Preprint of Piazzesi, Chiara, Catherine Lavoie Mongrain, « Women "Doing Selfies": Reflexivity and Norm Negotiation in the Production and Circulation of Digital Self-Portraits », *Sociologia e Politiche sociali*, 3, 2019: 95-111.

Women "Doing Selfies": Reflexivity and Norm Negotiation in the Production and Circulation of Digital Self-Portraits[1]

Chiara Piazzesi
PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Université du Québec à Montréal

Catherine Lavoie Mongrain
Graduate Student, Department of Sociology, Université du Québec à Montréal

Abstract

Selfies are a specific, wide-spread form of self-expression on social networking sites. Media, specialists and general discourse have criticized this form of digital visual culture, usually characterized as narcissistic and superficial. Criticism is particularly harsh when selfie-takers are women. In order to question this dismissive conception of women's practices as self-centered and naïve, our paper provides insights into women's motivation, attitudes, experiences and strategies while "doing selfies". Our discussion is based on a 2-year qualitative study on a small sample Canadian women taking and sharing selfies. We argue that "doing selfies" is a carefully reflected practice, involving awareness of social norms of acceptability and visibility for women's bodies, as well as direct and indirect experience of implications of exposure and connection-building online.

I selfies sono una forma di auto-espressione specifica e molto diffusa sui social networks. I mass media, gli specialisti e l'opinione generale hanno largamente criticato questa forma di cultura visuale digitale, che viene descritta come narcisistica e superficiale. Le critiche sono particolarmente dure quando sono le donne a fare dei selfies. Questo articolo mette in discussione questa concezione sbrigativa delle pratiche delle donne, caratterizzate come egocentriche e ingenue, e offre un'altra prospettiva sulle motivazioni, gli atteggiamenti, le esperienze e le strategie delle donne che "fanno selfies". L'articolo si basa su una ricerca qualitativa di due anni, condotta in Canada con un piccolo campione di donne che producono e condividono selfies. I nostri risultati mostrano che "fare selfies" è una pratica sottoposta a riflessione accurata, che implica sia la coscienza delle norme sociali di accettabilità e visibilità per i corpi delle donne che un'esperienza diretta o indiretta dell'esposizione e della costituzione di legami online.

Keywords

Selfies; social networking sites; reflexivity; norm negotiation; women

[1] The authors wish to thank the Fonds de Recherche du Québec – Société et culture (FRQSC) for the generous support granted to this research project, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful remarks. Corresponding author: Chiara Piazzesi, *piazzesi.chiara@uqam.ca*

Selfies; social networks; riflessività; negoziazione norme; donne

Since the massive diffusion of Internet access, of the affordability of portable devices such as smartphones, and the proliferation and the success of social networking sites (SNSs), critics have been warning users against the risks of exposure of private content. These risks are related, among other things, to violations of privacy, with companies collecting, using and selling private information about clients / users without their consent as in the *Facebook–Cambridge Analytica* data scandal in 2018 (Wikipedia Contributors 2020). Experts are also warning against the psychological and social consequences of increased exposure, ongoing quest for visibility, and need for validation on SNSs (for instance, see Agger 2012). An excellent example of this position, which is widely relayed by the media, can be found in the way selfies, and especially women's selfies (Burns 2015; Murray 2018), are qualified in the general discourse. A specific form of visual self-expression online, selfies are photos representing (with different techniques, styles and through different compositional features [Zhao and Zappavigna 2018]) the subject that takes the picture. Even if only 3-5% of photos circulating online belong to this category (Manovich *et al.* n.d.), selfies have garnered large attention from media, scholars in social and human sciences, and society more broadly. Selfies appear to be the most "intimate" kind of pictures that one can take and share, granting high visibility, but also exposure to scrutiny, surveillance, and criticism: often considered as a tool to seek validation, selfies can and do trigger negative feedback. Indeed, selfies are generally regarded as staged, artificial, mostly inauthentic pictures, unnecessarily showcasing the narcissistic, exhibitionistic inclinations of their (female) authors. As Senft and Baym (2015) observe, selfies are depicted as places where control and self-control are lost. In other words,

selfies are treated as though their producers (especially when they are women) would be "possessed" by their pathological needs and their weaknesses (Burns 2015), and willing to expose and overexpose themselves in their quest for visibility at any price.

This rather quick dismissal and/or pathologization of the wide-spread visual practice of selfies, as well as of women engaging with it, has been criticized (Murray 2018) and needs addressing. More specifically, and from a feminist point of view, this paper wants to question the tendency of media and specialists to second-guess women as selfie-producers, to reduce their practices to symptoms of obliviousness, pathological needs, or even mental illness. Based on the results of a qualitative study conducted on a sample of 11 Canadian women taking and sharing selfies on SNSs (*Facebook* and *Instagram*), this paper discusses women's experiences, feelings, and reflexivity related to the production and circulation of online visual content which represents them. We examine the three steps of "doing selfies" (choosing the moment, staging, and sharing the selfie), that is of participating in the production of online visual culture in the form of digital self-portraits on SNSs. We discuss the way women characterize activities like selfie-taking and selfie-sharing, the work they put into taking, editing and displaying their selfies, as well as the reflexivity that is involved in these processes. We argue that "doing selfies" is a carefully reflected practice that involves awareness of social norms of acceptability for women's bodies and identities (being visible *as* someone specific), as well as direct and indirect experience of implications of exposure and connection-building online.

