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## **The selfie and the transformation of the public-private distinction**

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**ABSTRACT:** The selfie is a contemporary form of self-portraiture, representing a photographic image of the human face. The selfie is created for the purpose of reproduction and to communicate images visually with others from a distance. The proliferation of web 2.0 technologies and mobile smart phones enable users to generate and disseminate images at an unprecedented scale. Coupled with the increasing popularity of social media platforms, these technologies allow the selfie to be distributed to a wide audience in close to real time. Drawing upon Erving Goffman's approach to the study of face-to-face social interaction, this article presents a discussion of the production and consumption of the selfie. We draw upon Goffman's dramaturgical approach, to explore how the 'presentation of self' occurs in the context of a selfie. Next, we consider how the selfie as a form of visual communication holds critical implications for mediated life online as individuals go about doing privacy. We conclude by reflecting on the role of the selfie and its impact on the boundaries between public and private domains in contemporary social life.

**Keywords:** Erving Goffman; Face; Privacy; Photography; Selfie

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary society is enamoured with the visual. Through the visual we are connected to one another in a manner seldom paralleled by other sensory stimulation. With visual communication reigning supreme in late modernity, some theorists have characterised contemporary society by the so-called ‘visual turn’ (Jay, 1994). Considerable developments in cultural and technological practices have facilitated changes in the ‘form and fluidity of new media technologies’ that permit ‘a succession of new forms of visual experience’ (Spencer, 2011, p. 10). Three technological innovations have been fundamental to these developments: the emergence of web 2.0 technologies as well as the affordability and accessibility of mobile smart phones and digital cameras, which enable users to generate, capture and disseminate images instantly and en masse (see also Hand, 2012). Coupled with the increasing popularity of social media platforms, these technological innovations allow the selfie to be distributed in close to real time to a networked society. These practices have fundamentally altered routine modes of social interaction (communication, privacy and public behaviour), making the notion of ‘the visual’ both timely and sociologically significant.

Drawing upon Erving Goffman’s approach to the study of face-to-face social interaction we present a theoretical discussion of the production and consumption of the selfie. We adopt Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to public and private photographs to explore how the ‘presentation of self’ occurs in the context of a ‘selfie’ in contemporary society. This paper develops Goffman’s understanding of the self by providing a definition of the selfie and examining its relationship to visual culture. Next, we discuss the implications this shift toward life mediated online has for individuals as they go about *doing* privacy within our contemporary media ecology. Embedded in social media sites, selfies are user-generated content frequently produced and consumed by young people (Döring et al., 2016, p.956). Finally, we contend that the selfie provides insight into the shifting boundaries between public and private domains in contemporary social life (Kumar & Makarova, 2008; Meyrowitz, 1986; Sheller & Urry, 2003; Zerubavel, 1979, 1982; Ford, 2015).

In this article we consider how the selfie is connected to larger social transformations. To achieve this objective we draw on Goffman’s (1979) ideas of the public and private photograph in *Gender Advertisements*, using this work as a framework to explore the interactional implications of disseminating photographic images of the self in the ‘age of the digital prosumer’ (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).<sup>1</sup> Although writing before the advent of the digital, Goffman’s ideas are highly relevant when considering the social significance of the selfie. While much literature has been written on the self in the digital world, Goffman’s legacy provides a solid sociological foundation through which to understand the phenomenon. Through his performative lens we become attuned to the interactional implications of representing the self visually through the selfie. We agree with Jamieson (2013, p. 28) when she states that ‘interactionist accounts of the self can remain fit for a theoretical purpose in a digital age’. For, despite the need to consider the distinct ways in which the self develops in physical and digital domains, it would be premature to divorce self-formation online from face-to-face communication (see also Robinson, 2007). According

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<sup>1</sup> Although never originally framed as a work of visual sociology, *Gender Advertisements* now arguably occupies a special place in the pantheon of visual sociology (Smith, 2010, p. 174).

to Goffman, copresence<sup>2</sup> is the defining aspect of society. This is indicated in Goffman's first book, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and in his final public engagement where he indicated his life's work concerned a fascination and engagement with the idea of the 'interaction order'. The interaction order is the defining feature of the human condition. Individuals are conditioned to be in the immediate presence of others: 'in other words, that whatever they are, our doings are likely to be, in the narrow sense, socially situated' (Goffman, 1983, p. 2). Although the selfie is a digital phenomenon that concerns the 'circulation of self-generated digital photographic portraiture, spread primarily via social media' (Senft & Baym, 2015, p. 1588), visual interaction remains a vital part of this practice.

