Identities in Flux:
An Analysis to Photographic Self-Representation on Instagram

Sofia P. Caldeira*

*PhD student in Communication Sciences at Ghent University, Belgium (sofiapcaldeira@gmail.com)

Abstract

Based on a review of literature and on a content analysis of nearly 12,000 photographs from 104 Instagram's users, this paper analyses the uses of photography as a self-representational device, comparing traditional vernacular usages with the new practices that emerged on Instagram. It seeks to understand the motivations underlying Instagram's uses, particularly focusing on its identitary functions, that helps to create visual self-representations in online environments. Identitary construction is understood as an active performance, in which each user is their own author, inventing and re-inventing themselves at each moment, in a continuous flux of imagetic creation that expresses a sense of identity open to constant reinvention. This paper explores not only the creation of *selfies*, a practice analogous to the self-portrait, but also the parallel strategies used to avoid the discomfort often caused by direct self-representation.

Keywords: visual culture; digital media; photography; self-representation; identity; Instagram

Introduction

New digital photographic devices – smaller, more affordable, more flexible, and highly automatized – came to expand the potential of the already existent culture of vernacular photography (Chandler and Livingston, 2012, p. 1), freeing photographers, both amateurs and professionals, for a larger imagetic production. Photographic creation, that had long left the domain of scientific speciality and entered the daily uses of most people, became increasingly simpler, depending on automatic and nearly intuitive gestures that allowed any photographer, regardless of their technical skills, to create impressive images which, thanks to their electronic character, can be easily transmitted and shared online, turning the association between digital photography and the use of internet into an unquestionable reality. Created for and shared in online platforms, such as social networks, digital photographs cease to be discrete objects, isolated in albums or frames, and become part of a constant flux of images and representational strategies.

These new digital photographic devices were soon incorporated in a vast range of other technologies, but their fusion with the cellphone was perhaps the one that has more deeply impacted our relationship with photography. By merging with a device that has become almost inseparable from its user, photography is placed in the centre of the everyday experience (Martin, 2009, p.7). Photography today is no longer simply a professional or artistic activity, nor even a mere hobby, but rather a practice that inserts itself in countless other social activities, becoming an integral and essential part of them.

Born in the midst of these technological transformations the mobile app *Instagram* came to satisfy some needs already felt by the vast number of photographers that used their cellphone as a photographic device, rather than to create new usages (McCune, 2011, p. 27). Internationally launched on the 6th of October 2010, the app was initially only available for *iPhone*, a smartphone that at the time already had a large number of users involved in photographic practices, and reached in the first two days the impressive number of 40,000 users, a growth so unexpected that overloaded the app's servers (McCune, 2011, p. 29). Later, in April 2012, Instagram also become available for Android, broadening its reach with overwhelming success, amassing over a million downloads just in the first day and growing to 100 million users by the first anniversary of the *Android* expansion, with nearly half of the user base coming from this operating system. (Li, 2013)

Initially thought as a tool that allowed users to easily improve the poor image quality of the photographs taken with their smartphones through the application of filters, the app gained its popularity not only thanks to the nostalgic and vintage feel that the filters added to the photographs, making trivial photographs more alluring (Chandler and Livingston, 2012, p. 12), but mainly for its ability to simplify and accelerate the photo-sharing process. Integrated in a mobile device with constant internet access and with a user-friendly interface, Instagram owes its success to the idea that it is ever-present to capture and share any occasion, a witness to the everyday, always in the centre of the action (Verdina, 2013, p. 22).

Methods

This paper uses Instagram as a case study to analyse photography as a self-representational device, comparing its traditional vernacular usages with the new photographic practices created by the app.

To do so it confronts a myriad of written sources with a content analysis to the photographs and representation strategies used on Instagram. This content analysis was inserted in the research conducted between September 2013 and July 2014 as part of a Master's dissertation in Anthropology - Visual Cultures. The analysed sample of 104 users was selected from the researcher's own following base, being thus constituted of both private users (whose images are only accessible to user-approved followers) and public users (whose images are available to anyone on the app and are searchable via hashtags). All these users belong to the category of personal users, those who use Instagram recreationally, having been removed from sample all user accounts with commercial and promotional intents, as well as those without any photographic production.

Of these users were analysed all the still-images (all video posts were excluded, for they did not fit the ambit of the study) present in their accounts, from their inception up until the 12th of December 2013. This amounted to a total of 11 872 analysed images.

For this sample was firstly conducted a brief demographic analysis, considering the age, gender, and current location of the users (see: Table 1).

Table 1 – User Demographic Analysis

User	Age						Gender		Current Location					
	<15	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-35	>35	Fem	Masc	Portugal	Europe	Africa	South America	North America	Asia

It was also conducted an analysis of usage intensity, taking into account the user's average number of shared photographs, and dividing them into three categories: weak users, with less than 20 images; median users, with 20 to 80 images; and advanced users, with over 80 images posted. The average number of followers and followings was also considered (see: Table 2).

Table 2 – User Usage Intensity

User	Nº Photographs			Nº of Posts	Nº Followers	Nº Following
	Weak (< 20 photos)	Median (20 - 80 photos)	Advanced (> 80 photos)			

Finally, an analysis of the users' frequency was conducted, dividing the users between new and old users (with less and more than a year of usage of the app, respectively), and between daily, weekly, monthly, and sporadic users, according to their average posting frequency (see: Table 3).

Table 3 – User Frequency

User	Date of 1st Post	Date of Last Post	Days of Usage	Frequency (average – a post every x days)			
	Recent Users (<1 year)	Old Users (> 1 year)		Daily Users	Weekly Users	Monthly Users	Sporadic Users

Concerning the analysis of the images themselves, it focused on five main aspects: the nature of the represented moment; whether it was a direct or indirect form of self-representation; the character of the photographed moment; the existence of textual context; and the existence of social interaction (see: Table 4). These categories, as can be seen in the table, sometimes overlaps.

Table 4 – Image Analysis Criteria

Represented Object				Character of Photographed Moment			Textual Context		Social Interaction	
Self	Mixed	Other	Objects	Ritual		Mundane	Yes	No	Yes	No
Self - Representation				Positive	Negative	Neutral				
Direct		Indirect								
Complete	Metonymic									

Concerning the nature of the represented object, it can fit one of four categories: Self, the complete or fragmented representation of the user himself and his body; Other, the representation of any other person that not the user himself; Mixed, comprising those images in which the user is accompanied by others; and finally Objects, which not only includes inanimate objects, but also animals, landscapes, and any other kind of image that does not fit in the former categories.

The group of images included in the categories Other and Objects, form the Indirect Representation. Conversely, the images from the Self and the Mixed categories compose the Direct Representation, in which the user's body image is present. This Direct Representation is sub-divided into Complete Representation, those photographs in which the full user's face or body appear, being easily identifiable, and into Metonymic Representation, those where the user's body appear only partially, i.e. just an eye, the feet, etc.