Theoretical framework

Within the framework of Web 2.0 and digital participative culture (Jenkins 2008), where

users produce a large portion of circulating digital content, SNSs are generally used by people to present their views, discuss their opinions, promote their skills, and share details about their personal lives. SNSs like *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Tumblr* and *Instagram* in particular, mostly rely on users showcasing their lives, families, partners, interests, jobs, meals, athletic performances, pets, and the most mundane aspects of their daily existence (for instance, see Balleys 2017). Some SNSs – like *Facebook* – have introduced features allowing users to restrict the accessibility of the content they share (i.e. selecting audiences), while others – like *Instagram* – only give their users the choice between a public and a private profile. As Chambers (2013, ch. 1) summarizes, despite the popularity of SNSs, there is a generalized, negative bias against these media, which are considered to foster inauthentic interactions and relationships, to weaken social bonds, to isolate people, to breed psychological disorders, to encourage mindless oversharing of private content, to commodify people's lives and memories. These criticisms rest on a series of dualisms, opposing digital life to real life, extimacy to intimacy, and private to public. Drawing on Lacan, for instance, Tisseron (2011) has introduced the term "extimacy" (*extimité*) to indicate portions of the self that are exposed to others in order to be validated. According to the author, the increased "extimacy" of our behaviour on SNSs promotes lack of authenticity and the reduction of the self to what can be exposed – edited and oversimplified. Beyond the traditional dualism of digital life *vs.* real life, however, authors have started looking at practices of intimacy sharing on SNSs as not simply displaying an edited self, rather contributing to the constitution of the self, as well online as offline. Humphreys (2018) observed that, throughout history, people have used media traces to narratively and qualitatively build their selves, and this process directly involved sharing media traces (such as journals, letters, photos, memoirs etc.) with different, more or less close publics. Papacharissi has introduced the concept of "networked self" to define the self that emerges from the

combination of old and new forms of sociability, the latter involving multiple audiences and being enabled by the affordances of SNSs (2011: 317). Notwithstanding the (sometimes illegal) commodification of private information and intimate details by private actors pursuing economic, political, and even personal goals, Dobson and colleagues regard digital intimate publics, with which we experiment and interact on SNSs, as "ground of our identities, affects, and politics" (2018: xx). Hence, scholars have reframed online intimacy as "mediated" (Chambers 2013) by the affordances of technologies, yet equally contributing to the formation and maintenance of deep and meaningful personal relationships. Online intimacy is also "networked" (Miguel 2018), as it is constituted by digital environments as well as personal experiences and connections, and embedded in networks of power.

Critical stances with regards to the negative consequences of engaging with social networks are also built along a further dualism, that of public *vs.* private. While protection of privacy certainly should be a priority for companies controlling SNSs and data collection on the Internet, criticism is more often addressed to individuals users and to their online practices. SNSs users sharing details about their personal lives are often considered as naive, morally irresponsible, and obliviously inclined to "oversharing" (Aggard 2012) – that is, sharing too much, too often, and to the wrong audiences. However, empirical work suggests that online practices and intimacies are more complex. Blurring the boundaries of public and private through "oversharing", for example, can be a (conscious) attempt to build deeper affective connections and reciprocity, hence to renegotiate norms regulating sharing and privacy within personal networks (Kennedy 2012). As Balleys (2017) has shown, sharing intimate aspects of their everyday life can be a way for young female Youtubers to perform their femininity and consolidate their identity within mediated interactions with their peers. Increasingly aware of what Brighenti (2007: 330) defines as the upper

and lower thresholds of "fair visibility", SNSs users negotiate visibility with regards to social norms, moral norms and technological affordances. Overexposure and underexposure both entail risks for SNSs users, specifically with regard to social recognition and agency. Thus, people develop skills and strategies to protect/negotiate boundaries of intimacy and identity (Piazzesi *et al.* 2020), with regards to professional as well as to personal audiences. Unequally distributed through social groups and stands, these skills can be regarded as a form of cultural capital applied to information technology (Ollier-Malaterre 2018).

Social anxiety is particularly strong with regards to specific forms of online self-presentation and self-expression, among which selfies are probably the most problematic. Thanks to the affordability, the portability and the technological possibilities of smartphone cameras, the practice of taking selfies has been democratized (Tiidenberg 2018; Rettberg 2014). Selfies have become a widespread form of self-promotion for politicians and celebrities of the show business, creating a new language for celebrity culture (Hourmant *et al*. 2019). Even though the word "selfie" commonly indicates a digital self-portrait, scholars regard selfie also as a "*bouquet* of practices" that the name "selfie" assembles in a "*a posteriori* cultural construction" (Gunthert 2015, n.p., my translation; Eckel *et al.* 2018). According to Zhao and Zappavigna (2018), the presence of the subject who takes the selfie can be "presented" (when he or she appears in the picture), "inferred" (when the picture contains body parts inferring the presence of the photographer), or "implied" through the presence of objects in the picture. Within each category, there are subcategories of selfies – such as mirror selfies, bathroom selfies, sexy selfies and so forth (see Iqani and Schroeder 2016). Generally considered as superficial, narcissistic, and harmful (for instance, Mills 2018) selfies are more harshly criticized when produced and shared by women (Dobson 2015), in which case they are treated as evidence of the problematic subjectivity of their

producers (Burns 2015). Social, moral, and clinical scrutiny of selfies, hence, becomes a political and a feminist issue inasmuch as it implies scrutiny of women's behaviors, bodies, sexuality, and voices. Moreover, selfies appear as a place where gender norms are performed (Döring, Reif and Poeschl 2016) and negotiated, but also where gender surveillance is enforced and self-imposed (Elias and Gill 2018), especially in connection with the market of beautification goods and services. Thus, "selfie-culture" (Tiidenberg 2018: 12) is shaped by users' practices and technological affordances, which are in turn permeated by social norms, power relations, and economic interests.

