



The Selfies: Social Identities in the Digital Age

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Abstract:

This paper explores the influence of the development of new technologies (smartphones, webcams, photo-video HD camcorders) and of social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) on portraying oneself. In the digital age, both the understandings of 'photography' and 'photograph' are changing. The notion and practice of artistic portrait photography has been disrupted, and new media users have been invested with 'do it yourself' portrait photographer's abilities. As the viewer (the photographer) has become the same with the viewed (the subject of the photograph), anew-constructed subjectivity comes into play, and the individual can choose how to construct and publicly disseminate his/her personal identity. However, the difference between self-perception and presentation of the self is waived within this process. Building on sociology (Charles Cooley) and social psychology (William James and George Herbert Mead) theory, this paper argues that new technologies and new media are instruments used for identity representation and construction, but the price of blurring the boundaries between amateur and professional portraiture photography is the stereotypy and conventionality of the pose, leading to generally undifferentiated portrayals of the self. Also, the spread of our social self-understanding as self-mirroring not only supports the inwards-looking cult of narcissism, but influences the construction and representation of one's self based on the gaze of others as media consumers.

Keywords: *Community Media, New media, Mobile or locative media*

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Introduction

The interest in social identity and portrayal of the self represents the cornerstone of social sciences. However, their definition and understanding are changing along with new developments that affect the individuals and put at their disposal new methods and tools for self-identifying, self-presenting and self-understanding. As core elements of contemporary daily life, social media and communication technologies' influences in the process of forming identities and presenting the self cannot be overlooked.

Theories of the Social Self

William James' seminal theory of self defines the social self of an individual as

“the recognition which he gets from his mates. [...] Properly speaking, *a man 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. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his 'tough' young friends”. (James, 1950: 294–295)

Therefore, an individual has as many different social selves as the many different social groups he is in contact with, or, more generally, as the many different social contexts he experiences.

Expanding this view, sociologist Charles Horton Cooley coins the concept of “looking-glass self” that states the individual's capacity of reflecting upon his social acting and the ways in which such acting is perceived by the others – “A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1902: 152). Thus, the construction of the social self involves three main elements: the way the individual thinks he appears to the others; the way the individual thinks he is

judged by the others; and the way in which the individual feels about himself (happiness, sadness, pride or guilt, etc.).

The defining of social self in accordance with one's capacity of reflecting upon his behaviour and the others' perceiving of it is crystallized by George Herbert Mead's term of "generalized other": "The very universality and impersonality of thought and reason is from the behaviouristic standpoint the result of the given individual taking the attitudes of others toward himself, and of his finally crystallizing all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint which may be called that of the 'generalized other'" (Mead, 1934: 90). Mead explains the concept of "generalized other" through the notions of 'play' and 'the game': in play, the individual adopts another person's role; in the game, he needs to pay attention to the attitudes and behaviours of the other participants. The generalized other can be then described as the influence a social group or community can hold upon an individual to present himself in a certain manner.

It is the idea of 'play' that was undertaken by Erving Goffman and put at the core of his theory. Comparing the presentation of the self with a theatrical stage show, the sociologist defines the social context as a 'performance': "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1982: 10). In Goffman's perspective, the individual performs, in his everyday life, a role in front of an audience. As with James' social groups, the audiences vary; the individual would play a different role, according to the attributes of the public his performance is targeted at. Thus, Goffman describes the daily processes of self-presentation as theatrical acting in which individuals are engaged.

The Social Identity as Personal Identity

Collectively, these studies outline that presentation of the self is constructed through interaction with others, and that it differs according to whom the individual interacts with and to the social context the individual experiences. What is of a particular interest is the fact that most of the authors would not pay much attention to the distinction between social self and personal identity. For instance, Goffman's comparison of human interactions with a 'performance' leaves some room to explain the difference between "back stage" and "front stage" behaviour. Furthermore, the back stage is not strictly defined as the individual's

private space in which he can develop or reveal his own personal identity, but it is generally used to refer to “the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (ibid: 114). However, the back stage is usually shared with other individuals (the performer’s ‘team’) that can yet impose or influence a certain social behaviour of the performer, although to a smaller extent than the front stage audience.

