Photography and social networks: a case study in situated affectivity

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Abstract: In our activity on social networks, we tend to crystallize happy moments of our life that we want to share with other people. In doing so, we seem to display the best version of ourselves, and in editing our digital self, we can create an ideal self. In the traditional debate on the risks of technology, many researchers have expressed the fear that this tendency could represent a way of falsifying the reality of our selves by offering a single piece of information about our lives: one in which we are happy, satisfied with our life choices and fulfilled. This risks generating negative effects in others as it produces comparisons in which people may be left feeling dissatisfied; sometimes, especially at a certain age, it could even be dangerous to linger in comparisons of this sort (for a general discussion on these topics see Fasoli 2019; Toma 2016). But: is it really a problem – something 'bad' – that we tend to publish our positive moments?

In this paper I would like to offer a different interpretation of this phenomenon, framing it within the terms of two recent philosophical debates and showing that there is another more innocent interpretation of this tendency, which has to do with the question: for whom do we post pictures? Who is the recipient of our posts on social networks?

I will discuss these questions by framing them within the context of the debate on situated affectivity (Griffiths and Scarantino 2009; Colombetti and Krueger 2015), and exploring the interpretation of posts on social networks as potential examples of affective artifacts (Piredda 2020). Moreover, posts on social networks may be interpreted within the discussion of the extended/distributed self as pieces of our extended selves (Belk 2013; Candiotto and Piredda 2019; Heersmink 2017). More specifically, I will suggest that posting pictures on social networks helps us constituting a materialized structure of our life narrative. Taking a first-person perspective, based on our experience, on this problem, and so considering the activity of posting pictures as a *personal act*, and not only a social-communicative act, changes the evaluation of this phenomenon and highlights the role of photography in structuring our life-narrative – a role it played even before the arrival of social networks.

Keywords: situated affectivity, photography, personal identity, social networks, affective artifact

I've been looking so long at these pictures of you
That I almost believe that they're real
I've been living so long with my pictures of you
That I almost believe that the pictures are all I can feel

The Cure, Pictures of you

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1. *Introduction*

This paper concerns the role of photography in our lives, tackling an issue at the intersection between philosophy of technology, philosophy of affectivity and aesthetics, and philosophy of personal identity. The issue is very simple. What is the role of the pictures we habitually post on social networks? Why do we post them? For whom do we post them in the first place? My aim is to propose an interpretation of such posts as a special kind of affective artifact: those material or immaterial objects that play a role in our affective life by altering our affective states with a certain regularity, and also have the property of being perceived as a sort of extension of the self by the emoter (Piredda 2020). In order to do so, this paper starts with an introduction on the role of photography in our life, wondering whether – and how – this has (radically) changed with the advent of smartphones and social networks. In the traditional discussion about philosophy of technology, and in public debate as well, it has often been pointed out that the massive use of social networks that characterizes our society comes with certain risks. The second section traces typical concerns and criticisms focused on the role of social networks in generating problematic social effects – deriving both from a tendency to compare ourselves with others (e.g. fear of missing out, and other negative effects on our well-being) and from the fact that social networks provide us with the possibility of creating a falsified, idealized version of ourselves to be "sold" to others. My aim is not to deny the existence of such negative effects, but rather to downsize the emphasis on the dangerous effects generated by the use of social networks, and to emphasize the role of individual differences in generating them (see de Vries *et al*. 2018). Many of the effects described in the literature are similar to what happens without social networks – fear of being excluded by a group in which we would like to be included, of not being invited to dinners or parties, of not being the favourite person of our favourite person – and exist even without and beyond the use of social networks. It may well be that the use of social networks enhances these fears, or induces people – especially young people – to develop such fears to a greater degree than before the advent of social networks, but some of us may, at some point in time, have experienced such fears independently of the use of social networks. The same holds true for the activity of tailoring and personalizing our public image on the social networks: we do the same thing in many other contexts and through many other means (dressing up, selecting an outfit and makeup, choosing the right words and lexicon depending on the public we are talking to, etc.). I will seek to "normalize" these fears and effects that social networks seem to enhance or facilitate, and focus on an alternative perspective regarding our use of social networks.

