Sundén, examine leaked or otherwise involuntarily exposed dick pics of men of privilege, asking

what kinds of media events such leaked data assemble, how penises become sites of public interest and attention, and how these bodies may be able to slip through the normal channels of public shaming. By focusing on high-profile international incidents during the past decade, Paasonen and Sundén examine how the agency afforded by social privilege allows some to slide through shame rather than be stuck in it. By building on feminist media studies and affect inquiry, the authors attend to the specificities of these attempts to shame, and to their relationship — or lack of it — to slut-shaming and the possibilities and spaces offered for laughter within this all.

Crucial to contemporary ways of reaching social recognition in different digital practices, are other socio-technical affordances involved in the circulation of both digital images and shame. These include the habit (obligation) to frequently update personal profiles, feeds and stories; or the ever increasing “context collapse” afforded by social media platforms, making it very difficult to keep any public and private divide, and to restraint the sharing of personal images to carefully selected groups and audiences. The analysis of all these sociotechnical features reveals how the rhythmical temporality of recurring digital exposure that characterises contemporary everyday life creates occasions for shame, and therefore, a constant potential for shame.

In “The rhythms of shame in digital sexual assault (DSA). Rhythmic resistance and the repeated assault”, Signe Ulbjerg explores non-consensual distribution of intimate images in the sense that they are a highly mediated kind of sexual violence. Data persistence, limited control, and shareability — lead to victims’ experiences of digital sexual assault being ‘repeated assaults’: as recurring instances of exposure and shaming facilitated by mediated rhythms and circulation. The young women who participate in this research manage to create stability and resist the rhythms of their assault by modifying their social media presence and politicising their experiences. The article explores how these rhythms of shame and exposure change over time, and how these young women can act in order to disrupt these rhythms and sometimes even turn shame into anger and claim political agency, in a kind of *identity work* that has the potential to shift victim positions.

The issue of digital sexual assault is also the topic of two other papers presenting innovative fieldwork carried out in Denmark. The focus moves from the victims to the offenders: addressing how the participation in forms of online shaming by sharing other peoples images can be a source of shame experiences for them. Kathrine Elmoose Jørgensen and Jakob Demant present a theoretical and conceptual typology for the different forms of image-based sexual abuse that unfold online within two different sharing environments — an acquaintance-based environment, and an organized, anonymous environment — in their article “Shame, shaming and economy: A theory of image-based sexual abuse within different online sharing environments”. They propose to understand the affective economy of digital sexual abuse in relation to two factors: the market structure of the activity, and the sharers’ feelings of acknowledged and unacknowledged shame. Anonymity, or the lack of it, is other key feature of online circulation of shame and shaming. Sharers from organized, anonymous environments show signs of unacknowledged shame, while sharers from acquaintance-based environments, retrospectively acknowledge shame by recognizing the negative consequences their sharing praxis exerted on the abused.

Sidse Harder and Amy Hasinoff’s “Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing image-based sexual abuse”, asks whether unruly image-sharers feel any shame themselves. Do people who transgress moral boundaries not feel shame at all, or do they have different “moral gyroscopes”? Drawing on 34 Danish police cases of image-based sexual abuse and using narrative criminology, the collected stories integrate shame during criminal investigations. Their findings suggest that Internet researchers studying online abuse might pay greater attention to shame management, including how people blame digital technology for harmful behaviour. Following on from this research, it might be considered that restorative justice processes could potentially help people who have committed image-based abuse acknowledge shame and try to repair the harm.



Diversity of topics, approaches and methodologies

The pervasiveness of shame and shaming within online sharing images is also revealed by the geographical diversity and the plurality of topics, practices, digital platforms and mobile apps explored in the different cases presented. These articles draw on case studies and fieldwork carried out in Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Pakistan, Canada, Australia, Brazil and the U.S. The range of topics spans from everyday life uses, practices and forms of self-(re)presentation in regard to sharing selfies and other personal images in social media, dating and instant messaging apps; to news coverage of personal images leaking; as well as imaged based abuse and harassment, and the less known digital spaces of the Dark Web.

The three last articles tackle different aspects of public shaming: from the emergence of online moral communities around images sharing in shaming campaigns, to the similarities between public shaming and sudden public faming of ordinary users, and the affects and effects of virality due to the convergence of social media and broadcast media (news outlets, television). They also cover social media tactics to counter existing politics of shame, such as the creation of online persona through online video performances.