## 2 Antecedents of the Selfie: Goffman on photographs

The selfie is defined by three interrelated components: 1. the self-capturing and reproduction of the visual; 2. the portraiture of the human face; and 3. created for the purpose of sharing.<sup>3</sup> Although the first two aspects of the selfie have considerable precedence in the visual arts, it is arguably the third component – the dissemination and sharing of the photographic image and its rapidity – that is most intriguing. Notwithstanding photography's entanglement in digital media perhaps the most important element of photographic communication is that it captures social action and fixes it in place. To put this in Goffman's terms, the photographic image becomes lodged within a distinct spatial-temporal frame, rendering the fleeting static:

The rendition of structurally important social arrangements and ultimate beliefs which ceremony fleetingly provides the senses, still photography can further condense, omitting temporal sequences and everything else except static visual arrays. And what is caught is fixed into permanent accessibility, becoming something that can be attended anywhere, for any length of time, and at moments of one's own choosing. (Goffman, 1979, p. 10)

This permanent accessibility of the visual allows the photo to become a technology not only of remembrance and nostalgia, but also a technology that feeds into the transformation occurring between public and private social life. Goffman's formulation echoes Sontag's (1977, p. 15) meditation on the photograph: '[p]recisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt'. It is the rendering of social action into the permanently accessible photo that has implications for its insertion into situations that it may not usually originate or be party to. Of importance here is Goffman's suggestion that photographs can be segregated into two classes: public and private. For Goffman, private pictures are those 'designed for display within the intimate social circle of persons featured in them' (1979, p. 10). These are pictures that the individual takes to commemorate occasions, relationships, achievements, and life-turning events. What Goffman is describing is the notion of the photographic image as keepsake, which is representative of

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<sup>2</sup> See Goffman's (1983, p. 2) written Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association (not presented due to a terminal illness). Here he coins the term 'interaction order' to describe the overall guiding focus during his career: 'My concern over the years has been to promote acceptance of this face-to-face domain as an analytically viable one – a domain which might be titled, for want of any happy name, the interaction order – a domain whose preferred method of study is microanalysis. My colleagues have not been overwhelmed by the merits of the case.'

<sup>3</sup> These three elements are defined in greater detail in the following section.

photography in the analogue age as a means for autobiographical remembering rather than as a way of experiencing 'live' communication (van Dijck, 2008, p. 58). Yet even though these images are labelled 'private', they may be capturing events occurring in public, such as rituals and ceremonies. According to Goffman, such images are private because they hold significance and remain part of the domestic ceremonial life. They contain portraiture that makes striking to the senses what otherwise becomes overlooked in everyday life.

As a result, private photographs allow the individual to furnish their surroundings in a 'self-enhancing' way. Writing in the late seventies, Goffman noted the use of domestic photography as a key part of furnishing domestic space. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton similarly suggest that 'more than any other object in the home, photos serve the purpose of preserving and enhancing the memory of personal ties. In their ability to arouse emotion there is no other type of object that can surpass them' (1981, p. 69). Statements such as these parallel Adorno's (2002, p. 274) contention that through the practice of listening to one's own record collection flattering 'virtual photographs' of their owners can be obtained whereby the record collection affirms the owner as they 'could also be just as well preserved' and hence, a form of 'self-worship can thus be accomplished' (Goffman, 1979, p. 11). In this regard, Goffman like Adorno understood the role material culture played in furnishing domestic space to affirm the self throughout everyday life (see also Pink, 2006). Though the constituent materiality of the photograph evolved, the role of photographic representation as it pertains to self-affirmation and also self-presentation remains elemental.

If private images are used predominately for domestic purposes then public pictures can be said to be designed for a wider audience: 'an anonymous aggregate of individuals unconnected to one another by social relationship and social interaction' (1979, p. 11). The public dissemination of the photograph is important to this distinction. Here 'print is usually not the final form, only a preliminary step in some type of photo-mechanical reproduction in newspapers, magazines, books, leaflets, or posters' (Goffman, 1979, p. 11). Print in this sense refers to process that renders printed images from a still film camera. By extension we can augment this to include digital dissemination. While significant changes have occurred in the intervening period, the public picture for Goffman contains images that are commercial in nature, news related (matters to be of current scientific, social and political concerns), instructional (for example those images found in medical text books), human interests stories (whereby those pictured are anonymous and candidly taken) and finally personal publicity pictures. This last category is said to be 'designed to bring before the public a flattering portrait of some luminary, whether political, religious, military, sporting, theatrical, literary, or – where a class elite still functions and is publicized – social' (Goffman, 1979, p. 11).

This dichotomy of the private and public photograph is an intriguing one. Like most dichotomies, what is particularly revealing is when one considers the possibility of seepage between the two categories. As with most social behaviour that can be symbolically situated as public or private, photographs possess the potential to traverse the thinly veiled boundary.

Photographic portraiture represents a rather significant social invention, for, even apart from its role in domestic ritual, it has come to provide a low and very little guarded point in the barrier that both protects and restrains persons of private life from passing over into public recognition. (Goffman, 1979, p. 11)

Goffman's statement is suggestive of the interactional implications the photograph can possess, even prior to their integration in digital media. The photograph is identified as an object that can seep or 'melt' the boundary demarcating public and private spheres. Portraiture, in this sense, even in its traditional role of furnishing domestic space, can be seen to represent an irrevocable break in the 'patterns of access to information' to the domestic and public (Meyrowitz, 1986, p. 37; see also Zerubavel, 1982). This way of understanding the social significance of the photograph resonates with Joshua Meyrowitz's use of the term 'information', not in the sense of facts, but rather social information; that is, the things that people are capable of knowing about the behaviour and actions of themselves, others and things learnt about others in acts of communication. The photograph provides access to a distinct social space that individuals would otherwise not be able to gain access to.

