UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

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Digital Cultures

Assessment 2 - Essay

Self-Presentation in the Digital Space

Essay Question: "Selfies represent the full paradox of privacy of our contemporary age, in which […] other metadata, constantly collected and quantified, can speak more than any face" (Geert Lovink). How is 'the self' constructed in digital spaces?

Presented by **Jean Boutros** (W1804948)
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Introduction

With screen times rapidly increasing, especially with the abundance of smartphones and tablets, the presence in front of these screens can no longer be reduced to simple practical work. Our life has become an inseparable node in the “living webs” (Abbas and Fred, 2009, p2), connected to the internet, and so networked in such an implicit manner that we do not realise it anymore. It is not uncommon after 12 hours of screen time to sit back on the sofa with a cup of tea, and as Alexa to play some ‘Jazz’ music and remind Siri to set a timer for the next morning.

Amid all these different devices and networks that are competing over our attention and our personal data, there is us, but not the physical self. It is rather, an alternative dialogical post-modern self, that is one thing for Alexa who knows our taste of music and daily afternoon routine. Then there is a different self that is curious, asks Siri questions about the universe, searches for interesting topics on Google, chats with friends on WhatsApp, and with colleagues on Microsoft Teams, Searches for job opportunities on LinkedIn, makes funny videos on TikTok, and these are only the tip of the social network iceberg. This multiplicity of selves is described by the sociologist Michel Maffesoli as the end of “the fantasy of unicity” (Abbas and Fred, 2009, p3). Lovink (2019) claims that “Social media and the psyche have fused, turning daily life into a ‘social reality’ that […] is overtaking our perception of the world and its inhabitants” (Lovink, 2019, p45). She then makes the point of how deeply the online subject has become involved in that networked ‘social reality’ that is defined primarily

by his profile but above all, by the social status associated with that profile that is often measured by the number of likes and followers (*ibid).*

The online profile is the main entry point into the online subject, and it each online profile on each platform or digital space conveys a unique version of self-presentation of the same physical subject. Presumably, the multiple profiles can be justified by the "commonly accepted understanding of identity" (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006, p418) which suggests that multiple aspects of the self can be expressed differently in different contexts and that three domains of the self can be distinguished such as "the actual self" or the attributes that the subject possesses, "the ideal self", representing the attributes that the subject would ideally like to possess, and "the ought self", representing the attributes that the subject and/or someone else, believe the subject ought to possess (Higgins, 1987, p320–321). These domains of the self finally render an identity that is constructed through consolidation and cherry-picking by "exploring possible selves, and then committing to a particular set of coherent self-definitions" (Salimkhan, Manago and Greenfield, 2010, para2). Identity consolidation according to Salimkhan et al. (ibid.), is realised through feedback received from peers during social interactions eliciting reflection upon the appraisals of others. Social networking platforms such as Instagram, make a perfect example of a digital space that provides its users with the opportunity to try out different aspects of their identity with different balances of the three domains: the actual, the ideal and the ought self.

Building on the theories above and departing from Michel Foucault's statement that "the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in

the beginning" (Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988, p9), the next section explores selfies, or self-portraits, on Instagram, as a common method of self-presentation, but also as a mean for self-exploration and of constructing the subject's identity (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Abbas and Fred, 2009; Salimkhan, Manago and Greenfield, 2010; Deogracias, 2015).

Selfies: self-exploration, self-presentation, and identity building

While the increase of selfie-taking is attributed to faster internet and phones equipped with front cameras (Sorokowski et al., 2018), it is imperative to consider selfies as a modern extension of their preceding antecedents of self-presentation and self-expression and as a phenomenon that encompasses technical, social and psychological factors. Carbon (2017) in his comparative analysis of selfies with historic self-portraits, argues that both forms of self-depiction refer to the 'condition humana' which is nothing more than a natural expression of the basic cognitive and affective human needs. His choice of the word 'needs' was not arbitrary, and he was referring to the individual's quest to express and construct an identity that technology has facilitated its dialogical formation. He describes the manifestation of these needs as originating from the 'intelligence of the unconscious' that wish to express something special and that would hardly be explainable in an explicit way. By taking selfies, selfie-ists are inventing themselves by boiling down many of their inner complexity, feelings, mood and cognitions to an essence, the photograph. But beyond the simple act of documentation and self-expression exists other, more complex dimensions,