What I propose – and constitutes an original perspective – is in fact a change from the point of view of the spectator (third-person perspective), to that of the person who posts, selects and publishes pictures on her social profile (first-person perspective). In the third section I will briefly introduce the debate on situated affectivity and, in particular, the notion of affective artifact, in order to suggest that pictures on social networks can be considered as a special kind of affective artifact, namely material or immaterial objects that regularly alter the affective condition of an agent, which can be connected to our sense of self and whose loss would generate an affective reaction in the agent (Piredda 2020). I propose to consider posted pictures as special kind of affective artifact inasmuch as they are "expressive" affective artifacts, being created by the author (while other affective artifacts are not). I will argue that, while we clearly post in order to display ourselves to others (contacts, friends), we also post for ourselves, as a personal act, and use pictures on social networks as a kind of (socialized) photo album that we keep and look back at whenever we feel the need or wish to. From empirical work it has been shown that looking at one's social profile – compared to looking at the profiles of others – confers beneficial effects on the agent's self-esteem, even while hindering her cognitive performance (Toma 2013). I think that managing one's public image on social networks – as well as on websites – is an activity with positive aspects, and does not necessarily entail that one is building an idealized, even falsified, image of herself to be displayed to others. No more than attention to one's clothing style – a far more accepted, more diffused and even better generationally distributed activity than posting on social networks. What is the difference between managing one's social profile and doing the same thing with our personal website? What is the difference between doing it for social or for professional reasons? (Instagram vs. LinkedIn).

In the last section I will consider some objections to the points I have defended, and discuss some possible answers. It has been highlighted that much of the literature on 4E cognition (*embedded*, *embodied*, *extended*, *enactive*) suffers from a form of "pathological optimism" – also called the "dogma of harmony" (Aagaard 2021). While I think that it is important to acknowledge hostile or even nasty uses of scaffolds and artifacts (see for example Timms and Spurrett 2023; Spurrett 2024), and that the social network environment is clearly not a "neutral" one (if only for the fact that social networks are owned by certain people, and managed in ways that tend to maximize our time on them), I do not believe that we should renounce an appreciation of the positive aspect of living in an engineered and personalized, physical and digital, environment. Another criticism of much of the 4E literature addresses the tendency to refer to the idealized context of the dyad user-resource, which is quite

far from reality, where there are numerous users and resources, and where users have varying degrees of power over resources, and over other users – even to the extent of manipulating the behavior of less powerful users (see Slaby 2016). I do not mean to deny the complexity of the cultural, social and political aspects of technological niche-construction and use of resources. However, I will maintain that these dynamics, while absolutely real, do not invalidate the questions I have raised. Some conclusions will be drawn regarding the role that posted pictures, considered as expressive affective artifacts, play in constructing and maintaining the materialized structure of our life narratives. A role of photography that was there well before social networks.

2. *Photography, affectivity and social networks*

Photography – and previously, other forms of art – is a way of expressing and representing ourselves (first in self-portraits, now in selfies) and the way we perceive the world we live in. Framing, and the choice of subject, colors, etc., are elements that contribute to the production of pictures. There is always a choice, a selection in how we want to be presented, how we present ourselves and how we present the world around us. Taking pictures is a way of representing the world around us, seen through our (technological) eyes: our cameras. In one sense, photography may be described as a way of placing a filter between the photographer and reality – a certain way of grasping reality, and the possibility to communicate how the photographer perceives reality. Obviously, photography is strictly connected with affectivity – how we choose our subjects is a question of interest and preference – and with aesthetics – every photograph is in principle an aesthetic object. In this paper I deal mainly with a kind of photography that can be called "autobiographical"; this does not necessarily mean that it involves families and important moments of our lives but, even if not, it has to do with our personal lives, our experiences (such as travel), our personal way of looking at the world outside us. Examples of non-autobiographical photography would include reportage or architectural images.

