

Be YourSELFIE:

The Meanings of Gay Bodies on Instagram

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This Major Research Proposal (MRP) observes common characteristics among selfies taken by gay men on Instagram, seeking to understand the meanings inherent in these images; to investigate their relation to precursory media, such as analogue photography; and their historical precedents in self-portraiture. Through the lens of the queer theory and in addition to images and interviews with famous gay Instagrammers, this article also analyses Instagram's popular gay hashtags, as well as compares selfies with the works of gay artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Tom of Finland and Pierre et Gilles.

Keywords: aesthetics, gays, Instagram, photography, queer theory, selfies.

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For all my gay friends who  
have to fight a battle every day.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION-----	1
INSTAGRAM AS A MEDIUM-----	9
Hashtags, Followers and Tagged Images-----	10
Profile Information, Filters and Likes-----	12
Comments, Instagram Direct and Stories-----	13
Sharing, Search Tab, and History-----	14
THE SIGNS AND PRACTICES OF GAY SELFIES-----	17
CONCLUSION-----	23
BIBLIOGRAPHY-----	27
APPENDIX A – Interview Questions-----	31
APPENDIX B – Images -----	32

## INTRODUCTION

Following the popularization of the Internet in the 1990s, a set of new “confessional” practices began to emerge in the digital world. Presenting one’s life online has become progressively common, enabling users to watch everything from afar, which is furthered by images that are ubiquitously posted in the virtual realm. Substantially, “being somebody” has garnered the same meaning as “being visible” on a screen. As remarked by the Argentinian sociologist Paula Sibilía (2009), the most salacious and innocuous details of life are exposed daily on interconnected devices. Photos and videos have gained a distinct prominence as the most intimate details of people are spilled onto websites and apps such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram.

My research is focused on observing a specific genre of images that emerged in the ocean of photos found online: the selfie. Newly available technology, such as cameras embedded in smartphones, makes self-portraiture more inclusive and widespread. Little training is required to take a selfie, unlike when it was necessary to learn drawing or painting to create recognizable self-portraits. Photographic self-portraits can be dated to 1839, when the pioneer Robert Cornelius turned a lens upon himself; however, the word “selfie” only appeared in the twenty-first century. As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, a selfie is “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website” (2013). With the advent of smartphones, various social groups began to utilize selfies as a form of expression. As discussed by the Latvian art and photography historian Alise Tifentale, selfies enable a particular agency and conscious styling of the self “through the clothes one wears, one’s expression, staging of the physical setting, and the style of the photo, [in which] people can convey a particular public image of themselves, presumably one that they think will garner social rewards” (2014: 6). Therefore, as any other form of

cultural expression, selfies can be used as a site of behavioral analysis for individuals and groups.

Special objects have even been created to increase the production of selfie images. One example is the selfie stick, a monopod used to help compose photographs by positioning a smartphone or camera beyond the normal range of the arm. The metal sticks are generally extendable, with a handle on one end and an adjustable clamp on the other to hold a phone in place. Some of the sticks even have remote or bluetooth controls, granting the user the ability to decide precisely when to take a picture. Another device that has been gaining popularity is the drone, an unmanned and remotely controlled flying vehicle that can perform numerous tasks, which in the context of selfies can be used to take aerial shots. These mobile cameras often have a timer, so that a countdown can be set before the device takes a photograph, including the number of clicks on a continuous shots. The timer enables the phone to be positioned anywhere, facilitating people to run to the front of the camera, stand and take a picture of themselves.

I am interested in a distinct demographic of selfie makers, the gay male community (homosexual and bisexual men). They have had a significant role in spreading selfie trends (such as images containing a high degree of homoeroticism, with naked or barely clothed men, and bodies touching each other). As with numerous other media, trends that have begun in the gay community are now common practices for heterosexual and other mainstream users. Michael Musto, gay writer of *Out Magazine*, has ironized about this appropriation: “[D]oesn’t it seem as if we LGBTs initiate a slew of social and cultural trends, which are later anxiously co-opted by the mainstream? Shouldn’t we get a finder’s fee?” (2016). Self-portraits are one of these media which have been an instrument used by gays to express themselves, as it can be



seen the work of the Robert Mapplethorpe, who photographed himself in explicit scenes, in pursuit of generating discussion about sexual taboos. With the popularization of digital cameras, the opportunity to self-photograph has expanded to more people, including homosexual and bisexual men. In order to better understand the selfie phenomenon in the gay community, I sought to discover whether there is something that could be called as a gay aesthetic: are there specific attributes of selfies by gay men? What can selfies meaningfully reveal about gay men and their lives? Why do gay men seem to take so many selfies? Is it possible to use and analyze gay selfies as a type of activism?