In regard of the character of the photographed moment, the images were classified either as Ritual – if they complied with the criteria of the traditional analogue family album snapshot, representing important events such as holidays, birthdays, parties, family connections, etc. – or as Mundane, if the images didn't fit the aforementioned criteria.

The photographed moment was also divided into Positive, Negative, or Neutral moments. A photograph was only classified as Positive or Negative if it showed a clearly perceptible, unambiguous, emotion, through, for instances, facial expressions, textual context, or, in the case of negative moments, injuries or clear signs of disease. Everything else was marked as Neutral.

Finally, it was also noted if the analysed images possessed or not any kind of Textual Contextualization, in the form of user-writen captions, and if they had received any Social Interaction, either as comments or as likes.

All the data for this content analysis was collected using the Instagram's API (application programming interface), and the photographs were visualized using the web-based analytic app Statigr.am (now Iconosquare.com). The analysis and codification of the images was done manually, and, as the results focused mostly on simple percentage divisions of the collected data and on calculations of averages, they were obtain via excel spreadsheet.

Results

The following section offers a brief overview of the results of the conducted content analysis. Although this analysis is not in any way exhaustive, and it certainly has a lot of fragilities, it still provides an interesting illustration for the theory that will be introduced in the Discussion section, and with which it will be briefly, albeit non in-depth, confronted.

It must be noted upfront that although the studied user sample tried to be as broad as possible, showing a balanced distribution of users between gender, with 53,85% of the users identified as Female and the remaining 46,15% as Male, it still presented severe shortcomings not only concerning its size but also its demographic range. The age and geographic distributions, particularly, presented significant biases. Regarding age, most analysed users (90,39%) had between 20 and 29 years, with only 1,92% being younger and 7,69% older, although never exceeding 35 years. This distribution cannot be taken as significant of Instagram's users at large, instead it shows a bias in my selection process, that by focusing on my own personal following base naturally tended to focus in users belonging to my own age group. Geographically, although there is a clear concentration of users in the portuguese (61,54%) and european (28,85%) territories, due to the same bias of sample selection, it was however possible to study interesting examples (although not statistically relevant) of the imagetic production of a minority of users (9,61%) from other continents (see: Table 5).

Table 5 – Results of User Demographic Analysis

	Age						Gender		Current Location					
Users %	<15	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-35	>35	Fem	Masc	Portugal	Europe	Africa	South America	North America	Asia
	0,96	0,96	54,81	35,58	7,69	0	53,85	46,15	61,53	28,85	0,96	3,85	1,92	2,88

The analysis of user intensity revealed a balanced distribution of users according to their total number of posted photographs, at the time of the analysis, with an average of 114,16 images per user (see: Table 6).

Table 6 – Results of User Usage Intensity

	Nº Photographs			Average Nº of Posts	Average Nº Followers	Average Nº Following
Users %	Weak (< 20 photos)	Median (20 - 80 photos)	Advanced (> 80 photos)	114,16	151,38	177,05
	32,69	28,85	38,46			

Concerning the frequency of their usage of Instagram, there was a even division between recent and old users, being noticeable a predominance of users that posted on a weekly (54,81%) or monthly (26,92%) basis (see: Table 7).

Table 7 – Results of User Frequency

Users %	Date of 1st Post	Date of Last Post	Days of Usage	Frequency (average – a post every x days)			
	Recent Users (<1 year)	Old Users (> 1 year)		Daily Users	Weekly Users	Monthly Users	Sporadic Users
	56,73%	43,27%		4,81	54,81	26,92	13,46

The data collected through the content analysis of the nearly 12 000 studied Instagram images (see: Table 8) revealed a somewhat surprising predominance of the so-called Indirect Representation, that comprised 79% of all analysed images. These were mostly images fitting in the Objects category, which amounted to 68,44% of all posted images.

Table 8 – Results of Image Analysis Criteria

Represented Object				Character of Photographed Moment		Textual Context		Social Interaction	
Self	Mixed	Other	Objects	Ritual	Mundane	Yes	No	Yes	No
13,10 %	7,9%	10,56 %	68,44 %	6,17%	93,83%	81,65 %	18,35 %	95,24 %	4,76%

				Positive	Negative	Neutral
Self - Representation				24,44%	0,76%	74,80%
Direct		Indirect				
21%		79%				

Complete	Metonymic
67,72 %	32,28 %

Of the images that comprised the Direct Representation category, the majority were photographs of the user by himself (13,10% of the total images), either in selfies or in portraits taken by another. There was a noticeable preference for photographs in which the user was easily recognizable, with his complete body or face in-frame (67,22% of all Direct Self-Representation), although the strategy of Metonymic representation, of sharing images focusing on a single fragment of the user's body, was not uncommon (32,28% of all Direct Self-Representation).

Concerning the character of the photographed moment, by far the most common kind of images represented so-called mundane moments (93,83%), that do not fit the traditional family album paradigm. It is interesting to note that there was even a small number of users, 29 of them to be precise, that did not had in their accounts *any* photograph that could be interpreted as Ritual.

There was also a predominance of images marked as Neutral (74,80%), mostly because of the overwhelming number of photographs of Objects to which no perceptible emotion could unequivocally be attributed. The photographs of Positive moments was the second most popular category, representing 24,44% of all images, although there was a small number of users, 16,35% of them, that had their accounts completely devoid of images of Positive moments. Finally, although the images of Negative moments mark only a very small percentage of the studied sample (0,76%), it is still interesting to note that 37,50% of the analysed users' sample had at least one image of a Negative moment.

Lastly, a large majority of the analysed images was accompanied of some kind of caption that provided Textual Contextualization (81,65%), and nearly all images (95,24%) received some kind of Social Interaction from other users, either as comments or as likes.

Discussion

The motivations underlying Instagram's common uses have been studied by many researchers, amongst them Zachary McCune (2011, p. 58) who, in his investigation for his master thesis entitled *Consumer Production in Social Media Networks: A Case Study of the "Instagram" iPhone App*, identified, from a series of 25 questionnaires, six motivations that recurrently appeared in their answers. These are: 1) *sharing*, the wish to enjoy the photographic activity jointly with others; 2) *documentation*, the urge to capture, record, and preserve transient experiences; 3) *seeing*, the urge to see the world through the eyes of others and to be able to present one's own viewpoint; 4) *community*, the thrills and incentives of social interaction and of a responsive audience; 5) *creativity*, photographic production as an artistic effort marked by a strong aesthetic aspect; and finally, 6) *therapy*, the idea, expressed by a small set of users, of Instagram's photographic and social activities as being, in a certain sense, generative of "well-being" or even "healing" for emotional or psychological instability.