Photography in general, and the kind of photography that I call autobiographical in particular, has radically changed over the last few decades with the advent of smartphones. Previously, ownership of a camera, while common, was far from universal. Photography was a job or a passion for only a limited number of people in the age of analog cameras. With the arrival of digital cameras the diffusion of this object among the population increased, but still not everyone owned a camera. Virtually everyone now has a smartphone capable of taking pictures, and clearly we habitually use the camera function, and send our photos to friends and relatives. Sending pictures as well as messages has

become a real form of communication. Of course, there is great individual variability in the use of photography – in the taking and the sending of pictures – but it can fairly be said that it is a very common behavior.

Taking pictures is an affective activity in the sense that we shoot what we are interested in (be it colors, shapes, faces, buildings, landscapes, etc.). And so, thanks to our smartphones, we take a lot of pictures. Sometimes we send them to friends and relatives, sometimes they remain in our archives and we look at them when we feel like it. Another thing people frequently do with pictures is to post them on some social network (typically Instagram) and share them with their contacts (or followers). I think that the pictures we post on social networks have something extra – a value that we attribute to them, as they are the result of a process of selection (we do not post all our pictures). Other pictures in our possession may perhaps be considered of great importance for affective reasons (and so be putatively good examples of affective artifacts); they could be even more intimate, and we might wish to protect them from the diffusion they would undergo by being published on a social network. But what I am claiming here is that there is an innocent version of posting pictures which becomes somewhat lost from view in the wholesale condemnation of the social network culture. Also, what I want to focus on is the fact that posting pictures is not only a social-communicative act – a fact that is widely acknowledged in the literature and in the public debate on digital technology – but it is also a personal act, an act that the agent does also for herself and not only for being seen by others. An act that is part of that agent's experience and of her way of elaborating it. This first-person perspective on our use of social network is somewhat unusual in the literature and can be associated with a phenomenological perspective in philosophy of technology.

Instagram is a social network originally based on photography and (if desired) short captions. Pictures can be edited before being published by way of instruments such as framing, contrast and light management and the application of filters (that sometimes give the picture an artificial flavor or aesthetic). There are now photos and short videos called "reels", as well as collections of photos or videos called "stories", but in this paper I will focus exclusively on posts as individual photos. On Instagram you can follow someone without being followed; some personal profiles are public, while others are protected, such that you must ask permission to follow. One's personal profile on Instagram is made up of photos, short videos and collections of photos or videos called stories. There are of course several possible uses of Instagram, but what I want to focus on here is the typical use by the average person – not a person who works on Instagram (e.g. so-called influencers) or who uses Instagram as an important channel for their job (many professionals exploit Instagram

for advertising and promoting their work: pediatricians, veterinarians, dietologists, armochromists, actors, comedians, writers, etc.).

Many scholars have highlighted the connection between social networks – as places where we can express ourselves in various ways and elicit reactions from others (approval/disapproval or even emotional reactions by means of the "emoticon" buttons on Facebook, for example) – and emotions. Tanesini (2022) proposes a classification of social networks as "emotional technology", insofar as they are artifacts with features designed for the purpose of modulating and regulating emotions (see Krueger 2014; Krueger and Osler 2019). Posts on social networks are characterized by a "positivity bias", in the sense that we tend to post more positive than negative posts (Tanesini 2022: 3; Kramer *et al.* 2014), and also to "adjust" pictures, for example through filters and other possible ameliorations (a process, by the way, which is also typical of contemporary digital photography, where pictures are shot in "raw format" and only subsequently go through a process of post-production which resembles the old development of material analog film).[1] This positivity bias of posts on social networking sites (SNS) often evokes the perspective of social comparison: the idea is that when we look at others' positive posts, we engage in a social comparison in which we feel that we have less value, and this could be detrimental for many of us. But this is not the only possible reaction, as there is also the possibility of emotional contagion (see infra §3), and it is interesting to wonder what happens in the case of negative or sad posts: do we engage even there in social comparison? Do we feel relieved to know that one of our peers is sad? If social networks in general are already connected with emotions and affectivity, then social networks based on pictures – like Instagram – are even more so, given the power of images to arouse emotional reactions more directly than words.