In “Selfies or self-development? *Humanitarians of Tinder (HoT)* and online shaming as a moral community”, Nathaniel Laywine analyses a meme account found on Tumblr and Facebook that aggregates screenshots of pictures found in Tinder profiles showing users taking part in volunteer tourism activities throughout the Global South. These include photos depicting them embracing racialized children in their arms or participating in rituals or traditional ceremonies in cultures to which they do not belong. Laywine argues that HoT establishes a moral community by shaming these individuals for presumably relying on these images to attract dates, while not recognizing their own complicity in colonial structures such as the volunteer tourism industry. These Tinder users’ photos replicate images in recruitment media that are designed to advertise volunteer tourism expeditions. The author suggests that these strategies of humour to mock or deride these Tinder practices of digital vigilantism seek to punish individuals for their behaviour, rather than the organizations and industries that structure these experiences.

Lillian Chin highlights similar dynamics between public shaming and public faming in “How to survive a public faming: Understanding ‘The spiciest memelord’ via the temporal dynamics of involuntary celebrification” — there being something inherently harmful about unasked-for public attention. As a case study, Chin performs an autoethnography of her own experience from winning a trivia game show with an Internet-savvy answer. This is another contribution that pays attention to temporal dynamics — in this case to understand how a person’s identity can be transformed into a media object subjected to corporations’ and strangers’ manipulations. She also introduces the tool of “radical reciprocity”: describing ways in which online sharing can counteract shaming attacks and harassment by shaming the shamers and harassers, to help victims of public faming understand potential paths for them to reclaim their narrative.

“Shamelessly cute: Understanding gender ambiguous identity performances via ‘The Desi Bombshell’ Snapchat video selfies” demonstrates how a tactical performance of a gender ambiguous identity portrayed via Snapchat’s cute animal lenses can subvert the culture of gendered shaming. Fatima Aziz draws on two feminist resistance tactics — performative shamelessness and weaponized/agentive cuteness — to study the case of Muhammad Moiz’s “The Desi Bombshell” a.k.a. Shumaila Bhatti, a fictive online persona. Through close reading and content analysis of these video selfies, she proposes the concept of “shamelessly cute”, as a gender ambiguous performance which is a novel resistance tactic on social media. The explicit display of a clumsy, Snapchat enabled identity, implicitly challenges the Pakistani politics of shame from within its culture, by reworking indigenous practices and gestures employed by the *khwaja sira* transgenders. In this case, shamelessness as a tactic is not the opposite of shame nor the absence of it, instead it is a disruptive play.

The geographical and thematic diversity of this special issue is accompanied by a plurality of academic fields, methodologies and approaches. The contributions range from cultural studies, communication, media studies, mobile studies, visual studies, celebrity studies, through to sociology, anthropology, and

criminology. The entanglement of affective and digital cultures regarding shame is studied from different standpoints, providing rich insights and a plurality of debate. Conflicting views are not omitted for the sake of attaining scholarly singularity. For us, as editors, this diversity is one of the strengths of this issue, and necessary to tackle the complexities of this topic. The many nationalities, disciplines, methodologies, and approaches has not only been necessary to tackle the complexities of this topic, but also been very productive in the cross reading between the different authors during the reviewing process.

The study of shame and shaming poses methodological challenges. It is a sensitive topic that relates to and exposes vulnerabilities and harm. Shame occurs either when being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition, this is, being seen when failing [1], or, on the contrary, by not been seen, not been acknowledged as a rightful member of the community. It often forces people into silence (Senft, 2013; Scheff, 2000; Probyn, 2005) and hiding. Therefore, such experiences and feelings are not easily shared and discussed as part of a research. These articles draw on multiple and innovative methodological approaches to explore, examine and grasp the flow of shame: ethnography, digital ethnography, autoethnography, participant observation, interviews and groups, surveys, qualitative workshops, experimental methods based on workshops and creative writing, content analysis of news media, and the study of police data on police cases, including narrative accounts of police interrogations of suspected offenders.

Modulations of shame


The geographical, theoretical and methodological diversity of this special issue is required to unravel the entanglements and complexities of shame and its digital flows and stickiness. Shame occurs in different shades and intensities from embarrassment and chagrin, to mortification, humiliation and trauma. Furthermore, the circulation of emotions forms affective entanglements of mixed feelings and associations, such as those presented and explored in these articles.