Our paper is a contribution to the understanding of how women participate in selfie-culture by taking and sharing their digital self-portraits on SNSs. We will discuss the "crafting of the selfie" (Iqani and Schroeder 2016: 40) in its material, political and symbolic dimension, that is to say the way women "do" selfies while managing boundaries of intimacy and visibility, building connections, and negotiating gender and appearance norms for themselves and for fellow selfie-takers.

Methodology

Dataset comes from a 2-year research project funded by *Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture* and carried out by the authors between September 2017 and May 2019. We constituted a small (Crouch and McKenzie 2006), convenience sample of 11 women aged 22 to 52 years, living in Montreal, professionally active or completing post-secondary education. Figure 1 below offers an overview of the main characteristics of our sample.

Figure 1. Overview of socio-demographic profile of the participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education	Ethnicity	Personal situation	Children
Eva	30	Student	M.A.	White	Single	0
Emma	22	Student	B.A.	White	Single	0
Fanny	36	Self-employed	B.A.	White	In a relationship	2
Juliette	35	Student	M.A.	White	Single	0
Melissa	51	Artiste	B.A.	White	Married	2
Zoë	52	Student, self-employed	M.A.	White	Married	0
Clarisse	36	Employee	B.A.	White	In a relationship	3
Cassandra	50	Artist	High School	Black	In an open relationship	1
Lena	38	Self-employed	B.A.	White	Married	2
Jeanne	26	Educator	B.A.	White	In a relationship	0
Audrey	41	Self-employed	B.A.	White	Married	1

Participants were recruited through word-to-mouth in the researchers' personal and professional networks (3 participants), as well as through announcements pinned on boards in different public spaces in Montreal and circulated in local *Facebook* groups (8 participants). Due to the length and the complexity of their involvement in the study, we requested ongoing consent from participants: informed consent form was signed prior to the beginning of data collection, and consent was renewed verbally and specifically at each of the four stages of data collection. Data were carefully anonymized and researchers committed to total confidentiality of pictures (which are not used in the dissemination of results). Ethics certification for this research was issued by the Ethics committee of the Faculté des sciences humaines at Université du Québec à Montréal (certification # 1978_e_2017).

The first stage of data collection consisted in studying the participants' *Facebook* and *Instagram* accounts, to which researchers were granted access. The main focus was on the ten last selfies shared by each participant, associated hashtags, and more generally on pages liked or followed by each participant, such as women magazines, celebrities, companies, products related to self-care and beauty. In order to "thicken" our data (Latzko-Toth *et al.* 2017) and understand digital data within their cultural context online (Laestadius 2017), researchers' observations on SNSs profiles were discussed with participants during the first semi-directed interviews.

Participants were questioned about their pictures, their selfie-related habits, practices, reflections, understanding of cultural features of SNSs, but also about their relationship with their appearance, gender stereotypes of beauty and femininity, beautification practices. Interviews have been transcribed and coded for emerging themes through open and iterative codification (Gioia *et al*. 2013), after establishing inter-judge reliability (Drapeau 2004). Codification memos have served to inform further data collection as well as analyses and theorization (Charmaz 2006). More generally, at each stage of data collection, the available data-set (depending on the stage: memos, notes, interview verbatim, pictures) was globally analyzed to inform further data-gathering and analyses.

After this first interview, researchers asked each participant to take seven selfies connected to five pre-determined situations (first date, job interview, presentation at work or school, night out with girlfriends, bathroom selfie) plus two situations chosen by the participant. Following the principles of the photo-elicitation technique (Rose 2016), visual data collection had a threefold goal: pictures were displayed to facilitate conversations / trigger memories with participants during interviews (Wills *et al.* 2016); they were used both by participants and researchers to exemplify the reflections, techniques, and behaviors described by participants (as well one's own as others'); and they provided researchers with an additional insight into patterns of behavior, visual choices and personal experience discussed with the participants or inferred from further data, and this, from the point of view of the participant herself (Bolton *et al.* 2001). Initial picture selection during interviews was researcher-driven, but participants were free to browse their phones, SNSs accounts and printed pictures to pick other images during the discussion. The five pre-determined situations were chosen in order to document participants' visual languages in connection to formal (work, school), informal (leisure time) and private contexts (bathroom). By asking all participants to take

selfies connected to the same situations, we were able to obtain a "controlled" variety, which allowed us to observe similarities as well as differences in visual languages. We left participant the choice of two additional situations in order to ease the "homework" pressure and to enhance the resemblance with ordinary, spontaneous selfie-taking. If selfies taken before the interviews testify to the ordinary labors of "doing selfies", these labors are not necessarily reflected, contextualized and criticized by the participants. Thus, compared to elicited selfie-taking, ordinary selfie-taking felt to participants more spontaneous, less artificial than producing self-portraits "on demand". Methodologically speaking, this contrast helped generate awareness (in the research team and in the participants) of the "hows" and the "whys" of selfie-taking. This awareness that was pointed out and discussed by participants during the second semi-directed interview, which took place approximately six months after the first. Once transcribed, the second set of interviews was coded. Comprehensive analysis of data-set was carried out through theory-oriented grouping of coded themes (Gioia *et al*. 2013), analytic memo writing and increasingly general theorization of observed phenomena. All data have been processed with QSR International's NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software.