To help consider these issues, I interviewed five popular gay Instagrammers – those with over 70,000 followers. The interview had fourteen questions related to selfies, Instagram, and aesthetics (see Appendix A). The profiles of these Instagrammers were closely analyzed, looking for details that could be seen as part of a presumed gay aesthetic. I also observed selfies found on hashtags used essentially by gay men – #gay, #gayboy, #gayman, #gayselfie e #instagay – intending to discover how they interacted with tools of this social network, such as likes, followers, suggested friends, filters, and profile pictures.

Although overt male homosexuality was rarely represented in photography until the 1950s, gay men began to express themselves through self-portrait photography before the popularization of the Internet. As previously remarked, one of the most well-known recent examples is Mapplethorpe. Almost three decades after his death (in 1989), the photographer still generates controversy in the art world, due to how his works question morality, pornography, homosexuality, and the limits of what may be called art. He was an artist who considered photography an efficient and rapid way to make art, which is an attitude suitable to the contemporary mindset. Similar to the quickness

of how selfies operate, it is interesting to note how much of Mapplethorpe's work is strictly the result of his observations and attitudes. Patrícia Morrisroe's (1996) biography of Mapplethorpe clearly articulates how the artist's self was involved in his photography, making his life and work inseparable. Mapplethorpe understood the signs of the culture that he was appropriating and using to expand the credibility and voice of gay people.

As Morrisroe also points out, several similarities can be noticed between Mapplethorpe's work and the illustrations of Tom of Finland, a Finnish artist known for homoerotic drawings. Tom combined photo-realistic details with wild sexual fantasies representative of a homoerotic culture that "came out of the closet" in the 1980s, and still continues today. Tom of Finland's work concerns gay men's fantasies for a gay audience, and, like Mapplethorpe's photos, it questions the differences between erotic and the pornographic. During this period, clichéd figures appeared that related to the homoerotic world, personages that could be identified as masculinity symbols. They comprised figures such as motorcyclists, cowboys, soldiers, and policemen, often accompanied by symbols associated with the masculine universe. Such symbols included leather clothes, boots, hats, and one of the most remarkable elements, the mustache, which ended up characterizing a new male homosexuality archetype. Another point that seems fundamental to be observed in Tom of Finland's work is the constant emphasis upon an exaggerated phallic element, connoting a penis, introduced as a subject of strength and vitality. The volume of the penis, as well as the volume suggested by the other muscles, is accentuated by dramatic light and shadows, making them seem ready to break through the fabric of the clothing. The resulting gestures create dynamic and charged seduction scenes.

A parallel also exists between the works of Tom of Finland and the French

photographers Pierre et Gilles. In both sets of work, common symbols, figures and ideas are used. In Pierre et Gilles's photographs, characters are marked by elements of excessively masculine archetypes, such as mythological heroes, soccer players, and farmers. The works of the French duo are traced by a highly aesthetic and flamboyant atmosphere, which is reminiscent of the colorful commercials and kitschy cards found in popular culture. As discussed by art historian Kerstin Mey, the emphasis of Pierre et Gilles's work "lies in appearance, surface and artifice engaged in a play with and contest of naturalized conventions of style, quality, and cultivation the space of postmodern consumerism and identity politics" (2007: 108). The scenography, the colorful accessories, the selected models, and the heady lighting create a universe of glamour that has homosexuality as its emphasis.

Pierre et Gilles highlight the constitution of clichés and cast a glance at standards that have been codified in Western, gay male culture. It is not a coincidence that their models are wrapped in an atmosphere suffused by comic innuendo, which does not make them less oppressed by prejudice, but creates the impression of hiding repression. Through this sarcastic humor, Pierre et Gilles present the models in the midst of flowers, leaves, and surreal blue skies filled with fluffy clouds, all of which give the feeling of figures inhabiting fairy tales, or being enveloped in an artificial sacrality. The models are presented as fragile beings, immersed in a youthful universe, almost childish. Since mainstream Western society understands little about the range and nuance of gay sensibilities, these representations easily fall into homosexual stereotypes.

The images of Mapplethorpe as well as those from Tom of Finland and Pierre et Gilles are part of complex of issues pertaining to homosexual desire, in which it is no longer clear whether these erotic fantasies arise because they are inherently homosexual

or whether they have been developed as constructions of homosexual behavior. Even years later, these aesthetic characteristics of gay life continue to be present in gay artistic iconography. In the context of gay male selfies, the characteristics are repeated. On Instagram, for example, it is possible to observe gays portraying themselves in visual codes similar to those of the above-mentioned artists.