Notwithstanding, such stances would eventually lead up to considering social aspects as essential to the personal identity and to waiving the difference between the social identity and the personal one. Richard Jenkins, for instance, argues that he ceased using the term ‘social identity’, preferring to simply refer to ‘identity’ as “all human identities are, by definition, social identities. Identifying ourselves, or others, is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation” (Jenkins, 2008: 17).

The New Digital Identity

If the traditional forms of human interaction might support this approach, there is certainly a field in which the distinction between social self and personal identity is sharpened, and that is the one of digital communication. Digital communication would not only create another social context for the social self to take into consideration, but a whole new identity the self can embrace: the digital one. States Steven Warburton (Warburton, 2010:10):

“Digital identity can be understood as a continuum. At one end we find the ‘simpler’ or ‘narrow view’ where digital identity is a ‘collection of credentials online’ used in electronic transactions ... In contrast, the other end of the spectrum is characterized as the ‘fundamental side’ or the ‘broader view’. Here digital identity is understood to be ‘the online representation of one’s self’ or ‘one’s representation in a digital space’”.

If the narrow view on digital identity refers to the data used to represent an individual (such as name, email address, etc.), the broader one comprises the cluster of elements that designate the presentation of self in the online sphere.

Identity and Self-Presentation in the Online Sphere

Digital communication offers a vast array of possibilities for self-presentation, as well as for identity construction, exploration, and experimentation, or self-development.

“Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated. [...] The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create.”

So notes Sherry Tuckler (Tuckler, 2008: 180), emphasizing the opportunity that individuals have to choose, alter, shape, experiment and transform both their digital identities and presentations of selves in online environments, such as social networking sites and other social media applications.

Converting the direct, face-to-face interaction, to a technology-mediated one, social media allows its users to adopt online identities and roles regardless their real-life selves. The practice of “revealing attitudes and aspects of the self in a controlled and socially desirable fashion” is defined by Joseph Walter as “selective self-presentation”, the author warning audiences to be aware that online identities might be very different from the actual nominal ones (Walter, 2007: 2539). A similar standpoint belongs to Mark Leary who argues that individuals “are more likely to selectively present” personal information in a digital context (Leary, 1996: 18).

Whereas personal identities and social ones represent two different concepts in the online sphere with little to no overlapping, the interaction involved by social networking sites follows closely the traditional patterns designed by real-life social theorists. For instance, Goffman’s dramaturgical approach of daily social behaviors can also be used to explain self-presentation and role performing in the social media environment, where various online networking sites, respectively the physical world of the users, represent the front stage and the back stage of the performance. Not only that individuals are able to choose which role they would like to perform, but they can also assume a variety of roles to impersonate at the same time. In digital social contexts, moving back and forth from one role to another is as simple as moving back and forth from an internet tab to another.

The Personal Photograph as a Non-Verbal Presentation of the Self Method

There are various methods of self-presentation adopted by social media users, among which a very suggestive one is the non-verbal presentation. Extensively discussed by Leary as an everyday life self-presentational tactic, physical appearance becomes a key element in online interactions under the form of its digital replacement: the personal photograph. If digital communication's developments, such as internet-based applications and social networks, serve as tools for identity construction and representation of the selves, the advancement of new technologies (portable computers and tablets, webcams, photo-video HD camcorders or smartphones) performs a double function, facilitating and encouraging both the access to social media sites and the picture taking and distributing. In the new digitized world, a picture can be taken and shared with a no-matter-how-large audience in a few seconds. Therefore, obliterating the status of photographs as objects, digitization tightly associates the practice of capturing and distributing photos to the use of social networking sites, as a number of studies have showed (Tim Kindberg et al, 2005; Hanna Stelmaszewska et al, 2005; Nancy Van House et al, 2005; Daisuke Okabe, 2004; Barbara Scifo, 2004).