What we typically do on social networks – and on Instagram in particular – is to present ourselves, editing our social profiles through the selection of pictures, short videos or stories. In our activity on social networks, we tend to crystallize happy moments of our life that we want to share with other people (or contacts, or "friends" or "followers", in the social network jargon). From the analysis of a personal profile on Instagram one can grasp something about the person – some autobiographical information, something of her aesthetic taste and perhaps something about her sense of humor (mainly in the cap-

[1] There are of course several facets regarding the use of filters on Instagram and in general on social networks. In particular – I thank an anonymous reviewer for having highlighted this point – seeing this fact from a gendered perspective raises issues concerning how the activity of posting images of bodies affects one's body image and one's self-perception. For some more political reflections on these aspects, see for example Banet-Weiser (2018) and Rottenberg (2018).

tions). The activity of managing one's personal image falls into the category of "self-presentation", an activity well identified and explained by Goffman (1959):

> According to Goffman (1959), strategic (or selective) self-presentation – often referred to as impression management – is defined as a purposeful process for packaging and editing the self to distribute positive impressions to others. The advent of several innovative mobile applications like Instagram and Photoshop, which allow users to enhance the quality of photographs and manipulate their outer appearance in travel selfies, has substantially promoted the strategic self-presentational phenomenon (Hancock and Toma, 2009). (Seong Ok Lyu 2016)

While self-presentation (say, through our choice of clothes,[2] words, expressions, makeup, style, etc.) is a daily activity that can be performed in various ways, both on and offline, having a camera perpetually with us and having the possibility to share the (sometimes modified) photos with many people – operations that are easily accessible using a smartphone – has probably multiplied and enhanced our possibility to indulge in self-presentation activities. Presenting ourselves on the Internet is a very common phenomenon nowadays: we do it for pleasure and for work, creating and editing social profiles and professional profiles on LinkedIn, Academia, ResearchGate or even personalizing a website. Through the web, the number of people "within reach" and the "resonance" of our activity of self-presentation has changed dramatically, with obvious advantages on one side and evident risks and perils on the other. One may be happy to share a picture with a very distant friend at the time of publishing it on Instagram, while one can be reasonably worried by the idea that our pictures may be accessible to a large public of basically unknown people (nevertheless, we choose to publish them anyway, in some way undermining the risks intrinsic to their diffusion). Much of the public and academic debate on social networks has thus far focused mainly on the risks and dangers of the (massive) use we make of social networks in our societies.[3] Before giving

[2] In a very interesting paper on William James, "The sartorial self. William James and the philosophy of dress", Watson describes the emphasis given by James to clothes as part of our material, social and even spiritual self. "Clothing is a form of self-expression, a way to allude to attributes of one's most essential being, one's place in the world, or one's sense of beauty" (Watson 2004: 215).

[3] In this paper I maintain that there also are beneficial aspects of the use of social networks and I will try to highlight some of them. As a concrete example, think to the use of photography on social networks by Iranian women, who expose their image and their person in order to claim a version of self that is authentic to them and challenges the ruling regime. Again, I thank an anonymous reviewer for having suggested to add this concrete example of how the use of pictures on Instagram may help subjects in vindicating a version of themselves that is true and authentic to them and – in the case of Iranian women – cannot be manifested publicly if not on social networks.

space to a different interpretation of this phenomenon, I will attempt to give an overview of the negative aspects that have been highlighted in the public and academic literature (a treatment, it should be noted, that often targets new technologies) (see Orben 2020).