Also Zane Verdina (2013, p. 27), in her master thesis *A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Storytelling With Instagram*, recognized five main motivations for the use of the app, as told by the users in interview. Some of these motivations overlapped with the ones identified by McCune, although adopting a different terminology, as for example the motivation of *memory,* that serves the same functions as McCune's documental use, and *promotion*, seen as an interest in generating more online traffic on the Instagram's

accounts, which entails aspects of both the sharing and community motivations. The remaining three motivations pointed by Zane Verdina show aspects of the Instagram's photographic practice that were ignored by McCune, as the motivations of *identity,* that aims to create a visual self-representation in online environments, of *triumph*, the ability to publicly announce an achievement, and of *fun,* the simple usage of photography as a means to escape boredom or monotony.

Some of the motivations pointed by Zachary McCune and Zane Verdina became especially apparent in the conducted content analysis, namely the *sharing, community,* and *promotion* motivations that found support in the overwhelming, over 95%, quantity of images that enticed some social interaction by other users, that gave their approval and support through their likes and comments. Also the motivation of *identity,* noted by Verdina (2013, p. 27), was markedly noticeable, with over 20% of the analysed images being portrayals of the users' themselves, either alone or with friends, thus clearly creating a direct visual representation of themselves in the online environment of Instagram. This sense of identitary creation is also mingled with the motivation of *triumph*, for most of the times the Instagram practice is marked by a great effort of idealization of the users lives, either representing Positive moments of their lives or by representing the desirable Objects they acquired through consumption. And of course both the motivations of *documentation/memory* and of *fun* are present in Instagram's usages, for it not only creates a sort of diaristic record of the users' lives, but it creates it through a light and effortless usage of the app, not as a laborious and specialized memorialization task.

Combining these points of view we thus understand that the motivations for the use of Instagram correspond, almost point by point, to the motivations for photographic practice already noted by Pierre Bourdieu (1965, p. 14-15) in the past century: *protection against time*, a simultaneously documental, memorial, and therapeutic impulse; *communication with others* and *the expression of feelings,* which emphasize photographic sharing; the capacity for *self-realization*, which implies not only a practice of identitary construction but also the possibility of artistic expression; the demonstration of *social prestige*, a ostentation of success or of consumption that is validated by public recognition; and finally the use of photography as a hobby, a *distraction* or *escape* from the sameness of the quotidian. Instagram is thus part of a long photographic tradition, from which it has never been able, nor wished, to break completely.

In a society like the one we live in today, where the subject is becoming increasingly insignificant and undifferentiated in the midst of a mass society, but where, paradoxically, he is encouraged to discover and develop an unique and idealized self through consumption, the narcissistic obsession that is associated with several contemporary technologies, seen as tools for a more effective identitary construction, comes as no surprise. The rise of this renewed cult of the body and of the self reveals itself as a counterweight for a profound fear of incorporeality and immateriality (Boyer, 1996, p. 74) that emerges in a society like ours that lives increasingly on abstractions.

In the span of a few decades, the individual became the centre of the contemporary vernacular photographic practice, making self-representation one of the most important functions of photography (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 60-63). The camera became an instrument for the affirmation of self-identity, and the management of a virtual identity has become an integral part of the current social practices (Nir, 2012, p. 17). Today more than ever, everybody acts as if all their actions were potentially being recorded by an invisible but omnipresent camera, stuck in a incessant social dramaturgy.

The creation of a coherent sense of self-identity always presupposes a narrative, which implies a concrete time and space, and develops in a certain continuity either in terms of common history, national or cultural, as in terms of personal memory (Burgin, 1996, p. 29-30). The use of external devices, such as diaries, self-biographies, family albums, and now Instagram, helps to make those personal narratives explicit, and to maintain a certain identitary stability (Giddens, 1991/2001, p. 71). On Instagram photographs function as the foundation for this narrative work. Through a recurrent, often daily or most times at least weekly, posting of new photographs, this series of images on the Instagram's users feeds serves to evoke personal stories, illustrating fragments of lives, and sharing with other users a broad definition of who is the individual that shared such images (Nir, 2012. p. 33).

Self-identity, even in unmediated contexts, is never something passive, being always directly and actively forged by the individuals themselves (Giddens, 1991/2001, p. 1-2). In the case of online self-representation this becomes especially clear. Each person is now their own author, inventing and re-inventing themselves at each moment. Each individual takes on the responsibility to promote their virtual self in social networks, managing the details they decide to share or to hide, and thus inserting themselves in the online public community (Stern, 2008, p. 101). Although in social networks, and on the Instagram's studied user sample particularly, the written context also contributes for the construction of the virtual self, with about 80% of the analysed images being accompanied by written captions, the way in which each user chooses to visually represent themselves, especially in their "profile picture", is instantaneously and unconsciously seen as representing, in some way, the user. In social networks photographs come to be seen as the virtual reification of the physically absent user, representing him in all his mediated interactions (Nir, 2012, p. 27). This only comes to happen because of our, subconscious and deeply established, belief that an individual can be adequately represented and summarized by an image, a belief that is testified by our recurrent usage of photographs as a proof of identity in official documents. As such, most of the users' efforts of Direct Representation, around 67% of it, tend to privilege the use of easily recognizable photographs of the users faces or full bodies, rather than more enigmatic or partial photographs.

As the self is not something immaterial and ethereal, but rather something necessarily embodied in a physical body, differentiated by its unique visual attributes, it seems to be aptly represented through images of its body and especially its face. Thus the photographic portrait emerges as uniquely qualified to represent the self, seeking to express the interiority and character of the portrayed subjects. Through the photographic portrait people explore, define, and confirm their idealized self-identities, seeing themselves in the eyes of the media and of others. Photographs act not only as a documental record of a person's identity, but more importantly as a "stage" were they can dramatically perform an idealized version of themselves.

Our present conception of identity no longer relies on notions of solidity and stability, rather being founded on an idea of openness and change, open to constant reinvention. And so the photographic process of identitary creation and confirmation became as well a continuous flux of imagetic creation. The photos shared on a daily or weekly basis in social networks attempt to represent the individual, but to represent him in the *present*, and no longer in an attempt to suspend his identity for a future remembrance. These images represent the *now*, the transient personal feelings and emotions (Enli and Thumim, 2012, p. 12). Each of these photographs is quickly created and shared, and after a quick view is then buried under an avalanche of new photographs, being basically forgotten. But by documenting all these emotional changes and this constant flux, Instagram's, with its aforementioned memory and documentation motivations, ends

up creating an archive that might serve as a point of stability, automatically creating a chronicle of the user's existence which may, in the future, be once again accessed (Stern, 2008, p. 102-103).