Contemporary photographic practices intensifies the underlying ability of connecting people and information together not merely due to the mobile nature of the photo but because of the mobility of the mechanism (the smartphone) that enables photographs to be distributed quickly and en masse. The ease by which the individual can now capture themselves photographically and then digitally disseminate these images close to real-time to a networked public is significant.<sup>4</sup> This plays into the altering role of photographic practices in the twentieth century and beyond. As van Dijck argues, the almost ubiquitous sharing of images is part of a larger transformation in which

...the self becomes the centre of a virtual universe made up of information and spatial flows; individuals articulate their identity as social beings not only by taking and storing photographs to document their lives, but by participating in communal photographic exchanges that mark their identity as interactive producers and consumers of culture. (van Dijck, 2008, pp. 62-3)

Understanding the production and consumption of the selfie is required in order to assess how the digital self-portrait plays into the transformation of public and private social life. Prior to discussing these implications for individuals as they go about *doing* privacy, a consideration of the nature of the selfie and its relationship to visual culture is required.

### **3 Face-work and photography: the selfie as proliferating portraiture**

The 'selfie' is a self-captured photograph of the human face created for the purpose of dissemination. The word 'selfie' formally entered the English lexicon in 2013, when the term became Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year ([OD Blog](#)). The term was first detected in an Australian online forum post in 2002, describing a photo of an injured lip belonging to a user dubbed 'Hopey' (Liddy, 2013). Despite the increasing popularity of the selfie, the practice of 'taking a selfie', in terms of self-photography and self-portraiture, has a long history. The ubiquity of digital technologies – smart phones, digital cameras and so on – has had an inexorable impact on the proliferation of this mode of digital self-portraiture (Döring et al., 2016). The proliferation of these digital technologies is synonymous with the infiltration of visual devices, now considered a central aspect of contemporary culture more generally

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<sup>4</sup> The public dissemination of 'the selfie' occurs differently across social media platforms. Facebook, for example, tends to favour the selfie as a mode of documentation, representing significant moments in one's life. Mobile messaging applications, such as, WhatsApp or Snapchat, by contrast, tend to view the selfie as a transient update of one's daily life.

where digital imaging and photography have become mundane accompaniments to communication and connection practices in everyday life (Hand, 2012, p. 11). Importantly, the selfie is distinct from traditional photographic self-portraiture in terms of technique and framing, but also in its ostensibly spontaneous and casual nature that has become embedded in everyday life (Saltz, 2014). Traditional photographic portraiture is perceived by viewers as staged, whereas the selfie is presented by producers as impulsive, notwithstanding its production may actually require 20 photographs before capturing the 'right' presentation worthy of dissemination. Although the contemporary manifestation of representing the self visually in the form of digital photos has been accentuated in contemporary society, self-portraiture is not a new phenomenon (Tifentale, 2014).

What is absent from much sociological literature is a definition of the selfie as a social practice. Rather than narrowly viewing the selfie as a narcissistic mode of self-expression (for example, see Schonfeld, 2013; Mehdizadeh, 2010), we contend along with others (Forth, 2015) that such interpretations are unnecessarily reductive and fail to consider how this form of visual communication is implicated in the wider transformation of public and private social life. Such reductive understandings also fail to provide credence for the interactional nature of the self. Examining the interactional aspects of the selfie provides insight into these acts of visual communication, but also into the selfie as a symbol of social transformation.

The selfie is a self-photograph. Visual reproduction is intrinsic to this definition with the selfie taken by an individual who is the subject of the photograph, typically rendered by a hand-held digital device. The subject of the photograph is usually an individual – or group of individuals (also referred to as a 'groupie') – who aims to capture a portrait of the person(s), therefore, focusing specifically on the human face (or part of the human face). Such photographic images are also digitally disseminated for the purposes of sharing (sometimes consensually, although not always). We contend that these three components are essential features of the selfie: 1. the self-capturing and reproduction of the visual; 2. the photographic portraiture of the human face; 3. created for the purpose of dissemination. Together these three features constitute defining qualities of the selfie. All selfies are therefore photographs, though not all photographs are selfies (Feifer, 2015).

In the current digital age, the reproduction of visual images occurs at an unprecedented rate (Hand, 2012). The way in which images are shared has led to a change in the social function of photography. As van Dijck (2008) notes, with the rise of western digital photography the traditional role of using photographs as a form of autobiographical remembering has become outmoded: the photo as keepsake is no longer the primary use of photography (see also Döring & Gundolf 2006). The increased capacity to disseminate images via handheld devices online means that the picture becomes the preferred idiom in mediated communication practices (van Dijck, 2008, p. 58). Visual communication takes on greater prominence. As Hand (2012, p. 1) contends where once we imagined the digital future would entail digital simulation and virtual reality, now arguably the opposite appears true: 'the visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape'. The idiom of the picture and its use as a way connecting and communicating with friends, acquaintances and colleagues signals this heightened role of photography. The widespread use of the cameraphone ushers in a new way of allowing individuals to communicate visually at a distance. This digital practice not only alters the way we communicate, it alters our attitude towards the visual and specifically the photograph itself. As van Dijck identifies in the case of cameraphone technology:



Cameraphone pictures are a way of touching base: ‘Picture this, here! Picture me, now!’ The main difference between cameraphones and the single-purpose camera is the medium’s ‘verbosity’ – the inflation of images inscribed in the apparatus’s script. When pictures become a visual language conveyed through the channel of a communication medium, the value of individual pictures decreases while the general significance of visual communication increases. (2008, p. 62)

The unique quality of the visual and specifically, the act of looking is central here. Writing in the early twentieth century, Georg Simmel proposed that the connection between, and interaction among, individuals that lies in the act of individuals looking at one another is ‘perhaps the most direct and purest interaction that exists’ (1997, p. 111). Psychological research supports these observations, emphasising the role of nonverbal communication in human interaction (Knapp et al., 2013). A glance, gesture or wink by a certain person underscores why visual phenomena, though subtle, are revealing sociological sites of analysis.<sup>5</sup> It also signals the importance of the face especially when considering its centrality in photography and by extension, the selfie. It is through the face we know the world and read other peoples’ intentions.