contributing to the final outcome. The aesthetics and composition of selfies make them appear to the viewer as being spontaneous, authentic, intuitively motivated by the emergence of a situation and instantly snapped for the sake of freezing "a fluctuating but significant slice of life" (Carbon, 2017, p6). However, in reality, the selfie is far from being authentic and spontaneous. It is premeditated and well reflected upon, before the shot and especially during the shot when choosing the angle, background, composition, facial expressions, body shape, etc and after the shot, in the post-processing phase, also called image retouching. In the process of producing the selfie, the selfie-ist has a very particular image of themselves that they wish to convey, exhibiting one of the three self-presentation domains discerned by Higgins (1987). For instance, an 'ought self' could be presented using some poses and angles in which the subject might look slimmer, because the mainstream and socially desirable look is dictated by the viewers/audience who often adopt an idealised perception of beauty (Mills et al., 2018; Leboeuf, 2019), inherited from the 'thin ideals' that dominate the media (Grabe, Ward and Hyde, 2008). The same photograph could represent an 'ideal self' where the subject actually shares the same cultural perceptions of the ideal body. In this context, an arguably challenging question is raised on whether it is possible to represent the 'actual self' in a selfie considering that it is pre-mediated, composed, and shot by the subject himself/herself, and that intends only to present attributes that they possess, without pronouncing any aspects. A selfie of the 'actual self' seems paradoxical because it's about displaying the attributes that the subject possesses which is not different from pronouncing these

attributes to make them visible in the photograph, and by doing so, the photograph can no longer be considered as a simple depiction of the 'actual self' considering the subject's 'ought' and 'ideal' bias that comes into play. Perhaps one of the factors that render the 'actual self' impossible to achieve, is the fact that selfie-ist generally take multiple consecutive shots to choose from and having the option to choose between the best 'actual self' is already a biased choice towards an idealised view of self-representation. Diefenbach and Christoforakos (2017) called this form of bias "self-staging" (ibid., p7) and their research shows that self-staging was positively perceived by most respondents.

In contrast, in the chaos of multiple trials and errors with bursts of selfies at each attempt and a significant time spent assessing the best shot, something important is taking place inside the psyche of the subject. Self-observation and self-studying are means of self-exploration and consequently helping in the process of identity exploration. This inward perspective, however small it is, it remains significant for the subject who is most often taking the selfie for others and not for himself, but still getting the chance to scrutinise himself before deciding how his final self-presentation will look like (Diefenbach and Christoforakos, 2017).

Accordingly, the construction of the self in the digital space turns out to be a complex process of continuous recursive self-exploration and self-presentation with an external feedback loop that provokes reflection and self-re-examination.

Lovink (2019) adds another dimension to the 'self' that is purely materialistic and technological. He reduces the selfies to a shallow representation of the self, that does

not tell much about the subject beyond his mere existence and he expresses it clearly in his claim that selfies “do not exemplify who we are, but rather show that we exist, at this very moment” (Lovink, 2019, p103).

Yet, as Foucault says “The way [man] thinks is related to society, politics, economics, and history and is also related to very general and universal categories and formal structures” (Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988, p10), and Baym adds that “How online spaces are constructed and the activities that people do online are intimately interwoven with the construction of the offline world and the activities and structures in which we participate, whether we are using the internet or not” Baym, 2006, p86). The meaning is that the construction of the self in the digital space is not dissociated from the offline world, it “is woven into the fabric of the rest of life” (ibid.) and there’s an intersection between the identity, the audience and the context (Boyd, 2014).