The conscious need to represent oneself online emphasizes the intentionality and strategies underlying all self-representation. Online the individuals have a much bigger control over what they wish to reveal or hide about themselves. Identitary construction takes place through a process reminiscent of a *bricolage*, experimenting, recombining the diverse bodily attributes that define personal identity and their social meanings, so as to better meet the momentary needs or desires (Weber, 2008, p. 43-44). In each moment the self is reflexively reviewed in light of new events, and it reveals itself flexible enough to be changed freely. Digital technologies, with their increase of speed, fit perfectly with these processes of revisionism and identitary *bricolage*. This implies a constant photographic production, with a majority of the studied users posting on a weekly or at least monthly basis, thus always suited to the momentary needs, and that continually confirm and reaffirm our ontological security. As the security conveyed by these images is destined to be as temporary as our own notion of identity, it is thus explained our propensity to continuously produce and consume new photographs (Wells, 1997/2000, p. 288).

Within social networks, and with a particular emphasis on Instagram, the term *selfie* has been used since 2004 to describe an online self-representational practice, analogous to the self-portrait. In 2013 *selfie* was nominated as one of the words of the year by the *Oxford Dictionary*, and its present definition states that a *selfie* is: «A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media» (Carvalho, 2013). The medium of a *selfie* might change, varying between webcams, smartphones or digital cameras according to the availability, but the individual is always the focus of the image, thus regularly capturing his fluid and in constant flux identity (Eler, 2013).

Selfies have entered popular culture as an highly democratized version of the self-portrait and have rapidly became one of the most popular contemporary cultural elements, asserting themselves as a privileged means to celebrate the self and its achievements, available at any time and to any person, as long as they possess the necessary technology (Eler, 2013).

The somewhat negative reception by the traditional media of this new form of self-representation comes mainly from a simplistic view of it as just another manifestation of the growing narcissism of the generation Y. However the self-portrait and its usage as an expressive tool by the younger generations could hardly be seen as a "new idea", having had countless manifestations throughout human history. In fact, images that fit almost point by point the aesthetic conventions of the *selfie* has been created since the beginnings of photography (see: Image 1 and 2), and so the *selfie* comes to insert itself in that tradition, having conquered in the past couple of years a place as one of the cornerstones of virtual identity.
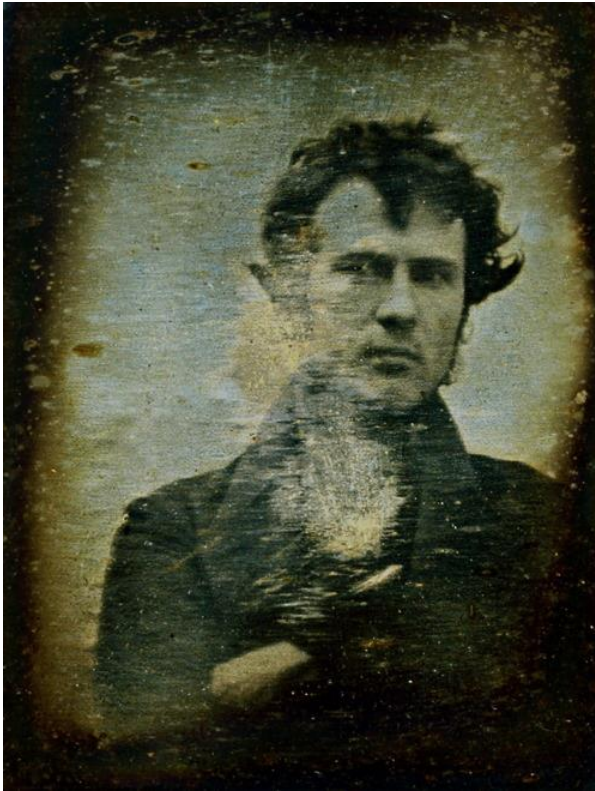
Image 1: "The first light Picture ever taken. 1839." Self-portrait of Robert Cornelius, 1938.

Available in:
<URL: http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/robertcornelius-self-portrait-the-first-ever-selfie-1839/>

Image 2: Workers of the Byron Company, December, 1920. Available in:
<URL:http://www.blameitonthevoices.com/2014/02/from-archives-probably-oldest-selfie.html>

Still some question the impact that this excessive focus on the representation of the self might have on the individuals and on their relationship with the world and with themselves. Kristin Booker (2013), in her article entitled "Mo' Selfies, Mo' Problems? How Those Pics Can Chip Away Your Self-Esteem", presents the opinion of the psychiatrist Dr. Josie Howard that defends that the impact, positive or negative, of the production of *selfies* is always context dependent. *Selfies* might function as tools to document moments of everyday life and a certain satisfaction with the present identitary configuration of the photographer, while being also a tool that offers concrete individuals, and no longer traditional media, the ability to control the self-image that is projected onto society, creating more realistic standards of beauty.

However, according to Dr. Josie Howard, the same photographic impulse, when not moderate, might lead individuals to exhibit an excessive anxiety over the control of their image, taking to an extreme the so called "dramaturgical discipline" studied by Goffman (1956, p. 137), which implies a constant and exhaustive

concentration on the social part that the individual is playing as to avoid *faux pas* that might break the illusion of the performance, and that might undermine the approval that he wishes to receive from others. The pressure to be constantly camera-ready and presentable might lead not only to self-esteem problems, but it could also lead to that the extreme concern over the control over the self-image hampering the very experience of the moment.

The introduction of small and versatile mobile photographic devices, as the smartphone, came to alter the dynamics of the artistic self-portrait, democratizing this practice while simultaneously diminishing the barriers between art and narcissism. But while the artistic self-portrait seemed to focus in revealing some of the interiority and emotional depth of the portrayed individual, the *selfie* seems to focus on his surface, showing him as an object to be appreciated (Pinar & Viola, 2013). However, as Italo Calvino (1958/2008, p. 45) noted in his short story "The Adventures of a Photographer", no matter how much a portrait, or self-portrait, tries to be "only surface" it inevitably reveals something of the subject's personality, on an individual, social, or even historical level. Thus we might dare to state that in fact there are no significant differences between the self-portrait and the *selfie*, both are valid strategies for identitary self-representation and their superficial differences are merely the result of the historical, social, and cultural circumstances in which this practices take place.

In the same way as the construction of an unmediated self is a reflexive process, implying self-consciousness and an ability to take oneself as object of analysis (Morin, 1973/1988, p. 132), also Instagram's deliberate photographic production, and especially the production of *selfies*, promotes this reflexivity. *Selfies* act as the ultimate "mirror", a reversible mirror in which we can take active control of the gaze, our own and of others, and in which we can externalize our identitary performance, aware that it is being observed (Eler, 2013). By accepting oneself as an object to be contemplated, and actively becoming one, each individual claims a bigger control over the self-image that will be shared online, thus seeking, with vain hope, to also control how others will receive these images (Eler, 2013a).