Since Instagram's release in 2010, it has quickly become the most popular current photo-sharing platform, reaching over 500 million users in 2016. It is an online social network for distributing photos and videos between users. Digital photography allows people to apply filters to images and to share them on a variety of other social networking services, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, and Instagram. The use of these new technologies differentiates selfies from earlier forms of self-portraiture. At the same time, selfies are a natural extension of the history of self-portrait photography and technical innovation (which resulted in the growth of the democratization of the medium). Yet, the immediacy of these pictures makes them seem as something distinct from a photograph. Photographs are considered an artistic medium that requires training, time and expense to process and print, while the instantaneous recording and sharing of a selfie lessens the "seriousness" of the practice as an aesthetic pursuit. Instagram is an important part of the current cultural landscape and covers an insistent demand for people to be displayed on a screen. These digital new media allow anyone to become an author, narrator and creator of their own character, in particular through selfies. One of the typical strategies to achieve a popular and highly followed persona is to make one's intimate life a spectacle. This performance is simultaneously real, private, and life-like: these images and reports eagerly offer themselves to an audience of hungry, voyeuristic eyes that is potentially infinite.

Selfies are not just self-portrait photographs, however, but also a form of

metadata. Users automatically input or divulge various types of information, such as comments, likes, and the network of people sharing images. Selfies can be understood in different ways, such as a form of self-expression, a type of a positive image construction, a tool for self-promotion, a means to express belonging in a certain community, and an outcome of the desire for attention. Media studies scholar Nancy Van House has argued that “making, showing, viewing and talking about images are not just how we represent ourselves, but contribute to the ways that we enact ourselves, individually and collectively, and reproduce social formations and norms” (2011:131). The same process is engaged by the gay community, which also appropriated selfies, the symbol of the social-networking era, and uses these images in ways that are as much narcissistic (gratification from vain or egotistic admiration of one's own attributes) as they are self-actualizing (the achievement of one's full potential through creativity, independence, spontaneity, and a grasp of the real world).

Research on the selfie phenomena is new and relatively scarce. Through the medium of selfies, I aim to contribute to the knowledge about how gay men, a community that is seen as particularly savvy about self-presentation, personal creativity and performance, express themselves in social media. This research seeks to analyze and draw conclusions about gay selfies and aesthetics. Aesthetics, as defined by philosopher Marc Jimenez (1997), is the study of beauty, nature and the foundations of art. This search seen aesthetics as the judgment and perception of what is considered beautiful, as well as the production of emotions by aesthetic phenomena. On the other hand, aesthetics also can deal with the sublime, or the deprivation of beauty. Observing how gay men represent their own bodies, I am determined to discover the main intentions, objectives and effects that self-images create. These observations can evidence the relevance of platforms in shaping selfies' conversational capacity, seeking

whether gay selfies reinforce dominant discourses, or contribute to an everyday activism that challenges normative sexual discourses. This article also presents some of the recent debates on the selfie and places it into a broader context of photographic self-portraiture, investigating how the Instagrammed selfie differs from and extends its precursors.

## INSTAGRAM AS A MEDIUM

Although Instagram is commonly seen primarily as a platform to share photos, the app also has a number of other features and forms of interaction that have gained popularity over the years. The gay community regularly uses Instagram and its app tools to further their interests and needs. By having similar experiences and goals, gays employ similar characteristics in their visual repertoire. A fundamental point to underscore about the gay community is that gays have always encountered exclusion, since they do not follow normative standards. Excluded groups generally exemplify what feminist philosopher Judith Butler describes as the abject, a state that designates “those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (1993: 3). The exclusions can change their intensity according to the social position and standpoint of the individual, such as social class, age, and physical aspects. However, by sharing a selfie gay male Instagrammers can revel in a community to which they belong, or wish to belong. The artist and critical thinker Paul Chan (2009) has affirmed that this desire to belong informs everybody’s aspirations by finding a comforting fellow-feeling from being around others who own the same properties. By “properties,” Chan means not only tangible things but, more importantly, “the immaterial things that give meaning to an inner life, like ideas, desires, or histories” (2009). Paradoxically, performing a selfie is at the same time a private and individual activity as well as a public activity. Thus “me” becomes “we”. With Instagram and selfies, the platform enables the creation of a virtual community.

## Hashtags, Followers and Tagged Images

For those who are discovering themselves as gay and feel isolated, searching for gay hashtags on Instagram allows them to connect with millions of people from around the world in a relatively safe space. Lives can be presented and followed through frequently updated photos. Hashtags are keywords or terms associated with an information, topic, or discussion that the user wants to explicitly index. They are composed by the subject keyword preceded by the symbol #. Hashtags become hyperlinks within the network, and are indexable by search engines; thus, other users can click on it to gain access to everyone who has participated in the discussion. The hashtags #gay #gayselfie #instagay, #gaypride, #gayman, and #gayboy are only a few of many used by homosexual and bisexual men who self-express and explore their identity through selfies.