3. *Risks and negative effects of the use of social networks: the traditional perspective in philosophy of technology*

Many perils and risks have been described with regard to the use of social networks. There is a great deal of literature – both popular and academic – warning us of the potentially dangerous effects of using social networks. The use of social networks has been connected to increased phenomena of depression, suicide, and loneliness, especially in young adults and adolescents (see O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson 2011; Pantic *et al.* 2012; Pantic 2014; Tsitsika *et al.* 2014 for some representative sources). To give just a few examples, titles published in several important newspapers include: in the New York Times «Don't let Facebook make you miserable», (6-5-2017); «Hooked on our smartphones» (1-9-2017); in The Atlantic, "Have smartphones destroyed a generation?" by Jean M. Twenge; "The dangerous experiment on teen girls" by Jonathan Haidt. This is not the place to discuss the significance of these studies or of these affirmations. If something positive in terms of warnings or normative tools results from this literature, I think it is important to acknowledge the risks and perils. I will focus here on the discussion of a risk in the use of social network which is somewhat more theoretical, as is consistent with the scope of this paper. Namely, the risk that, by using SNS in order to present ourselves and manage our image on the Internet, we tend to create an ideal self which does not correspond to our real self. One connected and overtly debated risk is the effect that this idealized, tailored self can have upon others – generating (bad) social comparisons, envy, feelings of being worth less than others. The effects of browsing personal pages on the web, as well as the social profiles of other known or unknown people, has been studied by researchers in different ways. The results vary, but among them it has emerged that people who look at their personal pages on Facebook before performing a cognitive task experience increased self-esteem, but a decrease in cognitive performance (compared to people who look at a stranger's social profile, Toma 2013). Another study shows that, depending on the individual differences, people that tend to indulge in social comparison show less positive affect after being exposed to positive posts by strangers on Instagram, while people that do not tend towards social comparison, and are more prone to emotional contagion, experience the opposite effect – more positive affect after exposure to positive posts

by strangers on Instagram (de Vries *et al.* 2018).

Of course, the effect of the use of SNS on our well-being also depends on the kind of activity we engage in (see Frison and Eggermont 2016). However,

> A large body of research has alluded to the adverse psychological outcomes of the use of social networking sites (SNS) because of its tendency to perpetuate upward social comparisons and negative self-evaluations (de Vries *et al.*, 2018; Feinstein *et al.*, 2013; Midgley *et al.*, 2020; Vogel *et al.*, 2014). However, no study has investigated strategies that individuals can employ to harness positive self-esteem effects through their SNS use. (de Vries *et al.* 2018)

Other views elaborate on the relation between the affective charge of social media and the epistemic possibilities that it engenders, and produce more articulated positions (see for example Steinert *et al.* 2022). More nuanced positions are also present here regarding Instagram and self-esteem (Shuna Shiann Koo *et al.* 2024), personal identity on SNS (Wittkower 2014), selective self-presentation to online photographs, self-deception and social desirability bias (Hancock and Toma 2009).

On one hand there is the idea that we construct an idealized self on the Internet, where people do not meet us in person – and so it seems, in a way, that we can tailor and then "sell" an identity which is not properly ours.[4] But is this really the case? I think that the possibility of creating a different (and even fake) identity probably exists, but most of the time what people do is manage and tailor an online identity which is a version of themselves, a part of their identity. The fact that we can tailor this identity does not exclude the possibility that true aspects and character traits will emerge, even if we don't like them, and perhaps attempt to conceal them. Another focus has been on so-called digital overuse – the fact that we seem unable to regulate our time spent on the web, and on social networks in particular (Fasoli 2021).

I think that these risks and dangers are real, but I also think that social networks are subjected to a treatment typically reserved for any new technology – which, due to its unknown nature, is perceived as potentially dangerous and capable of generating even catastrophic consequences. While several studies have focused on the negative effects of social networks in terms of affective responses and motivations, I think that aspects other than envy and social comparison also characterize the use of social networks by agents: namely, the search for comic or ironic contents (e.g. consider the many "memes" currently populating Instagram); news and information; following people we esteem

[4] For a popular example of this idea, see the Black Mirror episode, *Nosedive* (S3 E1). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for having suggested this connection.