Results

"I take my image, I make it beautiful, and I present it to you": this is how Emma describes doing selfies. Indeed, the women we talked to divide the process of *producing* selfies as online visual culture in three stages: choosing the moment to take a picture, working on the picture (before taking it and after the picture is taken), and then sharing it. Although the three steps do not necessarily occur in an uninterrupted flow, they build a practical sequence even when the second and third steps are delayed. In other words, there are context-related criteria to determine the right

time, criteria to determine what is a good shot, and criteria to determine how to share it.

Generally speaking, choosing the moment is a question of feeling: the moment *feels right*, meaning it does not require calculation or planning as such. One is in the mood, feels good, feels beautiful. These feelings of enthusiasm, excitement, serenity, happiness can relate to the scenery, the situation, the activity, the accomplishment, the company, or just be part of a "good day". Hence, taking a picture aims at constituting a memory of one's experiences and feelings. For some, the context also had to be appropriate; for example, interrupting an activity or conversation to take a selfie can be considered inappropriate. The exception occurs when the staging step comes before the decision to immortalize a moment, which is the case for professional selfie-takers such as Instagram celebrities. The participants framed selfie-taking as a spontaneous, unplanned drive to gather memories of what they feel and do: "it's a window on my everyday life", says Jeanne. Thus, many of them experienced an additional challenge in taking selfies for our research: it felt inauthentic, not spontaneous, artificial, too calculated. Some participants had to "stage" situations that do not occur in their life (like first dates for married women) or to force situations to make them selfie-worthy ("I *should* take a selfie here"). The participants who did not face this challenge reported that taking selfies for the study was just the same as their usual selfie-taking practice: timing and situation felt right *and* they could do their homework at the same time. Some of the women we talked to desire to constitute a memory of themselves because nobody else is doing it (Melissa), or nobody else is doing it right: Fanny states that pictures taken by other people do not reflect the way she sees herself. Such correspondence is particularly important when moving from the first to the staging step.

This felt spontaneity of choosing a selfie-worthy moment can combine with former knowledge / experience of the selfie-culture, of one's audience reactions, but also with the desire

to build a memory of one's life. Such awareness acts as an additional motivator: selfies are shot and kept in one's phone, that follows its owner everywhere. Some participants take selfies more often in order to avoid "gaps" in the digital journal that they create through their pictures. Fanny knows that her followers like her selfies, which encourages her to shoot more. Since she sees "everybody" posting selfies, Juliette feels compelled to do the same. For Jeanne, selfie are an easy way to communicate with friends and families about her activities. Many participants are very vocal against the culture of perfection that they perceive as haunting communication on social media, and pick for their selfies moments of sadness, fatigue, exhaustion, lack of motivation. By doing so, they want social media to become more real, a space where it is possible to share *real* life experience as opposed to a curated version of it. Participants define this endeavor as gender specific: in their opinion, women are undoubtedly more targeted and harmed by the culture of perfection, that decides which bodies and experiences can be visible on social media.

Once the moment has been chosen, it has to be staged as a selfie, better yet: the selfie has to be staged so that it conveys the feelings, experiences and perspective one wishes to express. According to the women we interviewed, staging entails some or all of these actions: choosing the angle, lighting, face expression, body posture; hiding or showing certain parts of the body, the face, or the environment; preparing oneself (clothes, make up, hairstyle) and the environment (tidying up, placing things); taking multiple pictures and selecting one; editing, cropping, applying filters and/or effects; adding location, caption, hashtags. As in the choice of the moment, the picture too has to "feel right", correspond to what is intended through it: one takes and retakes, selects, and edits the selfie until satisfactory. The picture must also feel real, authentic, from the subject's perspective. Authenticity means feeling that one really looks like the picture, and the picture really does justice to one's looks. But it also means that one was really doing what the

picture shows. Cassandra takes very elaborated and "staged" selfies (using wigs and costumes), yet she feels that she's only "stretching the look", not faking it. She finds some common embellishing filters and effects for selfies quite disturbing, because she does not recognize herself after applying them ("it's not me", she states). Women quite often aim at looking beautiful in a selfie, when feeling beautiful gives them a particular pleasure. Hence, they take selfies when they make an additional effort on their appearance (preparing for a special occasion), they try a new look (just went to the hairdresser), or they have a good day (hair is ok, one feels rested, one looks better when on vacation). For the women we interviewed, showcasing their appearance comes with a feeling of empowerment: they can convey their beauty as something that appears through their own perspective and their own technical efforts. Emma observes that selfies allow her "to feel beautiful in my own view", as opposed to being beautiful for and through others.