However, in recent years Instagram has been preventing the viewing of some posts with gay hashtags. At first glance it may seem like a homophobic and exclusionary policy, but according to the news website *Extra*, Instagram justifies the strategy as a way to combat pornography featured on some hashtags. However, as previously mentioned, definitions of so-called pornography can be considered debatable, enabling questions about whether the platform is banishing content based on homophobia. “There are less explicit tags that are also being censored, such as #lesbiansofinstagram, #snapchatgay, and #iamgay” (*Extra*, 2016). By clicking on the link, users can only find the message “no posts”, which is surprising, since according to *Extra*, studies rendered by Instagram itself presents that LGBTQ people are more likely to use the app than heterosexuals.

Using hashtags to attract followers is also a trend on Instagram. The amount of followers represents the popularity of an Instagrammer. The more a profile is followed,



the more its photos will reach a greater number of people. The gay Instagramer Fabrizio De Grandis (2016) (@bibbideg) links his large number of followers to time and patience. He said that he has gained 475,000 followers since he began working on his profile four years ago. Followers keep increasing because of the way he shares his life, his experiences and his friends. However, several other techniques can be used. One that has become popular among homosexual and bisexual men is the use of hashtags such as #gayfollow, #gayfollowers, and #gayfollowme. Photos of gay men appear in these spaces and can be found to be accessed by other profilers who are looking for new people to watch. Sometimes a negotiation occurs, and a profiler will only agree to follow someone else if the other accepts a reciprocal following.

In addition to allowing the use of hashtags – at least those that Instagram has not banned – another way to find profiles to follow is through tagged images. These exist next to the social circle that one already has on Instagram. Instagrammers who take pictures with friends can tag them on the image with a link to all of their Instagram profiles. Profiles with many followers, by tagging others on their photos, end up revealing them and enabling their followers to know and follow their circles of friends. Aiming at the need for people to find similar profiles, Instagram added in its platform a tool of “suggestions to follow.” It shows, for example, people who are linked to the user according to the popularity of these people among the profiles that one follows. It is also possible to find new followers by observing the places they frequently visit. Images can be tagged with the location from where it was taken. The user can open a search tab, write an address and then add it to the image. For gays, this tool represents a way to discover LGBTQ-friendly places and sites where other homosexuals and bisexuals have visited.

## **Profile Information, Filters and Likes**

Instagram allows users to post information on their home profile, such as presentation texts, personal websites, and a profile photo. Many people also use these features as a way to attract others to their accounts. A profile photo, commonly a selfie, is a major concern of users as it is one of the first images on their profile that other users will notice. For example, when someone likes a photo of other Instagram users, they receive a notification with the profile photo of those who liked it. This image also appears beside Instagram Direct messages, comment notifications, and in several other spaces. Therefore, this picture is always taken as evidence of the person, and thus bears the potential to be judged.

Another iconic feature of Instagram is the use of filters, which are utilized on a large proportion of photos. Filters give images an overall defined and standardized appearance that became a part of the individual's online performance. Filters are not only techniques, they are a type of meta-commentary, a deliberate aesthetic and narrative choice. Although filters are not required for posting a photo on Instagram, anyone on the app can use them to slightly change an image's affect, visually communicating to their followers with a certain tone or feeling that is in itself a reflection of the individual posting the picture. All gay Instagrammers interviewed for this research – Anthony Varrecchia (@antony.varrecchia), Fabrizio De Grandis (@bibbideg), Kevin Carnell (@kevincarnell), Sam Ghafooripoor (@samgstar), and Seth Fornea (@sethfornea) – have revealed using some sort of filter or image correction app. Fornea (2016), who has more than 205,000 followers, rationalized this by saying that if he is going to publish a picture, it has to be amazing, since images survive long after people. The filter phenomenon as a whole celebrates media hybridity and people use it to engineer emotional reactions, drive narratives, and shape users' experiences.

After selfies receive filters and are marked with hashtags, the “likes festival” begins. To like a photo or video, users touch the image twice or put the finger on top of a heart-shaped icon below the publication. If a publication has been unintentionally liked, it is possible to touch the heart again to unlike it. The likes that an image receives accentuates the feeling that the publications are always being evaluated. The more likes a selfie has, the more likely the user who posted will have many fans on the app. All posts and attitudes can be evaluated by anyone, and the popularity of these contents are usually determined by the amount of likes the posts receive.

### **Comments, Instagram Direct and Stories**

Another possible form of interaction on Instagram is through the use of comments. The comments section allows anyone with an account in the app to remark upon photos and videos, unless the one who posted the image disabled the option. Originally, beside photo captions, comments were the only way to communicate through texts on Instagram. For many gays, who use Instagram as a space to flirt, comments are where a more concrete flirting can occur. The selfies of the Instagrammer Kevin Carnell (@tyronewells), for instance, who has more than 74,000 followers, usually gets dozens of messages. Figure 1 shows one of his selfies, in this case one where he appears shirtless. For this selfie, he has received more than 83 comments, many of them with sexual overtones.