Thus, through this special issue, readers can follow how shame forms distinct affective fabrics with guilt, pride, anger (“the boiling point of shame” [2]), frustration, hate, excitement, boredom, humour, carelessness, awkwardness, contempt and self-contempt, self-disparagement, shyness, feelings of danger and discomfort, and fear (of being exposed, harassed, harmed, misrecognised, laughed at). The different time sequences of these affective fabrics reveal both: how shame can be hidden and go unacknowledged; or, on the contrary, how it can be noticed and shared, and therefore activate bodies, subjectivities, as well as personal and collective actions.

These various accounts of shame and shaming also disclose different shades of reflexivity, acknowledgment (or lack of it) and productivity. Shame is a productive affect when reflexivity prompts learning processes about the self and the power relationships in which we are involved (Probyn, 2005). Then, shame provides energy to individual and collective mobilization and can become a transformative performance (Sedgwick, 2003). This is enacted either in ephemeral flashes of reflexive consciousness, or in a repeated and lasting affective flow that contributes to the configuration of identities and subjectivities marginalised and stigmatised by the social order. As in the case of queer performativities and pedagogies, whose usefulness go beyond gender and sexuality, and can be mobilised in other social contexts and learning processes (Del Pozo, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003). Productive and performative shame can also be a collective experience giving rise to community building and collective actions. Some of the articles of this issue describe cases of such productive shame in digitally mediated learning processes, such as sexual learning in the article of Albury, McKosker and Evers. The articles by Pastor, and Lasén and Puente, discuss the role of shame in learning to acknowledge the strangeness and volatility of one’s own body (Grosz, 1994). Productive shame emerges in disruptive performances, as the rhythmic disruption operated by the young women victimised by image-based sexual abuse to gain agency and shift victim positions (Udberg), in the “Desi Bombshell’s” disruptive playful transgender play (Aziz), and in the radical

reciprocity described by Chin. Another example lies in the potential for restorative justice in the acknowledged shame of image-based sexual offenders (Jørgensen and Demant; Haser and Hasinoff).

Shame also flows and happens in a very different modulation, unable to be productive and mobilized in such knowledge and agency processes (Woodward, 2000). For instance, when shame is experienced as an intense form of humiliation, in a social context in which those ashamed are helpless and defenceless, or when shame circulates as a numbing form of pervasive ordinary sexism, classism, racism or other forms of discrimination. These experiences of shame result either in trauma or chronic discrimination and, as Woodward argues, neither can be overcome. In these cases, shame does not become an energy flow for moral and collective agency and transformation. Social inequalities and stigma, regarding class, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability and body normativity, with their intersectional weave of privilege and subalternity, condition the different vulnerabilities to shame and shaming. This intersectionality can blunt the potentiality of shame to be productive and transformative. Social conditions and contexts make shame stick to some bodies and subjects, while merely sliding off others — revealing the racial, gendered, and class-based double standards regarding shame, and the ways available to manage and to avoid shame — when experiencing a public shaming situation (Corry; Paasonen and Sundén).

Often, the structural conditions of classist, racist and sexist shame, circulate in pervasive forms of shaming that are part of the background of everyday life — so ordinary that they are hardly noticed. Thus, shame is not registered, identified and felt as an emotion, rather it becomes a condition under which one lives, and its productive potential cannot be activated. Therefore, both the heightened attention to shame and shaming afforded by online sharing and sociability, as well as the visibility given by social media to those who are not regularly seen and recognised, give rise to the possibility of sharing shame experiences — making them public and recognising that they are collective experiences. This has the potential for unsticking the trauma and the numbness and increasing the productive transformative potential of shame. Moreover, social and participatory media, dating and mobile apps, all participate in the circulation of shame, afford us to be witness to that shame. They can create an affective space in which shame might be understood and experienced differently, for instance, as a collective failure to live up to our ideals of mutual respect and democratic equality. Then, the haunting shame of online sharing, exposure and sociability could be understood “not as a mark of our inadequacy but as a sign of our commitment to act, as a mark of the tension between the present and the future, as a touchstone for understanding what we expect to achieve and how” [3]. Shame that can be worn in public with dignity and carries the promise of a public sphere (Woodward, 2000; Senft, 2013). 

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Notes

1. Williams, 1993, p. 78.
2. Woodward, 2000, p. 215.
3. Berenice Fisher quoted in Woodward, 2000, p. 229.

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