As for the first step of "doing selfies", staging involves a subjective feeling of authenticity and control over one's image, but also reflections on selfie-culture and platform-specific culture, past experience, and specific challenges of women's visibility on SNSs. For instance, participants report oscillating between implicitly endorsing mainstream selfie-culture and challenging it: taking less conventional selfies can be a way to reaffirm oneself against mainstream standards for femininity and appearance, and to encourage other women to question cultural norms of self-presentation on social media. Because of her past experience and her profession, Fanny is particularly aware of the difficulties faced by new mothers in reconnecting with their bodies and feeling sexy after pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding. Hence, she stages sexy selfies and shares them with her followers, encouraging women to take a moment and feel sexy for themselves, in front of their phone camera. Being on a strict nutrition and fitness regime herself, Lena took a selfie with a doughnut to encourage other women to embrace their imperfections and forgive

themselves for breaking the rules once in a while. For these women, as for all self-employed participants, conveying strong, non-conventional messages also serves the purpose of professional self-promotion on social media. Participants with a background in arts or who currently work as artists are also aware of the importance of distinguish themselves through careful staging of their selfies. At the same time, promoting one's work sometimes means avoiding being the main center of attention, even in a selfie.

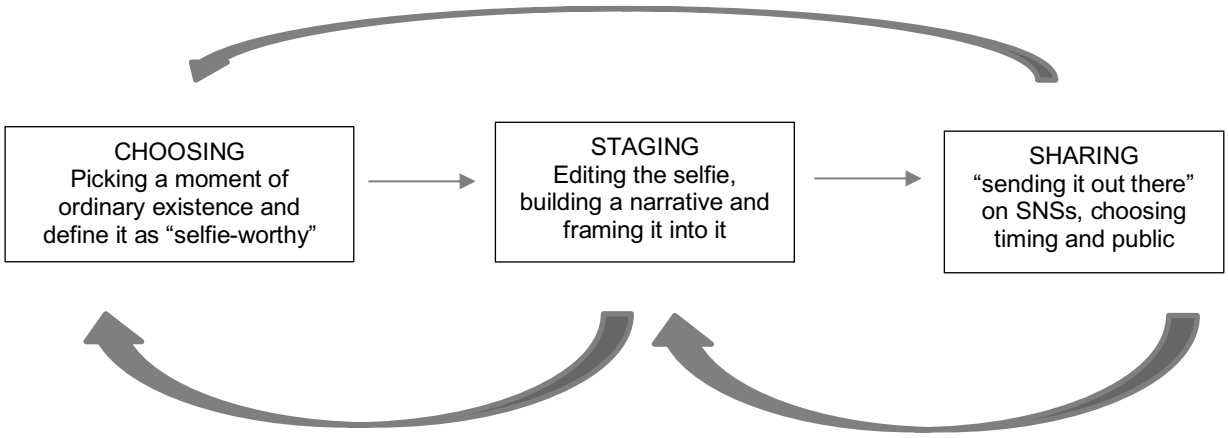
Thus, as well staging as sharing (third step) are strongly influenced by a reflection on the implications of what being visible on social media means. As Fanny put it, "there's what I'm posting, but then there's also who is looking at it". One anticipates being seen by other people, by one's public, and is also aware of the more general context in which this will happen. At the time of the second interview, Eva takes funny selfies to send them to a new partner who has "some sense of humour", and describe this practice as new for her: she does not feel compelled to curate her image the way she does for selfies posted on SNSs. Audrey struggles with a lack of self-acceptance related to her body, and likes "goofing around" with selfies to "tame" her rejection of her body, which does not correspond to mainstream standards of female beauty ("it's like an inoculation", she says). However, she isn't always in the mood: some days, she lacks the strength to bear unflattering pictures of her being "out there". This is not only a question of staging, but is also related to the act of *sharing* a selfie. First of all, there's timing. The selfie can feel inappropriate for the time of the day (Fanny refrained from posting a full make-up selfie on Tuesday morning before other people's first coffee), or be at odds with one's current "mindset" (Lena uses an app to carefully prepare posts containing selfies, but waits for the "right time" to post them), hence clashing with the need for authenticity. Some participants reflect on the appropriate pace for selfie-posting (neither too often nor too seldom). They can also have their

audience in mind when staging selfies. Multiple respondents expressed a desire to keep their profiles interesting to others by "mixing it up", that is, by diversifying the content of their selfies so as to avoid being perceived as a "one-trick pony". When deciding how to share selfies, participants also differentiate between platforms: *Instagram* feels less personal, less political, less confrontational, allowing for higher anonymity; *Facebook*'s audience is above all friends and family, by which participants feel more scrutinized and criticized. All these considerations aim at reducing the risk of being misunderstood, criticized, or even shamed on SNSs, despite the effort put into curating their image and conveying a particular message. Participants refer frequently to the increased surveillance on women's voices and bodies on social media, and explain how they navigate this culture while resisting to it to the extent that they can afford: they try to control the feedback as far as possible, while increasing the chances of connecting with audiences on the different topics or issues that they present in their posts.

Discussion

According to our results, "doing selfies" entails for women negotiating different norms related to women's self-presentation on SNSs and, more specifically, to selfie-culture. Such negotiation occurs in each and all of the three steps of "doing selfies": choosing the moment, staging the selfie and sharing it. Self-expression and communication on SNSs are structured by cultural norms and power relations, and users are aware – to different extents – of what this entails for their specific identity, presence and self-presentation online. Figure 2 presents a schematization of the three steps of "doing selfies".