On the conducted content analysis slightly over one fifth of all photographic production fallen in the category of Direct Self-Representation, comprising of images directly representing the user himself, alone or accompanied. There is a marked preference for images in which the user was portrayed alone, be this images *selfies* or more conventional portraits taken by another, with 62,38% of all Direct Self-Representation belonging to the Self category, and the remaining 37,62% being photographs of the user accompanied by friends or other people. Similarly to what used to happen in the analogue snapshot paradigm, also on the analysed Instagram's images it is noticeable a strong emphasis on the individual, that becomes apparent in the framing choices that put the individual on a prominent position, central, in close or mid-distance, and overshadowing much of the remaining contextual information. In most images, the portrayed individuals also tend to be aware of the presence of the camera, interacting with it and producing certain behaviours especially for it, posing, smiling, and facing it directly (see: Image 3). In this way, the subject attempts to influence the final result of the image as to make sure that it will fit with the idealized self-image he created of himself. This is achieved through multiple processes, as for example the selection of which images to keep or to delete, but mainly through the act of *posing* (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 64). As Roland Barthes (1980/2008, p. 18-19) put it, from the moment the subject feels himself *looked* by the camera everything changes and he prepares a pose, creating a "new body" just for the camera, in an anticipated metamorphosis into an image.

Image 3: Assemblage of photographs from the Instagrams of diverse users.

The preference for the representative strategy of the *selfie* arose from a desire to obtain an even bigger control over the representation of the self-image and over every step of the photographic process, thus superseding photographs taken by others in favour of images where the subject himself holds the camera, either stretching his arm to photograph himself or by posing in front of a mirror (Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011, p. 264), using the camera, in a much more literal sense, as an extension of his own body (see: Image 4).
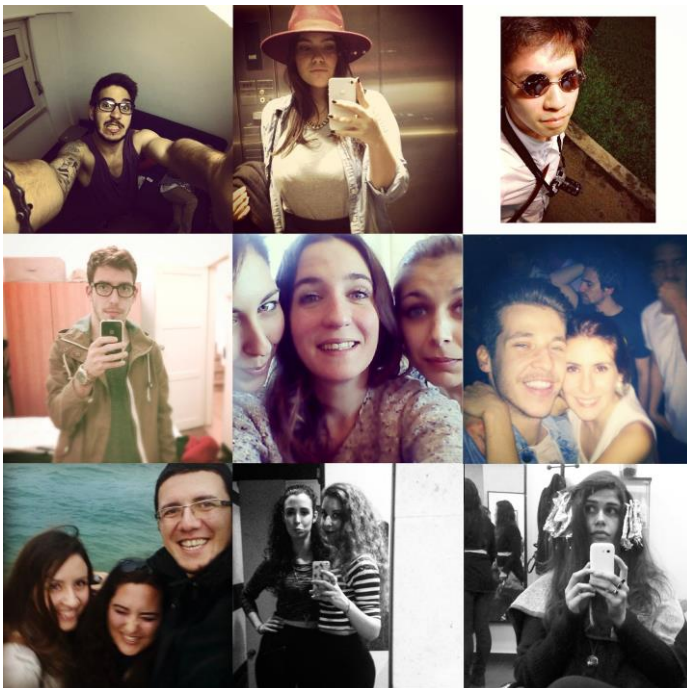
Image 4: Assemblage of photographs from the Instagrams of diverse users.

The image of the mirror acquires a special relevance in the context of the *selfie*, not only in a metaphoric sense, the aforementioned reversible mirror in which we recognize ourselves and mould our self-identity, but also in a literal way, as a physical object, appearing recurrently in the photographic production of social

networks, where is incredibly easy to find photos taken, either by men or women, to the individuals own reflections in the most varied mirrors, both in private or in public spaces (see: Image 5).

Image 5: Assemblage of photographs from the Instagrams of diverse users.

Instagram, despite recurrent references to snapshot culture, is more closely identified as an heir of Polaroid technology, as one can deduce not only from the prefix "insta", which directly alludes to instant photography, but also from the initial choice of the app's icon, a direct representation of a Polaroid Land Camera 1000, that connects both technologies semiotically (McCune, 2011, p. 22). At the date of the analysis, Instagram's icon presented a more stylized character, no longer alluding as directly to its precursor, but still maintaining some visual elements that unequivocally point to the famous instant camera, as the coloured lines, the beige tones, and the presence and disposition of the objective and viewfinder (see: Image 6).

Image 6: Polaroid Land Camera 1000, Instagram's first icon, and Instagram's icon before May 2016.

By reducing the temporal gap between the moment of capturing an image and the moment of its viewing Polaroid allowed, for the first time, for images to be seen in the context of the actual event they were

portraying, thus creating an emphasis in the present and giving this images a redoubled social and interactive character (Sarvas and Frohlich, 2011, p. 70).

But more relevant was the fact the instant photography, and later digital photography, gave the photographer immediate access to his photographic compositions, allowing him to evaluate them and make adjustments, even being able to take a new picture as to correct the flaws of his first attempts. Instant pre-visualization turns photographic creation into an immediate process of trial and error, showing a tentative image that the photographer might choose to save, re-make or delete.

This also increases the possibilities for the re-negotiation of photographic self-representation, allowing the represented subjects to correct their image and poses according to the photographs that he's being shown. Thus, despite the ideas of immediacy and spontaneity that are often associated with digital photography, the creation of a good *selfie* doesn't happen in a single try, it implies time and dedication, multiple poses and multiple attempts, until finally a satisfactory image is created (Refinery29, 2013), taking advantage of the characteristics of digital technology to create and present a highly perfected version of the self, and deleting all tentative images that do not correspond to this idealized image (Hirdman, 2010, p. 5).

The same online articles that praise the spontaneity and naturalness of Instagram's photography also offer advises on the creation of an idealized self-image, without realizing the contradictions this may entail. For example in the article entitled "6 Tips On How To Rock A Selfie" the writer Sarah Tuttle-Singer (2013) advices the portrayed to look *natural* and as if he is having fun, suggesting, despite the naturalness she advices, to ignore the camera and to stage a small imaginary conversation, smiling to another person... despite the fact that there is no one around. Through several tips, technical, of pose, and of composition, these articles offer many ways to *glamorize* the quotidian and our own self-image.