With the growth of Instagram, the app has been updated with Instagram Direct, an area reserved for users who want to chat, even if they do not follow each other. Instagram Direct enables people to exchange topic messages with one or more people and share posts seen by them. However, when one submits a feed post using this space, it will only be visible to people who can already see it. For example, if a post is sent

from a private account as a message, only people who follow that account will see it. The proposal of Instagram Direct is instead of leaving Instagram to talk with friends on different apps, all can be done on the same platform. Thus, the conversations and flirtations could migrate to a more reserved area than provided by the comments section.

It was probably the popularization of Snapchat (another photo-sharing app) in 2016 that compelled Instagram to add Instagram Direct. The feature brings a tool called “Stories” which approximates tools found on Snapchat. The contacts’ stories (also photos and videos) are shown one after the other as if they were a slide presentation. It is possible to skip forward or backward. All this happens within 24 hours, the time the presentations last before disappearing. Besides the temporal limit, another constraint of the story mode is the absence of the “like” button. It is also not possible to comment; however, users can send direct messages to those responsible for the publication. According to the Brazilian news website *G1* (2016), for Instagram these activities allow users to show other types of images of their day, for example, the ones that they do not want to devote much time before posting. Thus, Instagram ended up facilitating the sharing of nude photographs on its platform. The fact that the photos disappear, in some cases almost instantaneously, has given more confidence to users to send such images. Gay users, already quite sexualized, gained a new resource to engage in flirting.

### **Sharing, Search Tab, and History**

When posting a picture or video on Instagram, users can enable and disable the sharing on other social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This action can also be seen as a form of divulgation since people from other social networks, who do not necessarily follow someone’s specific profile on Instagram, can still take notice of that profile

because of the sharing. A few steps before a photo is posted, Instagram asks if the user wants to publish it on another social network, giving a list of available options. Since it is a more reserved place, images submitted using Instagram Direct cannot be shared by Instagram with other social media sites.

Instagram also has a link for searches where the user can look for hashtags, places and people. The search for people can occur by name or username. The results are based on a number of factors, including the people whom the user is connected to, and which photos and videos they all usually like on Instagram. The user does not have to type anything on the search bar to find new information. This space already contains data about other profiles that may be of interest to the user, and which tries to show the most popular photos and videos related to the user's personal taste. There are countless images waiting to be liked and accounts waiting to be followed.

Instagram is also a place known for facilitating anyone to stalk its users. This social network has an activity section that allows Instagrammers to inspect the history of what people usually like and when they do the liking. It is also possible to view the history of what a profile has recently liked in chronological order, making it easier to search old, liked photos. Lastly, the app contains a history of how other Instagrammers have come into contact with each other (through likes, comments and new followers). All of these features aim to increase the interaction between the application's activities.

The Brazilian communication studies and art theorist Luís Nogueira (2009) claims that being noted is a need for all social groups. It is possible to observe that, for this purpose, gay users often invest their profiles with elements of a star aesthetic. Global in their potential reach but local in their points of physical connection with other users, these Instagrammers acts as though they are "microcelebrities," producing themselves visually as online celebrity mixed with homoeroticism. It can be directly

connected with digital media scholar Robert Payne's (2015) discussion of how selfies suggest a complicated organization of attention about the self, and thus turn the self into a commodifiable artifact. This fictionalization of the self for luring can dilute the perception of reality, turning everything into a spectacular image. As noted in this section, Instagram tools can often be linked in some way to the construction of self-images and their dissemination. Therefore, the app ends up serving as the perfect environment for posting and proliferating selfies.

## THE SIGNS AND PRACTICES OF GAY SELFIES

Selfies can certainly be an instrument of information that identifies what the person who shot and posted the image wishes their audience to know. Instagram, as an online image-sharing space, presents insights into the operation of social media in general. Tifentale shows that the proliferation of selfies phenomenon “makes us aware about a particular method of self-fashioning and communication that is historically time-specific in the sense that it could materialize only in the moment when several technologies have reached a certain level of development and accessibility” (2014: 3). People use these images to document a moment and provide an instant visual communication of where they are, who they think they are, what they are doing, and who they think is watching. The quickness of digital technology has made humans alter the way they communicate and a large proportion of conversations now happen online. Although taking a selfie may seem to be a solitary activity, it actually is a small part of a larger picture of how people project themselves and connect with their friends, family and others online.

Gays are not any different. Or at least they should not be. The fact that society treats gays and heterosexuals disparately causes other kinds of behaviors and needs in the gay community. What cannot be ignored is the relevance of heterosexual society in the establishment of these behaviors, which influences the practices of sexual minorities. According to Judith Butler, post-structuralist American philosopher and queer theorist, “the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (1990:17). The origin of this cultural binary where gender identity has become comprehensible rests upon the idea that non-normative kinds of identities (those in which gender does not

follow from sex, and those in which desire is not related to either sex or gender) could not exist. Therefore, naturally, those considered different would eventually act differently from those considered normal according to heteronormativity, since they are excluded and since they do not have the same opportunities as the others.