Figure 2. The three stages of the process of "doing selfies". The thinner arrows indicate the sequence of stages in time; the thicker arrows indicate the impact of each stage on previous stages through anticipation and reflexivity on past experience of the subject.



"Doing selfies" means embedding the picture in a narrative about oneself as a self, as a producer of online digital culture, as a part of the discussion on the specific challenges that one faces, as an actor of a certain society and cultural environment. Thus, it means managing visibility (Brighenti 2007; 2010), which appears to be SNSs general currency (Banet-Weiser 2018), but more specifically managing being visible *as* someone specific: as a woman, as a mother, as a woman who works in a specific sector, as a woman who is a competent SNSs user, as a woman who is a competent selfie-taker, as a woman who has a feminist stance, as a woman who in politically committed to empowering other women and so on. Different identity-management strategies are applied to different, contextual self-presentations (Cunningham 2013; Kuznekoff 2013). Following Zhao and Zappavigna (2018), selfies can be described as places where different perspectives on the subject are negotiated. However, in selfie production, the audience plays a role only insofar as it is anticipated by the subject of the selfie, thus influencing material and conceptual production of the shared picture. Selfie-producers anticipate their audience's reception of their selfies through their knowledge of the audience itself, but also through their acquaintance with cultural norms surrounding self-presentation on SNSs, gendered power relationships and so forth.

Such knowledge translates itself into a certain leeway that subjects allow themselves in "doing selfies". On the one hand, a selfie must feel "right" and "authentic": it must reflect the subject's perspective, intentions, and feelings at a certain time and place. This is why the affordances of mobile phones are so important in facilitating capturing the here and now. On the other hand, a selfie must feel appropriate for a certain audience and a certain context. Hence, selfies are staged so that they convey a message that is shaped by the subject's perspective and by the subject's effort to increase the chances of connecting with other people through that message: the picture is embedded in a narrative that encourages people to acknowledge it and engage with the narrative itself. Insofar as this effort already incorporates norms and platform-culture, it reproduces the expectations that it anticipates (Butler 1990). The case of authenticity is exemplary. Authenticity means that the picture does justice to one's intentions, feelings, experiences, to one's perspective. However, authenticity must also be *staged* to be expressed: the picture must be perceived as authentic by the audience, i.e. must comply to standards and criteria used in mainstream digital visual culture to assess the authenticity of selfies circulated by users of SNSs (Lobinger & Brantner 2015). If the selfie is a mirror (Eler 2017), it also has to *look* like one. In other words, authenticity is a subjective sense of consistency of one's self, but also becomes a *quality* of the online self (Rosenbaum *et al.* 2013) who presents himself or herself as accountable for one's media traces (Humphreys 2018). In the era of photoshopped pictures, filters and photo editing apps, being "authentic" is raised to a moral value, and inauthenticity is horizontally policed by users exposing fakes and cheaters (see examples in Hess 2015). The stakes are especially high for women: firstly, postfeminist "competitive femininity" (McRobbie 2015; Winch 2013) thrives on social media (Elias and Gill 2018) and is identified as a source of a quest for exterior perfection that hurts women, especially young women (Banet-Weiser 2018; Mills 2018); secondly, as participants to

our research highlight, there's a stigma associated with women "faking" an appearance that they cannot live up to "in real life"; thirdly, there's an additional stigma more generally associated with women who take selfies (Burns 2015; Tiidenberg 2018), which qualifies them as superficial and narcissistic.

Because visibility is never just "being seen", but comes with a qualification of the self that is seen ("being seen *as*"), visibility is managed by attempting to create and "control" the narrative of a selfie (Eler 2017), and of media traces in general (Humphreys 2018). Selfie-producers shape this narrative and attribute themselves a set of qualities for which they wish to be acknowledged by an audience. The narrative (the staging) changes when a specific quality must be highlighted (being a good mother, a successful artist, a professional, a sexy woman, a disciplined fitness lover etc.), when a different audience is targeted (friends and family, a feminist group, a parent association etc.), or when selfie-producers want to join a certain conversation (resisting mainstream beauty standards, promoting diversity online, encouraging women to be "themselves" etc.). In this self-presentation and connection-building process, highlighting a certain narrative and specific qualities necessarily implies (more or less voluntarily) concealing other aspects of one's identity, experience, story. Being visible *as* a particular self can aim at empowering oneself and other people in online communities, i.e. encourage them to be visible *as* certain subjects and wider audiences to validate the visual production and the narrative that these subjects build and share. Women's appearance and identity are strongly policed (Löwy 2006; Bordo 1993) as well online as offline, and female bodies not corresponding or complying to cultural norms of beauty are less visible on SNSs and media in general, but also targeted by harsh criticism, shaming and hate-speech when they are showcased. Women can connect with other people by complying to conventional standards of femininity and beauty, i.e. belonging to mainstream visual cultural

production; or they can connect with other people by challenging these standards and giving voice to resistance to gendered power imbalances, promotion and inclusion of diverse lifestyles and identities. By doing so, women also claim legitimacy for their own bodies, appearances, experiences, identities, and lifestyles.