(artists, journalists, writers, etc.); curiosity: there are many pictures or videos demonstrating certain kinds of techniques: culinary, artistic, handcraft, bricolage, and so on. Of course, scrolling videos or pictures on Instagram could be considered a less than "noble" – or even an "empty-minded" – activity, typically enjoyed while commuting, or otherwise in our spare time. I don't believe, however, that it is qualitatively so different from watching TV or browsing the Internet without a specific objective. It is a technologically sustained kind of mind-wandering (cf. Bruineberg and Fabry 2022). What I propose in the following section is a change of perspective, from that of the spectator to that of the producer of certain photographic content, following the questions posed at the beginning of the paper: How do we choose these contents? Why do we post them in the first place? For whom do we post pictures on our profiles? Trying to provide answers to these questions that have to do with the first-person experience of the agent will allow me to elaborate further on the notion of "affective artifact", one of the key notions in the framework of situated affectivity (Piredda 2020).

4 *A change of perspective: pictures of you as an example of affective artifact*

4.1 A brief recap on situated affectivity

What I want to propose in this section is a novel interpretation of our activity of posting pictures, which focuses on the beneficial effect for the person doing it, shifting the perspective from the receiver, the external observer of the post, to the person who takes the picture and posts it in her social profile. I will do so by connecting this activity to the framework of situated affectivity, a galaxy of recent theory in the domain of affectivity that highlights the situated, scaffolded, and sometimes extended character of affective experiences, in continuity with elaborations on situated cognition (Griffiths and Scarantino 2009). The main ideas of situated affectivity are that emotions are not only mental states referred to the self but they also have an important communicative and socio-strategic role (Scarantino 2014) and that we use, personalize and manipulate the external environment for affective reasons, and that some particular objects or structures can be considered particularly important in these operations: affective scaffolds (Colombetti and Krueger 2015) and, among them, affective artifacts (Piredda 2020).

Describing the various ways in which we manipulate the material and the interpersonal world to alter our affective conditions, Colombetti and Krueger define affective scaffoldings as whatever resources – be they material culture or other people – have an effect on our affective states (Colombetti and Krueger 2015).

Affective scaffolds are analyzed along three dimensions individuated in Sterelny's theory of the scaffolded mind: trust, entrenchment and sharing (Sterelny 2010). Affective scaffoldings comprise both material and interpersonal scaffoldings – and among them are other people, substances (e.g., Prozac, caffeine), categories of objects (e.g., movie theatres) or even actions (e.g., moving furniture).

Affective artifacts (Piredda 2020) have been characterized as those objects – typically personal objects – that alter the affective condition of the agent with a certain regularity, that are typically perceived as part our extended or distributed self, and whose loss would provoke some sort of affective reaction on the part of the agent (it could be relief or despair, depending on the affective value of the lost object).

Some dimensions of the variability of affective artifacts individuated by Piredda (2020) are:

- Intended or unintended functions: the difference being between objects intentionally designed to perform a certain affective function (like wedding rings or teddy bears), and objects that only accidentally perform that function (any object that for some autobiographical reason happens to receive an affective value);
- Regular or accidental nature of the relation between the agent and the artifact: here the difference is between objects with which we have a regular and constant relation (e.g., personal objects that we tend to keep with us) and public objects with which we have accidental and brief encounters, like artworks, monuments or statues;
- Conventional or idiosyncratic nature of the affective artifact: here the difference is between objects that are conventionally affective artifacts (e.g., wedding albums) and objects that become affective artifacts in an idiosyncratic manner and are themselves unconventional objects in terms of covering this role (e.g., a post-it or any other object that happens to cover this role).

The notion of affective artifact – elaborated in analogy to that of cognitive artifact – has the merit of emphasizing the relation between affectivity and technology on the one hand, and, on the other, the «engineering» dimension of affective technology, especially for the cases of «intentional affective artifacts», such as photo albums, wedding rings, etc., that is objects specifically designed and created for an *affective* function.

This notion was presented for the first time in Piredda (2020) and has been used in the literature on situated affectivity in a series of theoretical developments such as those of Archer (2024), Facchin and Zanotti (2024), Viola (2021).