Human culture assigns the face a special role in representing the self. When individuals are mourned and remembered, it is the face that is used as a referent. The role of a death mask as an impression from the face of a corpse is suggestive of the importance attributed to the face as a way for the idea of the individual to endure. With regard to capturing images of the face in digital form, the selection of the human face as the subject is noteworthy. The human face is the greatest instrument of communication that individuals use throughout everyday life, revealing thought, feeling and emotion (Ekman and Friesen, 2003). In terms of communication, the face demonstrates *appearance*. As Simmel (1997, p. 113) contends, the face ‘viewed as an organ of expression is, as it were, of a completely theoretical nature. It does not *act*, like the hand, the foot or the entire body, it never supports the inner or practical behaviour of people, but rather it only *tells* others about it’ (author’s emphasis). It is this demonstration that renders the face impractical and yet fundamental to human communication.

The significance of the face as a tool of expression can be demonstrated when examining its role in providing communication materials when situated within the presence of other individuals. As Smith suggests (2010, p. 165), Goffman’s key ideas about social behaviours in public build on Simmel’s ideas concerning visual interaction. Goffman is similarly aware of the impractical though important application of the face as a literal and metaphorical instrument of communication.<sup>6</sup> The face provides the ‘ultimate behavioural materials’ that include, though are not limited to ‘the glances, gestures, positioning, and verbal statements

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<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite the significance of the visual, visual sociology has for various reasons suffered from a lack of legitimacy in terms of its social science credentials, with the image, its subjectivity and specificity renders this preference for the visual seemingly invalid for scientific sociology (Pink, 2007, p. 12). This is also somewhat of an irony when we consider the historical synchronicity of the beginnings of photography and sociology. As Berger and Mor (1982, p. 99) state: ‘The camera was invented in 1839. August Comte was just finishing his *Cours de Philosophie Positive*. Positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together. What sustained them all as practices was the belief that quantifiable facts, recorded by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such total knowledge about nature and society that he would be able to order them both’.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on the metaphorical importance of face see Goffman (1967, pp. 5-45).

that people continuously feed into the situations, whether intended or not' (Goffman, 1967, p. 1). This organ of expression is the mechanism by which we provide 'external signs of orientation and involvement – states of mind and body not ordinarily examined with respect to their social organisation' (1967, p. 1). The face conveys an individual's involvement in a particular situation and therefore is one key resource individuals' use in the collective manufacturing of the self.<sup>7</sup> As Goffman (1959, p. 2) indicates, an individual – primarily through the face – communicates expression in a given situation in two overarching manners: 1. expressions that are 'given', whereby the person uses 'verbal symbols and their substitutes' (such as facial expressions) 'to convey the information that he and the others are known to attached these symbols' and 2. expressions that are 'given off', therefore involving a 'wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectations being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way' (Goffman, 1959, p. 2). Understanding the role of the face in communication rituals both in this narrow and broader sense is required. Though our focus tends to fixate on the narrow, it is the wider form of communication as 'given off' or the more 'theatrical and contextual kind, the non-verbal, presumably unintentional kind, whether this communication be purposely engineered or not' (Goffman, 1959, p. 4) that Goffman was particularly gifted at illuminating. Both classes of expression are used in assessments of the others and determine the extent to which these expression cohere with the definition of a situation: '[t]ogether the participations contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured' (Goffman, 1959, pp. 9-10).

The selfie in light of situationally appropriate expression raises implications about the nature of digital portraiture because although the face presented is one that appears spontaneous and casual in appearance, it is actually the result of crafting, deliberate framing and ultimately embodied practices (Frosh, 2015, p. 1614). As a photograph the selfie omits 'temporal sequences' but further than this, it provides for the shaping and rendering of the image by the subject. The primed quality of the selfie offers the producer the ability to refine expressions that in Goffman's terms are visually 'given' and conversely restricts if not quashes expressions 'given off'. However though digital photography is often claimed to have led to an artifice associated with the visual, digitization did not cause manipulability; retouching has always been inherent in photography (van Dijck, 2008, p. 66). What is crucial is that digital photography provides for an increased opportunity for the practice of reviewing and retouching visual reproductions. And this may partially explain the ambivalence and moralising often associated with critiques of the selfie; as a form of visual communication it radically restricts not only the viewer's ability to assess the worth of the individual presented in the selfie (as when compared with face-to-face interaction), but moreover enables the producer an increased capacity to craft the face presented.