Hence, as Brighenti puts it, the structure of visibility on SNSs has substantially reduced the distinction between empowerment and vulnerability (2010: 93). The effort to "be visible *as*" aims at garnering attention, but attention must be afforded. When users convey non-conventional identities and narratives, being visible *as* a non-conventional subject, as an outlier, entails a burden and a risk, which women perceive as a constant threat for their interactions on SNSs. Thus, affording specific non-conventional self-presentations and narratives is not just a question of willpower: on the contrary, it is highly contingent, inasmuch as it depends on personal readiness at a certain point in time (can I manage this kind of exposure?), targeted audience (who are the people that will see me, and how are they likely to react?), user's network (who is likely to support my perspective and endorse my narrative?), context (which discussion am I joining? What is happening to women in society in general?) and social media platform. Staging a selfie and sharing it to connect with other people is the result of a set of assessments based on a practical knowledge of digital environments, cultural norms, and power relations. But there's also the assessment of one's personal, contingent capability to face the risk of negative feedback, of a backlash that would hurt one's sense of self and of legitimacy, one's self-acceptance and recognition. Boundaries of exposure, hence, are carefully – though not always skillfully (Ollier-Malaterre 2018) – managed to avoid negative exposure, as subjects in digital environments play with the continuum between visibility and invisibility (Casemajor and Toupin 2018). As cultural norms and social standards on digital platforms become more complex, so do reflections on opportunity, appropriateness, and

consequences of a certain gesture of self-expression. Building and fostering connections through selfies entails putting one's perspective and self-narrative to the test of validation, and negotiating norms and judgments with others, for oneself and for others.

Concluding remarks

A couple of weeks ago, in September 2019, a funny picture was circulating on *Facebook*: on a printed sign, someone explained that, because of not being on *Facebook* and not having many friends, he had tried to make some by interacting with people on the street the same way people interact on *Facebook*. Hence, he had shown strangers pictures of himself, his wife, his kids, his meals, his workouts, his cat, he had approached them to share his political views, and so on. People's reactions had been, so he reported, of embarrassment and unease. He had made one friend.

This example shows some of the differences between building connections / fostering intimacy online and offline. Despite the continuity between online and offline self, acquaintances, and social norms, there is something specific about the way online user produced content, and especially pictures and selfies, are intended, crafted, and received by audiences. As the anecdote highlights, online interactions allow for a mediated intimacy that cannot just be judged through criteria applying to offline interactions, and vice versa. Mediated intimacy is not simply inauthentic: it is a different form of intimacy, and needs to be addressed with fresh (sociological) eyes.

In this paper, we discussed the case of selfies, and more specifically selfies shared by women, which are considered to be a particularly inauthentic and futile form of self-expression.

We claimed that, on the contrary, "doing selfies" is a complex practice involving different reflexive stages, skills and knowledge about digital environments, audiences, and power relations online. Hence, far from being places where control is lost (as critics claim, as observed by Senft and Baym 2015), selfies are places where norms, identities and self-narratives are carefully negotiated by selfie-producers. The fact that selfies are always "staged" to a certain extent does not disqualify them as "fake" form of self-expression, and does not imply that they are superficial. Our results show how "staging" means a careful, contextual negotiation of norms of social acceptance that shape online platforms for social networking. Selfies are places where subjects put their self-narrative and perspective on themselves to the test in order to build connections with others on matters that are important to the selfie-producer. In this respect, need for self-acceptance and validation can shape "doing selfies" the same way they shape offline interactions in everyday life (and often haunt them: see Stone and Heen 2014). As well offline as online, this usually means highlighting particular qualities, accomplishments, skills or experiences of the subject, constituting a self-narrative around them, and offering this narrative to specific audiences to encourage them to acknowledge it and engage with it. As the anecdote highlights, the forms of expression of these needs can be different offline and online, and lead to different results within connection-building practices. Women "doing selfies" navigate the spectrum of more and less conventional self-presentations and narratives to create connections, and interpersonal connection-building (whether long-term or ephemeral) requires reciprocal acceptance of versions of the self that are presented in the interaction (Goffman 1959). Women's bodies and behaviors on SNSs are highly scrutinized, and women generally are rewarded for conventional appearance, compliance to mainstream standards of femininity, and conformity to gendered (and heteronormative) social norms. Hence, their selfies must be analyzed and understood by referring to the specific challenges women face

as a social group as well offline as online, and to risks and vulnerabilities associated with their being visible *as* women online.

References

Agger, B. 2012. *Oversharing*: *Presentation of Self in the Internet Age*. New York: Routledge.

Balleys, C. 2017. L'incontrôlable besoin de contrôle. Les performances de la féminité par les adolescentes sur YouTube. *Genre, sexualité & société*, 17. DOI : 10.4000/gss.3958 (8 January 2019).

Bolton, A., Pole, C., Mizen, P. 2001. Picture This: Researching Child Workers. *Sociology*, 35, 2, pp. 501-518.

Banet-Weiser, S. 2018. *Empowered. Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham, London, Duke University Press.

Bordo, S. 1993. *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Brighenti, A. 2007. Visibility. A Category for the Social Sciences. *Current Sociology*, 55, 3, pp. 323-342.

Brighenti, A. 2010. *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Burns, A. 2015. Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulation as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, pp. 1716-1733.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

Casemajor, N., Toupin, S. 2018. The Mediality of Concealement: Material Practices and Symbolic Operativity. *Intermédialités*, 32, pp. 1-26.

Chambers, D. 2013. *Social Media and Personal Relationships*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage.