Instagram, with its departure from the traditional criteria of the analogue Ritual family album snapshots (that now amount to less than 10% than all analysed photographs),came to open the door to new performative rituals based on the immediacy of its photographic process, allowing *selfies* to break some of the taboos and conventions that demanded some decorum in the moment of a photograph, and to adopt the carnivalesque and the *image risqué* (see: Image 7) that are a part of the moments of leisure and deemed as as photo-worthy by overwhelmingly majority of young Instagram users, with over 90% of the studied sample being between 20 and 29 years old. But despite of all the emphasis in spontaneity and naturalness, Instagram is still caught in a inherent duality, being as easily used as a way to document and share the everyday life of its users, or as a platform for the creation of an idealized aspirational world.
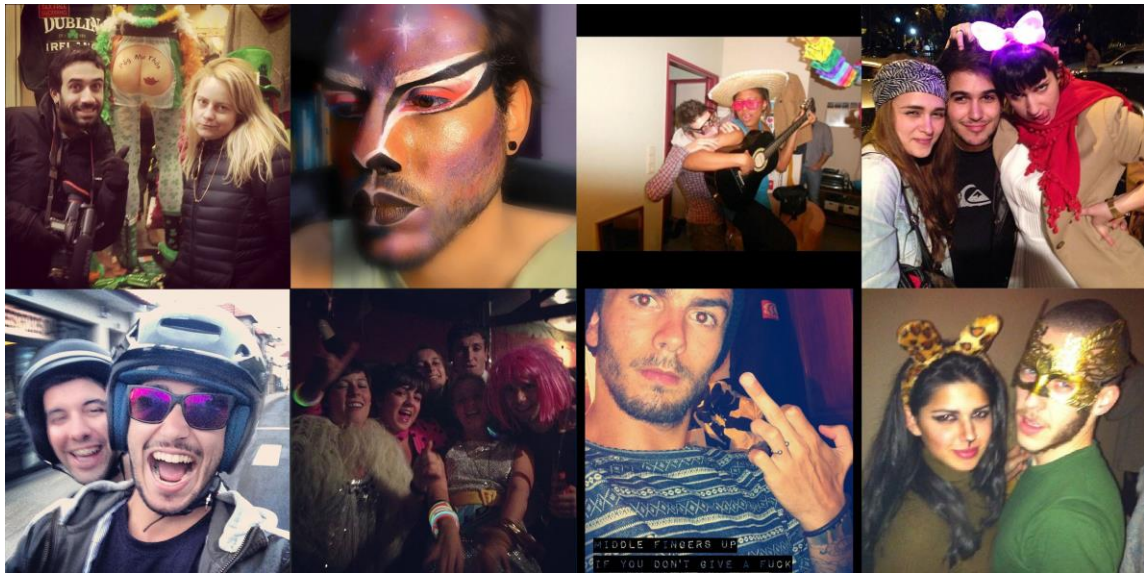
Image 7: Assemblage of photographs from the Instagrams of diverse users.

Paradoxically, Instagram also came to relieve the apodictic character of photography, reviving the old and simplistic notion of photography as a reliable mechanical record of an event, that functions as proof and witness (Verdina, 2013, p. 38) in the virtual environment of the internet, thus answering the cynical demand of "*pics or it didn't happen*". Yet, in *selfies*, as indeed in all self-portraits, the question of photographic authenticity and truthfulness is always ambiguous, for, despite it being an indexical representation, the individual always assumes an active position, carefully selecting the ways in which he represents himself and the aspects of his personality to emphasize or hide. In online environments, each subject is confronted with the possibility to select and share *only* the informations that contribute form his desired self-image, thus presenting something that while not a complete fiction is still, however, an highly selective vision of himself (Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011, p. 252). Despite the use of similar performative strategies in both physical and virtual environments, social networks allow a greater control over the identitary construction process. The very act of deciding to take a *selfie* implies already some selection and idealization, for people, for the most part, only make themselves photographed in times they feel good about themselves and their appearance (Eler, 2013a). This performative character of photography is not, in any way, a recent phenomenon, being especially noticeable in the early decades of photography, an historical era when the overwhelming majority of portraits where made in studios, and in which people presented themselves in their best clothes and in solemn poses (Martins, 2008, p. 46). With the democratization of photography this tendency might have became less apparent, but the desire for idealization still remains.

To photograph is thus an *event* in itself, and not an impartial and objective record of the real world. The camera might offer a *realistic* image of the world, but that doesn't imply that such image can be seen as a synonym of reality itself. Photographic realism is only the result of a series of social conventions and of a certain visual culture, assimilated in such a profound way that it often obscures the creative and transformative character of photography.

Photography always depends of a specific subjective point of view that has a constructive function. Through the seemingly simple act of framing an image, the photographer offers not only his perspective, but he

attributes specific meaning to the entire photograph, guiding the eye of the spectator and focusing his attention, thus being not only a creative but also a communicative act (Frey, 2012, p. 34). Each small decision made by the photographer, even in the most automatized photographic device, starting with the decision of which moment to photograph, to the positioning of the camera, the choice of proper lightning, and the subsequent application, or not, of a filter, is a creative decision that imposes his views.

Although most of the users state that the images they share faithfully represent their unmediated self, they also admit, without feeling any contradiction, to consciously omit some personal characteristics that they see as flaws, characteristics they fear others might disapprove or deem inappropriate (Nir, 2012, p. 37). In this way they wish to limit the information received by their audience, avoiding the collapse of the idealized identitary projection they seek to transmit, and seeking in this way to reduce the possibilities of embarrassment or humiliation that haunt all social interaction.

To expose oneself in front of such a massive audience, even under the apparent protection of an idealized photographic representation that hides as much as it reveals about the subject, is always an experience that causes some discomfort, and the pressure to conform to an ideal and to please the audience might often lead Instagram's users to avoid direct self-representation, seeking parallel strategies. The users thus seek to subvert the pre-established idea that the self is primarily identified by its physical characteristics, its face and body, and instead choose to represent themselves by other kinds of images, be those of other persons, of their pets, of objects, or landscapes (Enli and Thumim, 2012, p. 15). Despite of what the mediatic emphasis given to *selfies* might lead us to think, most images present on Instagram are not direct representations of their users, in the case of the conducted content analysis the images grouped under the category of *Indirect Representation* (images on which the user doesn't figure physically) amounted to 78,90% of all analysed photographs.