Considering the centrality of the face as an organ of expression, and the verbosity and ubiquitous nature of the photograph as a heightened communication medium, the marriage of

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<sup>7</sup> Following Randal Collins (1986, p. 107), we agree that Goffman's account of the self is aptly placed in the traditions of social anthropology in which individuals enact social rituals in order to maintain the normative order of society: "Thus, unlike Mead, Thomas, and Blumer, the self in Goffman is not something that individuals negotiate out of social interactions: it is, rather the archetypal modern myth. We are compelled to have an individual self, not because we actually have one but because social interaction requires us to act as if we do." For an extensive discussion on this point see also Cahill (1998).

the face and the image in the form of the selfie is in one sense unremarkable. As with other forms of mechanical reproduction (e.g. sound reproduction), the reproduction of the image in the form of the photograph brings human expression closer, collapsing the tyranny of physical distance though equally reducing the uniqueness of individual experience. This allows, as Walter Benjamin accurately perceives, the drawing closer together of individuals, even though they may be separated by physical distance:

The need to bring things spatially and humanly ‘nearer’ is almost an obsession today, as is the tendency to negate the unique or ephemeral quality of a given event by reproducing it photographically. There is an ever-growing compulsion to reproduce the object photographically, in close-up. (Walter Benjamin in Sontag, 1977, pp. 190-1)

We contend an important precursor of the selfie is the ‘close-up’. The term describes a camera technique that provides the ultimate framing of the expressive qualities of the human face. The portrait shares qualities of the close-up, using lighting to maximise the expressive qualities of the face (see Keating, 2006). The close-up, as Benjamin indicates, quashes the fleeting nature of human expression. As Sontag (1977, p. 115) similarly indicates: ‘[n]o one would dispute that photography gave a tremendous boost to the cognitive claims of sight, because – through close-up and remote sensing – it so greatly enlarged the realm of the visible’. At the same time, it paradoxically enables a sense of closeness or intimacy at a distance. This arguably marks qualities of both portraiture and the close-up that find their way into the contemporary practice of the selfie. The close-up represents a pivotal moment in the development of modern photographic communication because it reveals potent social information about the presentation of self. Yet rather than simply revealing the true representation of a subject, it expresses a ‘truth’ that is presented through the face. As Finkelstein contends:

The common use of the close-up asserts the existence of a ruminative interior or self; the camera is the device giving insight into secrets. Through the close-up, thoughts are made visible. The actor’s facial expressions transport the audience into the deep interior of the mind. The close-up uses the eyes as ‘the windows’ to the concealed personality. Suddenly the interior becomes exteriorized; certain gestures and subtle movements – a tear, quiver of the lip, a slight smile – are signs from the interior unmediated, true emotion. These fine facial movements caught by the close-up camera shot *suggest authenticity*, as if the realm of meaning behind the visible social surface is indeed the real world. (2007, p. 4 - our emphasis)

If the close-up provides the communicative possibility for depicting the deep interior of an actor’s mind in film, it follows that when this technique is incorporated into everyday practice, it similarly is a way of depicting the presentation of ‘true’ or authentic emotion. Therefore, by enlarging the ‘realm of the visible’ the close-up provides the viewer with a sense of greater scrutiny in what is being viewed, though equally and counterintuitively restricts the viewers ability to scan for what viewers perceives as authentic when compared with face-to-face interactions. The visual depiction of the close up of the face restricts if not quashes expressions that are ‘given off’ because both filmic production and the selfie are

highly manufactured. Nonetheless it is the *suggestion* or successful performance of authenticity that is central. The selfie as a means of communicating emotion is crucial.

To contemplate the social function of the photograph, and especially the new form of the self-photograph in its digitized state is consumed, we are required to consider how images are ‘read’ or acted upon by actors. Taking our cue from Goffman: ‘[t]o consider photographs – private and public – it is necessary, apparently, to consider the question of perception and reality, and it is necessary to control somehow the systematic ambiguities that characterize our everyday talk about pictures’ (1979, pp. 11-12). It is this perception of the image that we consider in the following section.

#### **4. Consuming the selfie: behavioural regard and *doing* privacy**

We use the idea of behavioural regard to assist in our explanation of the selfie. The concept is used to indicate the extent to which individuals display deference or acknowledge one another when entering into another’s presence. Providing ‘regard’ or modifying one’s behaviour when physically copresent with another individual is especially relevant to public situations. For example, in locations involving public transport individuals typically display an implicit type of acknowledgement to one another. Commuters will demonstrate that they are aware of each other’s presence while simultaneously withdrawing to ensure that they do not appear overly curious or interested towards one another (Goffman, 1963, p. 84; Schivelbusch, 1977, pp. 82-92). Behavioural regard in this situation can be understood by the term ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 84). The following kinds of cues and communicational gestures may occur: a non-assuming glance; a change of posture to accommodate the movement of commuters when finding seats; repositioning the body and limbs to provide for extra space; and non-assertive alteration in facial expression (Walsh, 2009, p. 50). Civil inattention is therefore not ‘disattention’, but a mode of interaction that implicitly reassures other individuals that they are not obviously interested in other commuters’s affairs (Lofland, 1989, p. 463).

This subtle form of interaction is symbolic of behavioural regard. It signals that participants have settled upon a single definition of the situation; all commuters in this situation tacitly agree to impose as minimally as possible on one another. Through employing behavioural regard, individuals demonstrate the adoption of expected forms of social behaviour that reinforce the way in which a situation is defined. Any behaviour (or material culture) that interferes or contradicts the situation’s definition will be actively resisted. This is because individuals strive for a ‘normative organisation’ of the social situation, in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions (Goffman, 1959, p. 254). This means that when an individual is commuting alone, they will expect to be socially isolated and not engage in prolonged conversation with others. This social convention means that when a passenger attempts to engage in animated conversation with another commuter with whom they have no pre-existing relationship, one is likely to experience this form of interaction as contravening civil inattention.