I am mindful that making affirmations based on the whole gay community ends up creating stereotypes that do not apply to every gay person, however, it is possible to make distinctions within the gay community and observe more apparent characteristics. Also, as a gay man myself, I cannot avoid pointing out that homosexual and bisexual men do seem, for example, to take a lot more selfies than their heterosexual counterparts. Everybody with a camera phone can take selfies. Nevertheless, it is important to note that today, even with the advances against prejudice, and even with gay men positioned as the most privileged of the LGBTQ community, gays still do not have the same freedom to meet partners in real life as heterosexuals, due to issues such as homophobia. For many gays, the only way we can interact with and meet other men is through online media. The view that gays form of other gays is usually highly dependent on online personas and images. First impressions are therefore important. In an effort to improve their online profiles, gays have perfected the art of taking selfies and distributing their “masterpieces” on social media platforms. The result of all this is the emergence of a selfie-taking culture. For many gay men, their social circles tend to be comprised primarily of gay men, therefore, when many of their friends flood their social media feed with countless selfies, it becomes a social norm for the gay community. It is a circle made by a gay majority who sees, likes and interacts with other gay men making selfies.

However, rather than being respectful of diversity – always considered one of the main goals of the community – non-heterosexuals often end up seeking approval. As



previously noted by Butler, gays are defined as being divergent from social norms. What seems to happen is that homosexuals seek to reduce these differences, as if the fact of being homosexual was a problem and they had to “fix the fault” of not being heterosexual. Through selfies, gays aim to project an image of perfection, to delight everyone. “Being gay” goes far beyond sexual desires or cultural identities. It is a social place with rigid rules, reproduced almost without thinking. It creates the feeling that the ideal gay man needs to be better than a heterosexual one in every way possible: more beautiful, stylish, sexy, cultured, intelligent. It is as if the “flaw” of being homosexual or bisexual had to be compensated by a number of fabulous magazine advertisement qualities: brushed straight hair, white teeth, soft skin, manicured beard, well-heeled body, athletic bearing.

This cultural pressure also extends to the world of gay selfies. Searching “gay selfie” on Google, it can be seen that there are a large number of websites, blogs and tumblrs related to the topic – Hot Gay Selfies, Hot Male Selfies, Gay Couple Nudes Selfies, Gay Twink Selfies – all sharing photos of men in sexy poses, often naked, or starring in gay sex scenes. On Instagram, however, rules forbid the posting of full frontal nudity or sexually explicit photos, but the images are still revealing and instill an intense erotic charge, most commonly by presenting strong, shirtless men. The gay Instagrammer Anthony Varrecchia (2016), who is followed by more than 130,000 profiles, presents the characteristics of a good, gay selfie: “showing skin, pushing the envelope, pulling the pants down just a bit more, presenting a little bit of bulge, being just very flirty... innocent.” The idea is to present as much body as possible, without being censored by the Instagram police.

In 2014, *Men’s Health* magazine published an article entitled “How to Take a Shirtless Selfie That’ll Get You 10,000 Followers” where Evan Ross Katz brought

together a number of tips for men taking pictures with the goal of attracting followers. According to him, shirtless selfie-takers are desperate for attention, unabashedly saying “Here I am! See me! Notice me! Like me!” In this way, shooting the chest, back or belly became the ubiquitous calling card of someone wanting to be admired. When the Instagrammer Carnell (2017) was fundraising for a charity bike ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles, he noticed that people would pay more attention if he was shirtless: “Sex sells and I had to use that sex appeal to get my point across. I need a broader audience base and a larger following to really be heard.” Also on the Instagram of Sam Ghafooripoor (@samgstar), for example, a large number of photos without shirts can be seen [Figure 2], the majority of them carry thousands of likes and dozens of comments by men flirting and complimenting his physique.

Other characteristic of gays selfies, already mentioned in the quotation by Verrecchia, is the “packages” or “bulges” – slang terms for the penis – notably discernible through the thin veil of clothing. On selfies, as can be seen in the Verrecchia’s picture below [Figure 3], the bulge appears similar to the phallic objects under tight-fitting pants of characters created by Tom of Finland. The packages can be shown in an erect state or not, sometimes in the foreground, held by the hand of the owner or being under special underwear that makes the volume seem bigger – all codes that constitute the game of seduction as configured in Tom of Finland’s illustrations.