Crouch, M., McKenzie, H. 2006. The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45, pp. 483-499

Cunningham, C. 2013. Introduction. In *Id.* (ed.), *Social Networking and Impression Management*. Lanham *et al.*: Lexington Books, pp. 6-16.

Dobson, A. S., Robards, B., and Carah, N. 2018. Introduction. In Dobson, A. S., Robards, B., and Carah, N. (ed.). *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. xix-xxviii

Dobson, A. S. 2015. *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Döring, N., Reif, A., Peoschl, S. 2016. How gender stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 55, pp. 955-962.

Drapeau, M. 2004. Les critères de scientificité en recherche qualitative. *Pratiques Psychologiques*, 10, 1, pp. 79-86.

Eckel, J., Ruchatz, J., Wirth, S. 2018. The Selfie as Image (and) Practice: Approaching Digital Self-Photography. In Eckel, J., Ruchatz, J., Wirth, S. (editors). *Exploring the Selfie. Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan: 1-24.

Eler, A. 2017. *The Selfie Generation.* New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Elias, A. S., Gill, R. 2018. Beauty surveillance: The self-monitoring cultures of neoliberalism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21, 1, pp. 59-77.

Gioia, D. A. *et al.* 2013. Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16, 1, pp. 15–31.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. N.Y.: Doubleday.

Gunthert, A. 2015. La consécration du selfie. Une histoire culturelle. *Études photographiques*, 32. Retrieved on Aug. 29, 2019 at: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3529

Hess, A. 2015. The Selfie Assemblage. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, pp. 1629-1646.

Hourmant, F., Lancelette, M., Leroux, P. (eds.). 2019. *Selfies et stars. Politique et culture de la célébrité en France et en Amérique du Nord.* Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes.

Humphreys, L. 2018. *The Qualified Self*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Jenkins, H. 2008. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Updated ed. edition. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Kennedy, J. 2012. Oversharing Is the Norm. In Dobson, A. S., Robards, B., and Carah, N. (ed.). *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 265-280.

Kuznekoff, J.H. 2013. Comparing Impression Management Strategies across Social Media Platforms. In Cunningham, C. (ed.), *Social Networking and Impression Management*. Lanham *et al.*: Lexington Books, pp. 18-36.

Laestadius, L. 2017. Instagram. In Sloan, L., Quan-Haase, A. (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. London *et al.*: Sage, pp. 573-592.

Latzko-Toth, G., Bonneau, C., Millette, M. 2017. Small Data, Thick Data: Thickening Strategies for Trace-based Social Media Research. In Sloan, L., Quan-Haase, A. (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. London *et al.*: Sage, pp. 199-214.

Lobinger, K., Brantner, C. 2015. In the Eye of the Beholder: Subjectve Views on the Authenticity of Selfies. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 2015: 1848-1860.

Löwy, I. 2006. *L'emprise du genre*. Paris: La Dispute.

Manovich, L. *et al.* s.d. *Selfiecity – Findings.* Retrieved on Aug. 26th, 2019 at: http://selfiecity.net/#findings.

McRobbie, A. 2015. Notes on the Perfect. Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30, 83, pp. 3-20

Mills, J. S. *et al.* 2018. «Selfie» harm : Effects on mood and body image in young women. *Body Image*, 27, pp. 86-92.

Miguel, C. 2018. *Personal Relationships and Intimacy in the Age of Social Media*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Murray, D.C. (2018). Selfie Consumerism in a Narcissistic Age. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, June, pp. 1–23.

Ollier-Malaterre, A. 2018. La compétence numérique de gestion des frontières sur les réseaux sociaux: un capital culturel technologique à la Bourdieu. *Lien social et Politiques*, 81, pp. 121-137.

Papacharissi, Z. (ed.). 2011. *A Networked Self*. New York: Routledge.

Piazzesi, C., Blais, M., Belleau, H. (2020). Frontières de l'intimité conjugale et familiale : théorisation et applications empiriques. *Enfances, familles, générations,* 34 (in press).

Rettberg, J. W. 2014. *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rose, G. 2016. *Visual Methodologies*. London *et al.*: Sage.

Rosenbaum, J.E. *et al.* 2013. « Looking the Part » and « Staying True": Balancing Impression Management on *Facebook*. In Cunningham, C. (ed.), *Social Networking and Impression Management*. Lanham *et al.*: Lexington Books, pp. 37-61.

Senft, T.M., Baym, N.K. 2015. What Does the Selfie Say? *International Journal of Communication*, 9, pp. 1588-1606.

Stone, D. and Heen, S. 2014. *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*. New York: Viking.

Tiindeberg, K. 2018. *Selfies*. *Why We Love (and Hate) Them*. Bingley: Emerald Group.

Tisseron, S. 2011. Intimité et extimité. *Communications*, 88(1), pp. 83-91. doi:10.3917/commu.088.0083.

Wikipedia contributors. 2020, January 5. Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved January 8, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Facebook%E2%80%93Cambridge_Analytica_data_scandal&oldid=934188909

Wills, W., Dickinson, A., Meah, A., Short, F. 2016. Reflections on the Use of Visual Methods in a Qualitative Study of Domestic Kitchen Practices. *Sociology*, 50, 3, pp. 470-485.

Winch, A. 2013. *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zhao, S. and Zappavigna, M. 2018. Beyond the self: Intersubjectivity and the semiotic interpretation of the selfie. *New Media and Society*, 20, 5, pp. 1735-1754.