That photographs represent an instrument in identity construction and presentation of the self is a previously suggested fact by photography theorists, such as Susan Sontag or Roland Barthes, but it was only the full digitization of the photography practice and distribution that wholly acknowledged their significance, as well as their new role in online communication and sharing everyday life experiences. However, such changes influenced a shifting in the understanding of the terms of 'photography', 'photograph', or 'to photograph' oneself. Researcher José van Dijck argues that the traditional meaning of personal photography did not change due to digitization, but to various cultural, social and technological transformations:

“Digital photography is part of this larger transformation in which the self becomes the centre of a virtual universe made up of informational and spatial flows; individuals articulate their identity as social beings not only by taking and storing photographs to document their lives, but by participating in communal photographic exchanges that mark their identity as interactive producers and consumers of culture”.

(van Dijck, 2008: 62)

Yet, it has to be emphasized that the availability of cameras for consumer use marks the moment when individuals ceased relying on professional photographers for having their

portraits taken and began doing it themselves. The continuous widespread use of cameras and their new being-at-hand character, such as the one displayed by smartphone cameras, have further increased this tendency. Being able to snapshot a portrait each time one had the interest in doing so, affected the practice of professional portraiture photography in favor of the amateur one.

For instance, a family that is able to capture pictures of their young children in any moment of the daily routine would rarely draw upon a professional photographer to record various little stages of their growth. The easiness of sharing precious moments in the family life with relatives who are not present through social networking sites enhances the appeal of ‘snapshotting’. When depending on a professional photographer, it would be mainly for the purpose of documenting milestones, such as weddings, special anniversaries, rare family portraits or graduation ceremonies. The progressively higher quality of consumption cameras leads to the capturing of images at professional standards by amateur or non-professional photographers. Also, the wide accessibility and convenience of photo editing and manipulation tools (such as Photoshop or other similar software) disrupt the formal understanding of artistic portrait photography. Not only that color and exposure adjustments, red-eye removals, spot-healing brushes and cropping are considerably improving shots that might not be technically correct, but the retouching and manipulation tools and options available can artistically enhance and reshape an otherwise unappealing image.

However, José van Dick points out that this “tendency to fuse photography with daily experience and communication is part of a broader cultural transformation that involves individualization and intensification of experience” (ibid). That individualization generally represents the essence of the portraiture practice is truism in the visual arts field. Not only the contemporary background, but the entire western fashion has put individuality at its very core: “The pictorial genre of the portrait doubly cherishes the cornerstone of bourgeois western culture. The uniqueness of individual and his or her accomplishments is central in that culture,” highlights Ernst van Alphen (van Alphen, 1997: 239).

But again, the interest in individualisation and the sharing of personal experiences was aroused by the convenience of public consumption cameras and social media applications. In a fully digitized environment that, on one hand, encourages the users to create and alter their identities and to present their selves in which manner they choose on social networking sites

(Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, etc.), and, on the other hand, puts at their disposal an array of new photographic technologies (smartphones, webcams, photo-video HD camcorders), it would not come in surprise the interest social media users manifest in taking their own photographic portraits.

Nevertheless, in her 2002 visual anthropology study, Barbara Harrison already notices that photography's main function shifted from family presentation to self-presentation. The researcher suggests not only that photography accounts for personal lives, orientations and experiences, but that "visuality is itself a method by which social actors are in the social world" (Harrison, 2002: 94). Although Harrison never intended it, she advances hitherto an explanation at the heart of a social media phenomenon that will become mainstream years later: the selfie.

The Selfie

In 2013, the term 'selfie' was officially added to the online Oxford English Dictionary and defined as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smart phone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website". At the end of the year, it was also selected as the "word of the year" by the same dictionary. A self-portrait photograph usually taken with a digital camera or phone camera at arm's length or in a mirror, the selfie is also defined by the social purpose it was captured for: to be shared on online media networking sites.