Displaying the naked buttocks or its curves under clothes is another symbol of allurements found in selfies taken by gay men. When asked about a gay trait that can be observed on selfies, the Instagrammer Fornea [Figure 4] did not hesitate to answer: “Gays take a lot of ass pics and I don’t think hetero men do that.” (2016) This behavior can be related to a theory called “fragile masculinity” that involves a rigid and constricted set of internal rules to what it means to be male. According to the

psychologist Christopher Blazina, “the fragile masculine self encompasses the woundedness that many boys and then men carry as a result of their restrictive gender role experiences from the disidentification onward” (2001: 53). Due to anal sex being a common practice among gay men, the buttocks are a way to generate attention. According to the French gay activist Guy Hocquenghen, homosexuals make the libidinal use of the anus more often and, in a sense, “all homosexuality is linked to the anus” (1974: 65). Therefore, taking buttocks selfies usually does not occur with heterosexual men, since being penetrated has a predominant connection with gays.

Another common feature found on Instagram profiles of gay men is the presence of intimate selfies with their partners. These moments, even when the details are more romantic than erotic, can suffer the weight of prejudice because they show homosexuality and thus are susceptible to the transgression of innumerable interdicts. Some selfies from De Grandis provide examples of images that, although evoking subtle and romantic contact, may ended up being seen as having only sexual aspects. In Figure 5, De Grandis and his partner are in the midst of natural setting, lying in a hug, suggesting an intimate moment in which affection is the overriding message. Although they are shirtless and displaying parts of their underwear, their attitude is not lascivious. Even if the scene may hint at sexual intercourse, it would not be an act devoid of affection.

To some viewers, the simple fact that the scene featured two men could establish that their bonding refers to sex or is meant to seduce. In the comments of the selfie on the figure mentioned in the previous paragraph, an Instagram profile named *@hairyomani* posted: “all this cuteness and every [sic] thing but I couldn’t ignore that perfect curve of a butt #thustytoday”. Another profile, named *@marcel\_qm2*, also commented what he thought after seeing the selfie: “Very very very hot guys”. The

prejudice regarding homosexuality still appears reinforced, conceptualizing it more as an issue about a sexual baseness and depriving it of the possibility of affective normalcy. The same can be seen in Figure 6, from the same Instagrammer, where he is lying on bed with his partner, affectionately kissing. The scene is not marked by, for example, a kiss with tongues (which would create references to sex), but even so it is impossible not to see an erotic charge in the image. I would not deny the reading that the images of the couples mentioned above may contain both erotic and sexual intentions; however, what I intend to touch upon is the fact that homosexual affection is seen to bring with it a erotic charge. If the persons in the above photographs were substituted with a man and a woman, it no doubt would be possible to observe a greater range of affection than just sexual desire.

## CONCLUSION

The selfie can be used as an instrument to amplify voices, showing other, non-mainstream realities to society at large. When these photographs are taken by gay men showing their intimacy, they allow pointing out normative ideologies imbued in society, such as prejudicial definitions of right or wrong. Therefore, selfies also provoke debates about the ambiguity, multiplicity, and fluidity of sexual identities. However “being gay” and “gay practices” can be considered broad definitions, since gay behavior depends on different influences, such as the subgroups trends present in the gay community. This subject was demonstrated by the Instagrammer Seth Fornea (2016) who pointed out the broadness of the group: “The gay community is so vast.... I can see patterns in small subsets of the gay community but gays as an entire community no.” Sam Ghafooripoor (2017) also touched the topic when he spoke about gay subgroups. “Bears, twinkies, circuit queens ... and all subgroups have different aesthetic norms.” As it can be seen, this vastness of diversity present in the gay community makes it problematic to define an aesthetics which encompasses all gay men selfies.

Despite this diversity, a few features of Instagram gay selfies can be outlined, such as the search for perfecting their image, with elements of vanity and sensuality. As explained in the second section, gays are constantly judged and, as a way of being accepted, they start to compensate the act of not fitting the heteronormative standards by trying to improve their image for society. Thus, gay Instagram posts turned out to be images which the heteronormative Western society consider to be physically attractive. The Instagrammer Antony Varrecchia (2016), after being asked about an aesthetic called gay, affirmed that “gay men can be very narcissistic...” Gay selfies usually come accompanied by naked or half-naked bodies shown as online celebrities. These type of photos frequently get significantly more likes than other kind of images posted by

homosexual and bisexual men. Since gays are the ones who usually like or do not like pictures of other gays, it is possible to observe that these men, inside the own community, ended up having the same idea of masculine beauty standards already prominent in Western society. The gay aesthetic imagination thus has been forcibly narrowed and gay men collectively prefer this type of beauty without even noticing it, or stopping to reflect critically on the phenomenon.

The reason gays take selfies are also varied. The Instagrammer Kevin Carnell (2017) opined that “everyone has different motives for the images that they post. Some post to be seen, to get attention, or to promote something they may have going on.” Similar to Carnell, Ghafooripoor (2017) also expressed that advertising and making money is one of the reasons to photograph oneself: “The more business oriented ones are trying to capitalize on opportunities.” As long as people can find paying customers who think these images are good enough to pay for, selfies will, as any other media, continuously gain new strategies to be exploited.