However the social character of Instagram implies the need to interact and communicate with others, and that inevitably involves some sort of self-representation (Enli and Thumim, 2012, p. 15). By avoiding a direct representation of the face and body, the idea of self is created through the choices of *lifestyles*, representing identity through the consumption of diverse commodities and services, through a series of daily and seemingly trivial decisions on what to dress, how to behave, what to buy, or what to eat, a set of practices integrated in everyday life which gain a redoubled importance, answering the questionings of "Who am I?" and "How should I live?" (Giddens, 1991/2001). As such each individual defines, consciously or unconsciously, the way he wishes to be seen by others through the emphasizing of certain characteristics, such as their choices of company, of beverage, of hobbies, etc. (see: Image 8), resorting to what Barthes (1982/2009, p. 18) called the "object's pose" to create the connotative message of photography. These carefully selected and composed images of Objects, that constituted nearly 70% of all the analysed photographs, thus contribute to the creation of an identitary rhetoric, providing informations not only about the photographer's personal identity, but also about his social and cultural identity (Bate, 2009, p. 77). The apparently trivial content of these images, made photo-worthy by the changes in the digital photographic paradigm that embraced the Mundane (to such a degree that in the conducted content analysis this category represented over 90% of all the analysed photographs), reveals itself as more important than it might at first seem, for it illustrates the objects, persons and events with which the individual deliberately choose to surround himself and that he believes to be information enough as to allow his audience to create an adequate notion of his identitary posture (Verdina, 2013, p. 30).
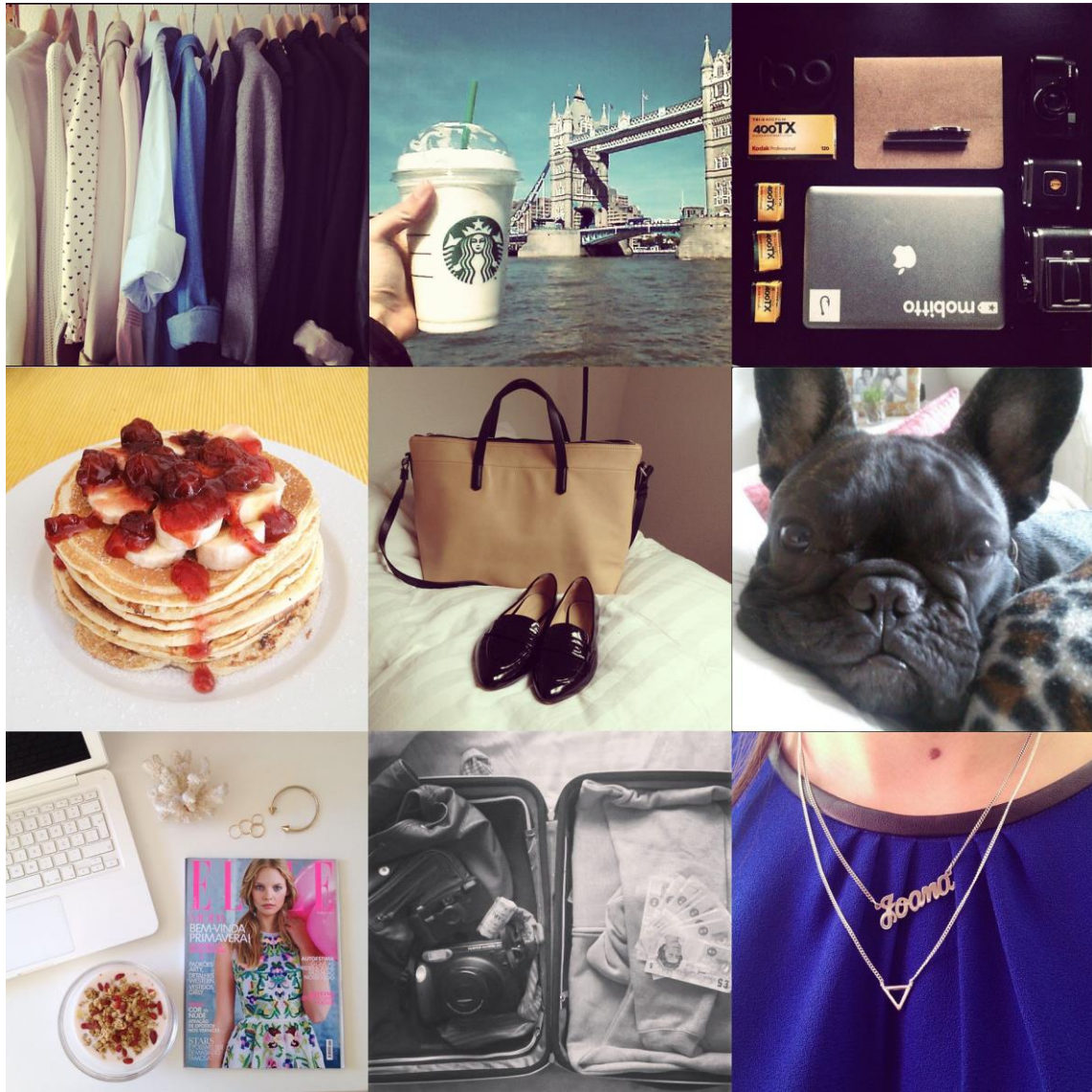
Image 8: Assemblage of photographs from the Instagrams of diverse users.

Another strategy frequently used in social networks' photographic self-representation to avoid the discomfort caused by direct representation is the use of metonymic images, fragmented views of the body that separately shows aspects of its totality. In the content analysis made for this essay over 30% of the images of Direct Representations of the users were metonymic images (see: Image 9). By showing only fragments of the body or the face, Instagram's users are still supplying enough information to create a self-image in the minds of their audience, but this metonymic representation implies a greater participation and a greater deductive effort from the viewers. These fragmented elements thus work, according to Linda Nochlin (1994/2011, p. 38-40), as a form of *synecdoche*, leading the viewer to take the *part* as a *whole*, in a way that a mere fragment becomes capable of insinuating the total level of attractiveness of the represented

individual and thus generating desire, which might lead to a fetishistic reading that emphasizes sexual difference based on the selection of which body parts to exhibit.
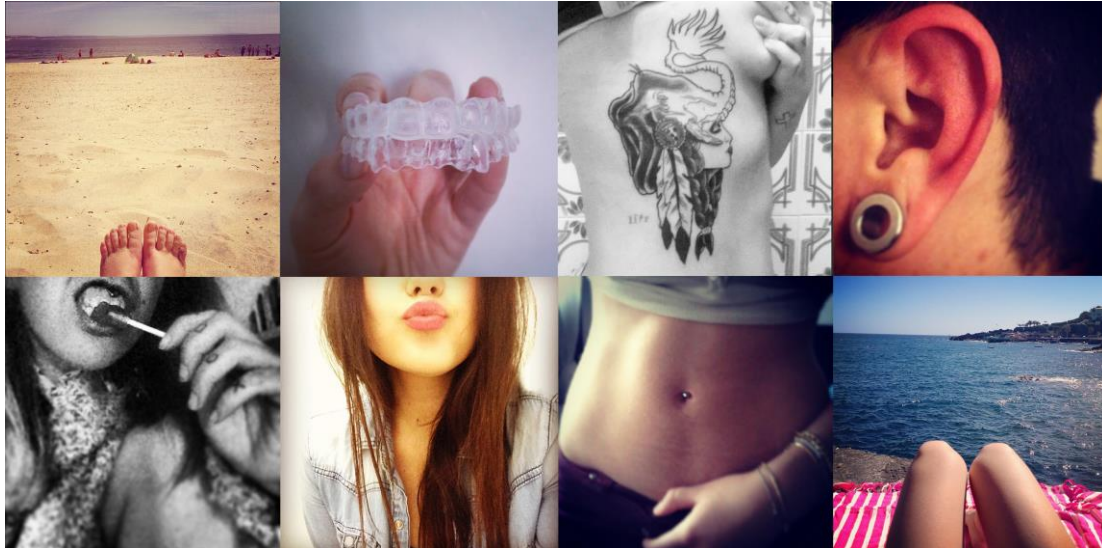

Image 9: Assemblage of photographs from the Instagrams of diverse users.