Therefore, the selfie lies at the very gist of digitization that reinterprets the understanding of the term 'photograph' and merges the effortless practice of the capturing of a self portrait with its distributing. Additionally, the selfie seizes the whole cluster of possibilities that digitization has to offer to individuals in terms of creating their new online identities and of presenting their selves and continuously shaping and altering them. By the very convenience of repeating the same shot until obtaining the intended result and selecting and deleting unwanted images, the selfie bestows to the individual the capability of thoroughly choosing the portrayal of his self. The fast cropping and editing tools that social media networking sites began to incorporate (such as Instagram's highly popular filters) are used to reshape, enhance and beautify an image within seconds. A black and white filter and some blur represent an

easy recipe for an artistic touch, while a vintage filter will cast an entirely different view of a swiftly captured selfie in front of an indifferent background.

In consequence, creating an online identity and choosing the way of presenting the self become a matter of clicking and screen-touching. By pressing one tab or another to capture, retouch and share a selfie, the individual selects the role he would like to impersonate or the stage of his performance (a certain social networking site or group). Multiple self-captures or different edits of the same selfie can serve to simultaneously perform a range of roles, as the individual would move back and forth from one online context to another.

There is a common belief that a photograph can betoken the true self of a person but, as Barthes argues, attempting to reach the self of an individual through a photograph leads to frustration. Generally, a selfie offers a more accurate presentation of the individual than other non-visual methods. For instance, in the absence of an image, a social media user can choose to describe his physical appearance completely differently from his actual real one.

However, the selfie still grants the individual the possibility to present his self on a discerning base. It is not only the convenience of selecting and deleting snapshots, but also the multitude of focusing, cropping and editing choices that can bring a selfie to little-to-no affinity to the sitter. Focusing on a certain part of the body, privileging a specific angle, cropping or removing the unwanted elements, enhancing colours and lightening effects, or even using various smartphone applications that turn a photo into a drawing or painting, all prompt to numerous, various results ranging from adding a simple cast on a shot to completely changing it with the insertion of previously non-existent features (such as rock-band hair to a bold, middle-aged individual).

Discussing the capturing of a photograph, Roland Barthes underlines that there are four image repertoires that intersect and influence each other: “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (Barthes, 1981[1980]: 13). Thus, having one’s portrait taken involves both internal and external image processing: the subjective image of the self and the idealized image of the self on one hand, and the photographed image of the self and the public image of the self or ‘imago’, on the other hand. For Barthes, the external stage of the picture taking and presentation raise ontological

dissatisfactions through the lack of control over the captured and distributed image. It is the idealized image of the self that the individual would like to be immortalised and shared, and the matching shortfall between it and the one that it is eventually obtained is disconcerting and deceptive: “I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre” (ibid:14).

Having the sitter coinciding with the photographer, the selfie allows the individual to control the photographed image of the self and the public one, as well. To begin with, the individual can choose the favourite framing, angle and focus. Among the shots captured, he can select the ones closer to his idealized image of the self and delete the others, as argued above. Also, by further editing of the favoured photographs, the individual can obtain an image that would perfectly match the one of his idealized self. Albeit the fact that such perfect matching might never be acquired, the possibility of influencing the photographed image of the self and, eventually, of selecting the image to be publicized, gives to the individual control over all the four image repertoires, a privilege earlier shared with the photographer. Therefore, the selfie empowers the individual and eventually informs his very sense of identity and personal abilities. The satisfaction granted by the equalling of the idealized image of the self with the one finally obtained not only ontologically comforts the individual, but also strengthens the appeal of ‘do it your own’ photographic practices. Anew-constructed subjectivity comes into play, reassessing and repositioning the functions of portraiture photography.

However, the downside of the process of making the idealized image to coincide with the photographed, respectively the publicized one, is that it fosters self-absorption and ultimately supports the inwards-looking cult of narcissism. By the constant attention towards the captured pictures and the steady efforts to retouch and refashion them, the individual would only develop an increasingly higher interest in the portrayal of the self and, ultimately, in his physical appearance.

The Selfie and the Audience

In the online social networking context, the role of audience is assumed by other social media users. Lacking any direct interaction (except the cases in which the individuals previously met in real-life situations), the users experience an exclusively screen-mediated interplay. If the physical world of face-to-face interaction influences individuals to perform a

‘role’ and to adjust their behaviours according to whom they address, the virtual space similarly prompts users to amend their online conduct observing the audience’s response (such as number of friends or followers, amount of comments, type of comments – positive or negative ones – number of ‘likes’ etc.). The gaze of others becomes the ultimate judge of an individual visual portrayal of the self, manifesting itself by the way in which a selfie is assessed (the amount of positive comments, ‘likes’, shares or negative comments the image would attract).