Not only objects, structures or other people have been considered "affective": even the relations we entertain with the external environment can be affectively charged, as in the case of affective affordances: "We perceive things

as affording regulative opportunities to amplify, suppress, extend, enrich, and explore our affective experiences" (Krueger and Colombetti 2018). Affective affordances are then relations with objects that are able to consistently solicit an emotional behavior over time. In the interpretation by Caravà and Scorolli (2020), integration is a means to predict whether an affordance-relation of the agent's practice is able to solicit an emotional behavior in a consistent and reliable manner.

Finally, proposing a pragmatist approach that overcomes the limits of both internalist and externalist conceptions of affectivity, Dreon and Candiotto (2021) conceptualize affective scaffoldings as habits, focusing on the interaction between agent and environment. Affective habits are thought of as pervasive tools for feelings that scaffold human conduct, as well as key features in the transformation of behaviors.[5]

Given all these proposals, several attempts to systematize this literature have been put forward (Colombetti 2020; Coninx and Stephan 2021). Among them, Coninx and Stephan (2021) propose the encompassing concept of "environmental scaffolds in affectivity" and individuate them along three important axes: temporal scale (consequently, different agents: individuals or collectives); reciprocity and direction of impact (user-resource vs. mind-shaping); scaffolding as a polyeidic concept, elaborated along numerous dimensions of gradual differentiation: trust, robustness, mineness, individualization, incorporation, awareness, intent and control.

In what follows I will offer another possible ramification of the classification of affective artifacts, proposing the new notion of "expressive affective artifact", applying it to photographic posts and suggesting other possible applications.

4.2 Expressive affective artifacts as a special kind of affective artifact and their role for our selves

Returning to our discussion of the role of photographic posts on social networks, I would like to propose here that these posts can be considered as examples of affective artifacts, and in particular – as a new proposal in the domain of situated affectivity – claim that they incarnate a specific kind of affective artifact: they are "expressive" affective artifacts.

My idea is that not only do posted pictures satisfy the criteria individuated for affective artifacts, but furthermore that they help us grasp another possible

[5] Connected with this pragmatist interpretation of affective scaffolding, a worry that may emerge regards the focus of my attention in this paper: I focus on objects, namely posted pictures, and not on the action of posting them. This could appear less than ideal for someone with a more pragmatic-oriented view – one less focused on material or abstract objects. I think that here the choice is theoretical, and that both views are legitimate, as they point out different facets of the same state of affair.

nuance of this concept: the fact that some affective artifacts are not only created by the same user in a technical sense, but are also the result of the expression of the user. They are, thus, *expressive affective artifacts*. Expressive affective artifacts satisfy the criteria of being "affective" in both senses of the term:

- In its arousal sense: they systematically generate a certain kind of affective reaction – a feature they share with all affective artifacts;
- In its expressive sense: being pictures taken by ourselves, they also are an expression of our affective state in that particular moment of our lives. In this sense, they are comparable with another interesting category: works of art.

Thus, the affective dimension of these particular expressive affective artifacts is, so to say, affective in both senses of affectivity: as an active as well as passive/reactive dimension of the human agent.

In this interpretation, a feature of social networks which is often ignored in the debate on dangers and risks emerges: the creative potential of social networks, or better, the fact that Instagram becomes a potential source of expression of the self. Even people who are not artists or photographers can present their work on the social network to the appreciation of the public.

I think that by considering posts as a case of expressive affective artifacts we can catch the potential of self-expression offered by SNS based on pictures. Pictures posted there cover several functions: of course they are a means of remembering, but they also "frame" certain experiences, expressing them in certain ways rather than others. Being expressions of the self, photographs are good candidates for being considered objects to which the self "extends", not necessarily in a strong ontological or metaphysical sense, but in an epistemological and phenomenological sense (Belk 1988; 2013; Candiotto and Piredda 2019; Heersmink 2017; Piredda 2020).