These idealized images users create of themselves are always a consequence of the judgement they imagine others will make of it, and of a personal feeling of pride or shame (Cooley, 1902, p. 152). Although, in theory, Instagram users are free to publish what they wish (as long as complying with the social network's rules), the judgement they receive from others can be seen as having a sort of "editorial power", that comes to constrain the user's self-representations (Enli and Thumin, 2012, p. 93) and to build renovated notions of how one should present and behave.

On Instagram this judgement is given in a relatively direct way. All photographs, unless explicitly forbidden by the user (something which never arose throughout the research) may be "liked" or commented on by the other users. The "like" appears as a way to offer a small form of quick validation, only implying a click in the heart-shapped icon that appears directly under the photograph. As Instagram, like many others social networks, does not possess a "dislike" button, the images can only be judged by the amount of "likes" they possess, instead of by a more accurate proportion of "likes" and "dislikes". The act of commenting a photograph, less usual than the simple "like", acquires a special value as social validation, simply because it implies a larger deal of time and effort, even though it usually consists of short sentences or even just *emoticons*.

This kind of judgement and social interaction seems to be central to the usages of Instagram, often generating phenomenons of reciprocity between users, the so called "like for like". Thus, out of the nearly 12.000 images analysed only a infinitesimal quantity, of less that 5% of them, did not possessed any kind of social interaction from other users. True to its nature as a *social* network, the images shared on Instagram are thus heavily marked by their interaction with other users.

There is a special kind of pleasure in seeing our images be valued by others. There is a clear relationship of proximity and interdependence between these social networks, their visual representations (especially in the case of identitary self-representations, such as *selfies*), and the very act of exerting a judgement of value to such images. The enthusiasm and concern with which we receive such judgements about our *selfies*

might contribute to a growth in our self-esteem, out of recognition for the fact that someone went through the trouble of interacting with the app motivated by something as trivial as our face. But it might also make us dependent on these kind of attention, seeing our personal value as bound to the number of "likes" and comments these images achieve, and giving more relevance to the strategies to increase this kind of social responses than to the actual enjoyment of the photographed moments. Thus these images might be already composed as a way to elicit certain emotional responses from its viewers, such as envy, admiration, desire, etc., and the interest and care that we dedicate to certain self-image elements might become less of a way to externalize an internal self and become more and more dependent of our imaginary conception of how the other might perceive us, pleasing us or displeasing us according the judgement we belief they would make (Cooley, 1902, p. 152).

Moved by the desire to receive positive judgement from the other users, the photographer in the moment of the creation of the image already tries to anticipate the responses that the viewers might have, trying to control all the little details present in the photograph as to make sure that these converge in the idealized self-image he tries to convey. For any little accident or inadvertent gesture is more than enough to break the involvement of the viewer with the image, leading him to either misunderstand the situation and to create a reading quite distinct than the one intended by the photograph, or to develop of a feeling that all of that user's identitary projection is somewhat false (Goffman, 1956, p. 33).

Instagram's photography is thus, most times, an extremely careful and thought-out idealized construction, often appearing better than the very experience from which it arose. And even if the users have a perfect notion that what is shared on Instagram always goes through a careful process of selection, these images are still capable of evoking the powerful idea of an enviable life, composed almost exclusively of leisurely moments.

Conclusion

If digital technologies and in particular social networks such as Instagram brought with them a series of transformations to the photographic practices of the by-gone analogue era, they were nonetheless rooted on a quite solid foundation set by over a century and a half of photographic visual culture. Thus, these new technologies are experienced mostly as continuities, not breaking with the paradigms of the traditional vernacular photography and its self-representation strategies, but rather expanding its reach and fulfilling long-existing needs and desires.

Despite being scorned as just one more manifestation of the growing narcissism of the younger generation and as a meaningless distraction, Instagram new uses, at first thought apparently so distant and unlike from the practices of the analogue era, reveal themselves as more similar than one would think, obeying similar principles and motivations, such as expressing a sense of identity and self-realization or communicating with others.

In particular self-representation arose as one of the most important functions of Instagram, being actively and carefully used to create a sort of diaristic record and archive of the users daily existence and a chronicle of their identities. Through a regular and intensive photographic creation, with the users posting on a weekly and sometimes even daily basis, they create a notion of identity that emphasizes the present moment and that is open to reinvention.

The same kinds of dramaturgic strategies of posing and selection used for the creation of idealized self-images in analogue portraits are now appropriated, often quite unconsciously, by Instagram user's to create their virtual selves online. As such, there is a noticeable focus on a more direct form of representation, that portrays easily recognizable photographs of the users, showing their full faces or bodies, with the users carefully composing themselves for the picture and interacting with the camera in gleeful attitudes quite reminiscent from the traditional analogue snapshots. These images, in particular *selfies*, are created in a deliberate and reflexive manner, with the subject reclaiming a larger control over every step of the photographic creation of his own self-image, carefully curating the photographed moments and hiding any undesirable aspects, thus presenting a highly selective and idealized version of himself.

But, as already happened in the analogue era, and now heightened by the sheer size of the potential Instagram audience, the conscience of this photographic exposition of the *self* and the pressure to conform to an unattainable ideal often creates a certain sense of discomfort, that can lead the users to seek alternative representation strategies that subvert the logic of direct representation. This indirect representation, quite unexpectedly, revealed itself to be the predominant mode of representation on the analysed sample, as most images aimed to convey a sense of identitary narrative not by showing the face or body of the user, but instead through a carefully created *bricolage* and recombination of distinct elements that show the user's lifestyles choices, embodied in images of objects of consumption, idilic landscapes, and the like. These seemingly trivial images thus gain a redoubled importance, becoming a visual representation of the users identities.

Another popular parallel strategy used to avoid the discomfort of direct representation is the use of metonymic images, of fragmented views of the users' bodies and faces. With these mere fragments, through a bigger participation and deduction from the viewer, the users provide enough visual information to create a sense of identity, without feeling they are exposing themselves too much.

These images, inserted in a social network, play with the sense of pleasure of receiving approval from others, which on Instagram translates into receiving *likes* and *comments* from other users. The user's photographic self-representations thus become somewhat dependent of this immensely common kind of judgment, which serves to build widespread notions of how one should present, represent and behave, with the users creating images that often seek to conform to these newly created ideals in order to receive more likes and a greater appraisal.

Instagram has become, in the past couple of years, part of the daily lives and social activities of an ever-growing number of users all over the world, and as such it has established itself as one of the privileged social networks on which to perform the unavoidable identitary dramaturgy and for the creation of an idealized virtual existence. Directly or indirectly, each user utilizes Instagram as a means to make himself known to others, generating an incessant stream of photographic production, but as these images ceaselessly succeed each other, also the identities they represent seem to remain in a constant flux, being continuously revised and modifying itself as to always correspond to an ideal self, in a cycle of creation, fascination and forgetting.

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