Therefore, the control the individual has on the photographed image of his self and the public one is eventually undermined by the audience. It is not solely the fact that the efforts put into equalling the captured image of the self with the idealized one have to take into consideration the audience responses, but the mental, internal imagery process that leads to the initial forming of the idealized image of the self is influenced by the audience’s reactions to previously publicized photographs. ‘The one I want others to think I am’ has to acknowledge the preferences, inclinations and options of the ‘others’.

The influence the social online group or community holds upon the individual to portray himself in a certain, fashioned manner can be defined as Mead’s generalized other transferred into a digitized environment. Generally, it is expected that a large digital audience would put an unoriginal and unimaginative mark on the presentation of the self, as there is a stringency in accommodating most of the tastes. But such influence would only add itself up to the constraints that are already affecting the selfie, such as technological ones or artistic and professional ones. To begin with, the selfie is defined by the fact that it is captured at arm’s length or in a mirror. Having the focal distance given, the individual has limited options upon the choosing of the angle of view and the depth of field (which basically refers to the way in which objects in the picture – for instance, the individual and background elements – are represented relative to each other). At last, the selfie does not always benefit from the best composition principles. Despite the increasingly wide availability and high quality of digitized camera and image editing software, the lack of artistic or professional abilities of social media users has its saying in producing similar, bland self-portraits. Therefore, the price of blurring the boundaries between amateur and professional portraiture photography is the stereotypy and conventionality of the pose, leading to generally undifferentiated portrayals of the self.

The Selfie as Experience

Along with individualization, there is another element that van Dijck considers to be accountable for the strong linking between photography and communication, and that is the intensification of experience.

“Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form. That most logical of nineteenth-century aesthetes, Mallarmé, said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph.”

This is the conclusion reached by Susan Sontag in one of the most influential studies of photography of the time (Sontag, 2001: 24). Certainly, the individual’s predilection of photographing as many events and experiences of their daily lives as possible is reinforced by the digitization of cameras. But also the wide availability of cameras and the convenience of distributing and sharing the captures with physically absent friends or relatives play a role in enhancing and intensifying the experiences an individual can have. The camera’s character of being at-hand stimulates its increasingly frequent handling, in the same way that the easy access to social networking sites spurs their continuous use. But the expediting of picture taking and distribution can only lead to the expediting of experiences that are photographed. The intensification of experiences follows naturally the digitized world’s contemporary trend of arousing, prompting or searching for new contexts, events and happenings from which the individual could benefit to develop his self, but also to differentiate himself and stand out in his social groups.

The practice of taking selfies supports this view on the intensification of experience. Ultimately, the selfie attempts to capture an experience and acts as a tool that helps distinguish between undifferentiated portrayals of the self. The stereotypy and conventionality of the pose that is forced upon the self-portrait by various technical or vocational constraints or groups’ influences are in some ways condoned by the novelty and excitement of the experience the individual has at the moment of the photographic capture. For instance, despite the fact that a selfie needs to be taken at arm’s length, it can still put forward an innovative image and distinguish itself from a batch of others by what it reveals on the individual’s experiences: having a nice meal with friends or family, taking a trip,

meeting a celebrity, visiting a museum, and others. And as Susan Sontag brilliantly phrased it, experiences would exist in order to end in a selfie.

Conclusions

The digitization of communication offers to the individual new avenues to explore, construct or reconstruct his identity, to fashion his self, to present it, and to change, shape and experiment with the presentation of his self. Also, the development of new technologies and online media applications and networking sites put a new self-portrayal tool at the individual's disposal: the selfie. While it disrupts both the notion and practice of artistic portraiture photography, investing media users to 'do it yourself' portrait photographer's abilities, the selfie ultimately provokes the individual to enhance, diversify and intensify their experiences.

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