The concept of behavioural regard is particularly useful when considering empirical cases of interplay between the public and the private (Waskul, 2016). The single sex public bathroom is another case in point. These locations are accessible to all members of a given sex and therefore, for all intents and purposes, considered ‘public’. They are regions freely accessible

to members of the community and ‘in the main, all persons have legal access’ (Lofland, 1973, p. 19). Equally, this setting is a place where individuals are actively encouraged to be ‘private’. This is because, as Kumar and Makarova (2008, p. 330) contend, numerous activities in public such as prayer, the contemplation undertaken in an art gallery or listening to privatised music in a train, represent situations that constitute private activity, while located in public (see also Cahill et al., 1985; Goffman, 1971; Karp, 1973; Lofland, 1973). However, like the situations above, and certainly for the public bathroom, these public settings possess social conventions around their use and are regulated by social norms about how individuals should perform and afford other users degrees of situational privacy. Users of these environments are required to demonstrate regard to other users of these locations. Cahill et al. (1985) in their pioneering study describe how this ritual operates:

Clearly, a toilet stall is a member of this sociological family of ecological arrangements. Sociologically speaking, however, it is not physical boundaries, per se, that define a space as a stall but the behavioural regard given such boundaries. For example, individuals who open or attempt to open the door of an occupied toilet stall typically provide a remedy for this act, in most cases a brief apology such as ‘whoops’ or ‘sorry’. By offering such a remedy, the offending individual implicitly defines the attempted intrusion as a delict and thereby, affirms his or her beliefs in a rule that prohibits such intrusions (Goffman, 1971, p. 113). In this sense, toilet stalls provide occupying individuals not only physical protection against potential audiences but normative protection as well. (Cahill et al., 1985, p. 36)

As with other physical barriers and perceived symbolic boundaries (i.e., not necessarily physical), the separation between stalls (doors and walls) are treated as though they cease communication materials more than they actually do so. In this sense, ‘the work walls do, they do in part because they are honoured or socially recognised as communication barriers’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 152). They provide actors with ‘both physical and normative shields behind which they can perform potentially discrediting acts’ (Cahill et al., 1985, p. 37). It is the act of acknowledging such ‘shields’ and responding in a way deemed appropriate, that we can describe as behavioural regard.

While the concept derives from interaction between individuals, behavioural regard is also partly the province of material culture: doors, stalls and arguably photographs. As walls and doors function in a bathroom to provide cues to interactants in this setting, so too photographs provide cues that viewers perceive and interpret. Goffman’s explanation of public and private photographs is indicative of this. As public photographs are identified as being produced for an ‘anonymous aggregate of individuals unconnected to one another by social relationship and social interaction’, the implication is that these images are ‘diverse in function and character’ and serve to furnish the world symbolically for particular purposes beyond the immediate confines of persons known to the producer. The vast majority of pictures that one encounters are public. When we traverse through the city, view magazines and newspapers or surf the web, the majority of images we are exposed to are produced for public consumption; intended for individuals unknown to one another. Private photographs on the other hand are recorded ‘for display within the intimate social circle of persons featured in them’ (Goffman, 1979, p. 10). Here photos are produced for the sake of exhibition and specifically for those known to one another.

These categories of photograph imply a distinct kind of behavioural regard. When viewing images produced for public consumption, such viewing is deemed appropriate and usual. We are required to pay little respect or veneration towards the depiction of people we view, because we have no direct social connection to them. When viewing private photos, on the other hand, the context and relationship to the producer of the photograph is significant. The producer's relationship to the consumer of the image determines the type of regard the image requires. For example, when viewing a family portrait of an acquaintance, respect and deference is highly likely to be afforded to the image. This is especially true when the object is viewed in a domestic setting.

In addition to the display of deference, control is another aspect of the private photograph. In the analogue age, private photos were only viewable by individuals sanctioned by their relationship to the producer of the photograph. To sanction viewing of a private photograph was relatively straightforward: one was required to gain access physically to the photograph (displayed within a spatial location). It may be affixed to an internal wall, placed on a mantel or tucked away in a shoe box. To gain access to photographs, one must gain access to the social setting in which that photograph was situated. Regulating the sanctioned viewing of private photographs becomes increasingly difficult with digital media and the introduction of ubiquitous digital photography.<sup>8</sup> It allows for the distribution of images enabling close to instantaneous dissemination via personal handheld devices. The medium of the image becomes increasingly shareable and increases the possibility of seepage across this 'very little guarded point in the barrier that both protects and restrains persons of private life from passing over into public recognition' (Goffman, 1979, p. 11). Indeed part of the popularity of digital photography is the increased command over the outcome of the image that allows for its manipulability and with this increased manipulability this 'renders them vulnerable to unauthorised distribution' (van Dijck 2008, p. 58). The possibility of a sanctioned viewing of private images is increased and equally, this is true for the non-sanctioned viewings.