Gays' selfies are self-presentational, but they also can be analyzed as socio-political activism since they reflect and propagate discourses of sexuality and gender to peers, the public, and oneself. Fabrizio De Grandis (2016), in his interview, stated that he has used one of his images with his boyfriend to promote the approval of the civil union for same-sex couples in Italy: “It was very popular and was used by several organizations, so after this experience I think it’s a way to put my face and promote my ideals between my friends, my family and my beloved followers.” Since sensuality is a recurring subject in gay selfies, and gays are particularly aware of the power these images to attract people, gays have also used eroticism to draw attention to their causes.

Analyzing selfies present in popular gay hashtags, as well as the ones taken by the famous gay Instagrammers, it is possible to note that sexuality and sexual desire is an

ongoing subject regarding gay self-expression. The discussion about acceptance of sexualities is still intense and these selfie images generate contemporary debates on the matter. The seductive approach seems relevant when it comes to issues of sexuality, and if used in a visually attractive way, can gain the viewer's attention and ultimately reach a broader audience. Non-heteronormative sexual intercourse is a topic generally viewed in a biased way by mainstream society, or as explained by Butler (1990), as "abject." However, through selfies, gay Instagrammers can suggest the naturalness of their orientation and practices. What is commonly positioned as deviant is treated as just one more legitimate possibility in the spectrum of sexuality. Even with gay identities being infinitely diverse, gay men use these sexual gay stereotypes as a form of empowerment. Gay selfies show that, at least in the virtual world, homosexuality is no longer hidden and disguised, but affirmed and exalted in innumerable ways. When the gay community highlights homosexuality, it consequently leads to discussions about the subject of acceptance. By emphasizing the eroticism of gay bodies, and freely expressing sexuality within the safe refuge of online groups, a space of tolerance is created in the midst of a larger homophobic culture that can be potentially transformative.

This "naturalizing" look at these aspects of sexuality, however, can be seen to result in establishing a discourse in which sexuality appears as something primarily related to pleasure and the identity process. In the case of gay men's selfies, sexuality does not seem to be a thread of discussion that needs to be established through the problems that surround it, but rather through the emphasis on its other determinant aspect: pleasure. The power of selfies originates more in the courage to affirm desires and to refuse to submit to arbitrary sexual prohibitions. Selfies are also an interaction device and, since Instagram is relatively a safe place, gays feel free be themselves while being connected to people from around the globe. Due to the sexualized atmosphere,

gay selfies also serve as an instrument of flirtation. The images, full of seductive symbols, attract the attention of other gay Instagrammers who, consequently, post their own provocative photos, receive likes, and so on. This reciprocal and networked communication eventually brings the seductiveness found on selfies to a more overt sexual representation, transforming the search for love and partners into a primary reason to take a selfie.

At the end of my research, after analyzing these issues, it is useful to ask again if there is an aesthetic that can be called gay. My answer is yes, but that there are many types of a gay aesthetic. Not all gay selfies share the same style or formal characteristics. As previously mentioned, each gay subgroup operates with distinct behaviors and different social rules. The aesthetic used by these men directly relate to their intentions for taking selfies. On the hand, the sense of the aesthetic is influenced by the standards that are established by Western society and imposed upon many groups, including gay men. Some gays end up following these standards in order to gain acceptance. Yet many gay men create and develop their own unique aesthetics in Instagram selfies and in their lives generally. Even when the purpose of selfies is to create a celebrity-like following or to find romantic partners, the fact of their posting can send a politically activist message about sexual diversity and tolerance.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview questions**

1. What is your name, age and location (country and city)?
2. What is your gender and sexual orientation?
3. Considering the entire gay community, what do you think they are trying to accomplish when taking a selfie?
4. For yourself, what are you trying to accomplish when taking a selfie?
5. How much followers do you have on Instagram? How did you gain so many followers?
6. What is the secret of a good selfie?
7. Where is your favorite place to take a selfie?
8. Do you see any patterns that are followed by gays when they take pictures?
9. Do you use any app or software to improve your Instagram selfies? Which one? Why?
10. Have you ever used or thought about using selfies as a form of activism? Do you think it is possible?
11. Do you think Instagram is a media that can be considered oppressive or socially exclusionary?
12. Do you think gays take pictures differently than hetero men?
13. Do you believe that there is an aesthetic that can be called gay? Why or why not?
14. If your answer above was yes, what are the characteristics of this gay aesthetic?

## APPENDIX B

### Images

**Figure 1:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BCEqbGTRRNz/>

**Figure 2:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BTpK4gjH11/>

**Figure 3:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPN-MuUlhtM/>

**Figure 4:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BOH0rkcbfWN/>

**Figure 5:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BLG-ww0g6WD/>

**Figure 6:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQJQNaWgN1d/>