The pressure to tailor the self-ie

Perhaps, a great example to illustrate this intersection would be the body image concerns or body dissatisfaction among women, that is the result of the social construct of socially desirable body aesthetics characterised by unrealistic and unnatural beauty standards, and that is aggravated by the use of social media through self-examination and comparison of one-self with others (Mills et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). Beauvoir describes the objectification by the society of the woman’s body in his claim that a “woman is her body as man is his, but her body is something other than her” (Beauvoir 2011, 41). Departing from the socio-cultural context that encompasses media, family, and peers, according to the ‘Tripartite Influence Model’

and the objectification theory the media's unrealistic beauty ideals and sexualisation of the women's body lead women to the internalisation of the thin-ideals, body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, depression among other social and psychological troubles (Grabe, Ward and Hyde, 2008; Mills et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021). With the appearance of new media such as the social media platform Instagram, though the medium has changed, the context remained the same so as a consequence, Instagram became a constant stream of appearance-focused photos that promote or that are influenced by the thin-ideals. This has multiple implications, most notably the psychosocial ones, but since we are interested in the implications on the construction of the self in such context, we return to Boyd's concept of collapsed contexts and invisible audience (Boyd, 2014), in which the women who are sharing selfies, imagine the audience that they want to reach and who potentially view and engage with them. By doing so, they stabilise the context in which they are operating that is defined by a specific subset of the audience. With a known context and a set audience, the long challenge of negotiating an identity begins and undergoes all the established rules, values, and pressures such as the pressure of meeting the thin-ideals standards. At the intersection of Boyd's trinity (context, audience, and identity), two major behaviours can be observed:

- The first is the typical succumbing behaviour that is "bound by their subservience to the power of the spectator" (Altintzoglou, 2019, p10). Women in this case resort to becoming more selective in what they share and their self-presentation strategies involve editing, skin retouching and even photoshop-

ing to make body parts look thinner (Mills et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2019). By doing so, they increase their chance of gaining approval (Yue, Toh and Stefanone, 2017), however, the approval will be an appearance-based recognition based on the 'manipulated'-to-conform self which differs from the actual self, and develops into a separate dialectic identity that strives through retouching, feedback and revision. In a zero-sum game, this new identity also creates a schism with the real self, the more it succeeds, the weaker the non-digital identity becomes and consequently self-esteem and body image among young women become poorer and appearance concerns worsen (Mills et al., 2018).

- The second behaviour is the non-conformist attitude that individuals can take and decide to challenge the status quo. Such behaviour encourages body positivity, self-acceptance, and body appreciation. The digital identity building in this context is more inclined towards the genuine and authentic self which has a totally different set of rules to negotiate it on social platforms through selfies. The proponents of this camp share bold selfies with a variety of quotes and captions, ranging from proudly displaying their larger bodies to showing their belly rolls, cellulite, acne, or simply showing themselves without alteration (Cohen et al., 2019). The construction of the digital self goes through the same feedback loop described in the previous behaviour, however, the alterations made would be aesthetic instead of being morphologic. Accordingly, the dialogical identity takes a non-intrusive, non-harmful shape and instead of

focusing on adjusting the body resulting in less self-esteem and body dysmorphia, it takes a photographic shape namely in the form of artistic compositions.

Conclusion

Constructing the self and ultimately the identity, as a reaction to a social norm or a social construct remains an explicit acknowledgement of the toxic context but more importantly, the architect of the individual's self and their identity remains the context itself in which a demanding audience is present, and which has the power to dictate what is desirable and what is not. It is therefore, not the individual's free will and his inner drives alone that are involved in the construction of his self in the digital space, but rather a complex socio-technical system involving the platform, the medium, the audience, the context, among other factors, and uniting them to form a set of practices that condition the narratives. Cruz and Thornham (2015) argue that "these practices perpetuate power relations in ways that are sometimes celebrated and very often accepted rather than critiqued" (Cruz and Thornham, 2015, p8).

The big question that comes up at the end of this essay is whether the individual will ever be able to break from the existing contexts and construct his self in the digital space without the need neither to succumbing nor to resisting any power balances and social constructs or whether the power structures and social constructs are engraved in the design of the digital platforms and are thus a mould for the individual's identity rather than a tool for him to negotiate various self-representations in the process of constructing his self. Respectively, there is a great potential that is beyond

the scope of this essay to explore the political economy of the mediated moulding of platforms' user's identities, in terms of how it shapes online behaviour, free labour, self-surveillance, peer surveillance, revenue generation and also, how it can be designed to extend to encompass the offline behaviour.

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