Accounts of the prevalence of online sexual activity experiences and state prevention strategies highlight this point. For example, Döring (2014) in her analysis of the sexting risk prevention literature explores consensual adolescent sexting and indicates that the topic is framed in predominately two ways: as deviant behaviour associated with a range of different risks (where images are viewed by parties that are not sanctioned) and less frequently, as normal intimate communication in romantic and sexual relationships in the digital age (2014, p. 2).<sup>9</sup> In a social environment where online sexual activity is recorded to be fairly common (see Döring et al., 2015) and the fact that there is an increasingly 'normalcy of sexting', especially among adults (and teenage populations) in romantic relationships (Döring, 2014, p. 6; see also Perkins et al., 2014; Salter, 2015), this exacerbates the importance of behavioural regard in relation to the consumption of private photographs. In the context of sexting the role of deference to the photograph is significant. It reinforces that although aspects of sexting (the sending and receiving of sexually-laden images) are not novel; what is new is 'the use of

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<sup>8</sup> See Hand (2012, p. 11): 'In embracing the term 'ubiquitous', then, I am not referring simply to images: I suggest that the discourse, technologies and practices of photography have become radically pervasive across all domains of contemporary society'.

<sup>9</sup> Döring's (2014, p. 1) definition of sexting is useful: 'Sexting is a 21<sup>st</sup> century neologism and portmanteau of "sex" and "texting" that refers to the *interpersonal exchange of self-produced sexualized texts and above all images (photos, videos) via cell phone or the internet*' (emphasis in original)

the cell phone to do so [send and receive images] and ease with which one can engage in sexting' (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011, p. 1697). The ease of producing, sharing and consuming private photographs increases and signifies the heightened role of photographic communication practices in everyday life (van Dijck, 2008, p. 62). Accordingly, this situation intensifies issues concerning the unauthorised distribution private images and expectations around privacy. In other words, the manner in which behavioural regard is provided to the photograph.

What therefore is at stake in our contemporary media ecology is the individual's relationship to privacy; privacy, not in the sense of an individual's claim to particular space (a la civil inattention), but rather their claim to keep private objects and representations that symbolise them. Producers of photographs are now required to consider and actively manage how to maintain control and sanction the viewing of private photographs. Managing control over photographs is an increasingly fundamental aspect of performing privacy. As Albury's study of digital media suggests, young men and women have a heightened awareness of the need to manage their online presence. In the case of the selfie, Albury reports that her participants were 'highly conscious of privacy and that not all selfies were made to be shared' (Albury, 2015, p. 1735). Some selfies in this context were made specifically with the intention of keeping private, while others were there to be shared as a way of expressing the self and communicating 'to others one's location and interests at a certain point in time' (Albury, 2015, p. 1736).

What is integral here is the spectrum between concealment and disclosure. Christina Nippert-Eng (2010) in her empirical exploration of privacy argues that rather than being an absolute state, privacy is something that individuals are required to act out and undertake throughout the everyday. How individuals go about revealing themselves publicly impacts on their capacity to remain inaccessible (see also Zerubavel, 1979, 1982):

...creating pockets of accessibility is an important way in which we try to achieve a few pockets of inaccessibility too. Making some part of ourselves accessible to some people in some times and places actually helps us get away with denying them access to other parts or at other places and times. We might agree that 'you can know this about me, you can use this thing of mine, and you can reach me here, at this time, and in this way', in part to better insist 'but I won't let you know this about me, you can't touch this, and you need to leave me alone now'. (Nippert-Eng, 2010, p. 6)

Privacy is therefore interactionally contingent (see also Dellwing, 2012). How an individual goes about constructing privacy and works towards achieving it in collaboration with others is central. The contingent nature of privacy is susceptible to violation or instances where in the case of the selfie, unsanctioned consumption is possible. This becomes acute when we also consider the increased pace of sharing visual culture, where even the accidental or forced revealing for even a brief moment can render what is deemed private, public. Nonetheless, the selfie can be characterised as a moment in which one reveals themselves a certain image of themselves in one situation only to deny others access in another context.<sup>10</sup> The producer

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<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the selfie can be viewed as part of the counter play between the two interests that Simmel (1950, p. 344) identifies as permeating the entirety of human interaction: concealing and revealing.

of the selfie can command what others view and when they view, in order to withhold or seclude other parts of the self. This is certainly indicated in a recent empirical account of the selfie whereby participants in Albury's study indicate they took 'private selfies'. These are photographic images that were perceived to be created only for the producer of the image, rather than the public.<sup>11</sup> These images were understood as 'ordinary, or at least unremarkable, practice albeit somewhat risky, with several participant expressing concern that friend, parent, or teachers might find private selfies on unlocked phones' (Albury, 2015, p. 1736).

Concealing and revealing is a significant aspect of the selfie and underscores why reducing the selfie to narcissistic display fails to understand the wider context. The desire to conceal visual representations of the self and to disclose these at other times are suggestive of the increasing role of impression management as it becomes delegated onto material culture. Individuals' have always attempted to control the information they reveal to one another when situated in face-to-face interactions through their conduct and expression and this certainly persists in digital interactions. However the extent to which this conduct and expression is viewable is restricted (in a Goffmanian sense) and, as discussed in the previous section, is arguably more susceptible to manipulability and priming by the producer of the selfie.

The advent of the digital has increased the ability to insert private materials into public situations, making acute the 'low and very little guarded point in the barrier that both protects and restrains persons of private life from passing over into public recognition' (Goffman, 1979, p. 11). But what occurs when a private selfie is viewed without consent? The literature that frames sexting as deviant behaviour underscores the risks and severe legal ramifications (in countries such as Australia and the U.S.A.) associated with producing and consuming these photographs, especially when produced by adolescents (Döring, 2014, p. 7).<sup>12</sup> Yet this danger is not one that is natural. Rather it is manifest in light of legal structures that fail to understand the increasing role of photographic sharing practices and how they increasingly play a role in contemporary romantic relationships (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). In contrast, is the example of revenge porn whereby private sexualised photographs are publicly shared without consent in a vindictive manner with intent to damage the reputations of those depicted (Goldberg, 2014, p. 18). This too is an example of the non-consensual circulation of a private photograph and it raises a question about the type of regard a viewer, such as a friend or parent experiences when inadvertently consuming this image. The consumption of the photograph in this case is non-sanctioned and therefore transgresses the division between public and private that social convention usually manages to keep distinct. This reinforces the extent to which privacy is interactionally contingent and is only collaboratively achievable. These instances play into larger transformations between public and private social life.

Typically, however, the selfie does not occupy this extreme. The selfie is generally represented as the consensual circulation of self photography. As a relative new communicative practice the social protocols and regard provided to the selfie are still being

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<sup>11</sup> In one sense, this point highlights why it is the self-capturing component of a selfie that makes it unique. These pictures are not necessarily intended for public dissemination (although media analysis of celebrities may indicate this).

<sup>12</sup> Lee et al., (2013) indicate that moral anxieties concerning the practice of sexting has rendered policy making around this issue almost impossible in an Australian context; young people are silenced in public and media discourses while also are the recipients of harsh legal consequences.



formed and as such there is much ambivalence displayed around the consumption of selfies for purposes of bodily display and gendered expression (Albury, 2015, p. 1743; see also Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2016). Arguably, the selfie and its production and consumption lead to a greater ambiguity. While social ambiguity is certainly possible across all media technologies that transfer communication to different temporal and spatial settings, the selfie – with its emphasis on the communicative instrument of the human face – takes this ambiguity to a new level.

### **5. Conclusion: the selfie and the transformation of public and private life**

The selfie challenges the traditional demarcation between ‘public’ and ‘private’ social life. This division between these spheres can be pointed to in numerous analyses of contemporary social life. The boundary between private and public carries powerful normative implications (Nippert-Eng, 2007; Sheller and Urry, 2003; Weintraub, 1997, p. 1; Zerubavel, 1979, 1982), especially in relation to how (i.e., what modes of interaction) and where (i.e., in which social situations) people interact with one another in everyday life. At its most basic, the public-private distinction is characterised by several divisions: first, a division between what is hidden or withdrawn versus what is revealed or accessible; and second, the division between what is individual versus what is collective (Weintraub, 1997, pp. 4-5). Although the boundary is ‘porous and ambiguous’ (Madanipour, 2003, p. 66), it still functions to allow for a ‘realm of private self-expression and intimacy buffered from the larger world of politics and a sense of belonging to a larger community that expresses obligations to all its members, even if they are strangers’ (Wolfe, 1997, pp. 187-88). It is in this context that the selfie, as a mode of self-expression (as sometimes private and at other times public activity) comes into its own.

Individuals segment social activities, locations, behaviours and experiences into ‘public’ and ‘private’ categories (Kumar and Makarova, 2008; Meyrowitz, 1986; Sheller and Urry, 2003; Zerubavel, 1979, 1982). For most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the separation between the two remained relatively distinct. This division has now arguably begun to unravel, becoming increasingly blurred (Ford, 2015, p. 54). As Kumar and Makarova explain:

One might not be sure where to put the stress – on the private overwhelming the public, or the public saturating the private – but the general perception, here as elsewhere, is a of a fundamental shifting of boundaries or, even more significantly, of the increasing difficulty of recognising any boundary at all. (2008, p. 326)

We argue the selfie is part of this segmentation of social activities; but to categorise it as either public or private is inaccurate. Indeed, the selfie is subject to the increasing ambiguity that is creeping into the public-private division; the practice of taking selfies is emblematic of the blurring of the boundary between public and private social life. The proliferation of selfie as a form of visual expression is connected to the increasing desire to communicate an ideal image of the self. The desire to stay connected regardless of one’s location renders the division between public and private less significant. As discussed, photographs form part of this desire as they represent in Goffman’s (1979, p. 11) words a ‘low and very little guarded point in the barrier that both protects and restrains persons of private life from passing over

into public recognition'. But rather than a case of transgression between the private and public photograph, producers and consumers of the selfie appear to not pay the same deference to the boundary as did previous producers and consumers of standard photographs. The selfie appears to straddle this dichotomy of public and private photograph, decreasing the clarity of the division between public and private social life; the role and character of sharing social information is transitioning. Although some commentators might argue this reduces or symbolises the elimination of privacy altogether, we argue that in actual fact individuals still aspire to privacy, however in more nuanced and socially contingent ways (see also Salter, 2015, p. 14). The selfie as situated within these larger social transformations is associated not only with production and consumption of the visual, but specifically with the elevation of photography as a heightened communication medium. By drawing upon the work of Goffman and using his approach to the study of face-to-face social interaction we have been able to more clearly understand the interactional nature of privacy and the significance of how self-presentation occurs when the stage adopted is the 'selfie'.

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