The connection between affective artifacts and our sense of self is evident. On the one hand, there is a clear sense in which our emotions, sentiments, affective dispositions, moods and temperaments are part of who we are. In a very important sense they define our character traits – a fundamental feature of our identity. On the other hand, we have seen that we tend to exploit the external environment to manipulate or manage our affective states: we project our emotions upon our personal objects, and thus "extend" our selves beyond our bodies – to possessions or objects that we feel somehow represent us (James 1890; Belk 1988; 2013). Following these leads, I have suggested that affective artifacts play an important role in two of the most meaningful processes of our lives: their general function has to do with the task of affective management and regulation, and with the construction and maintenance of our selves (Piredda 2020: §6).

In the neo-Lockean tradition, answers to the synchronic question about the self refer to cognitive abilities such as consciousness, while for the diachronic

question the role of memory and narratives in our lives is usually emphasized (Schecthman 1996, 2014). On this view, narratives are articulated structures produced by us, and used to provide an order and an explanation to what happens in our lives. In this sense we can consider ourselves "our own historians" (La Branche 1973, cit. in Belk 1988: 159). As already emphasized by Heersmink (2017), narratives have a material basis, and are also constituted by particular objects to which we assign the task of, for example, remembering certain events. My idea is that at least some affective artifacts – those with which we entertain a persistent interaction and also expressive affective artifacts – are part of the material basis of our life narratives. Our narrative self is subject to a partial reconstruction, based on individual and shared memories and material pinpoints, especially at some ages (e.g., infancy and old age). The presence of material pinpoints somehow prevents us from manipulation and falsifying reconstructed narratives.

Being affective artifacts, posted pictures may be considered parts of our extended self, material pinpoints of our (sometimes reconstructed) life narrative. A way that we use to hold us together and weave the structure of our life history. This feature of self-extension is not necessarily true of every example of an affective artifact. It will likely be associated with personal and expressive affective artifacts, even if we cannot exclude the possibility that this feeling of self-extension or resonance may also appear in more contingent emotional interactions. An example could be an emotional interaction with a work of art that we see only once. If the affective experience is sufficiently strong, we may associate this feeling of self-extension or enhancement with it (see Caldarola and Leñador (2024) for an interesting development of this kind of reflection). Setting aside this somewhat unusual scenario, the affective artifacts that most frequently satisfy this self-extension feature might be personal affective artifacts: those objects with which the agent entertains a constant and persistent affective relationship and I believe expressive affective artifacts are also good candidates. This aspect of self-extension or self-resonance – the feeling that our self is somehow extended or enhanced through these objects – has been explored in the already mentioned work on the extended self by Belk (1987; 1988; 2013). Although developed in the context of consumer behavior, Belk's considerations on our relationship to possessions seem appropriate to our discussion:

> A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves. (Belk 1988: 139)

Thus, it seems, from a synchronic point of view, that the web of affective artifacts we accumulate could be described as an affective exoskeleton of our af-

fective world that contributes to a "topography of the self" (Heersmink 2018). From the diachronic point of view, the accumulation of affective artifacts in our lives helps us maintain a sense of self that would be lessened in the case of the loss of or damage to such artifacts.

> Our accumulation of possessions provides a sense of past and tells us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going. (Belk 1988: 160)

Some people are more prone to the proliferation and accumulation of affective artifacts, while others tend to be more parsimonious in this process. Concerning this difference, Belk (1988) speculates:

> Material possessions forming parts of our extended selves seem to form an anchor for our identities that reduces our fear that these identities will somehow be washed away. We may speculate that the stronger the individual's unextended or core self, the less the need to acquire, save, and care for a number of possessions forming a part of the extended self. (159)

Let me highlight that the reference to materiality and to the external world in the process of building and maintaining the self is not so exotic as it may seem, after all. The process through which the self structures itself is in fact an inherently social process and we know that the eyes of others have been fundamental – since we were children – in the structuring of our selves. There are aspects of the self that intrinsically depend on the eyes of others, such as our reputation. So, it is not so strange that we sometimes use a social instrument like social networks in order to articulate and structure our life narrative.

Expressive affective artifacts have the central features of affective artifacts, but display this added condition of being produced by the agent herself, as in the case of artworks. There is then in the notion of "expressive affective artifact" a convergence between technology, personal identity and aesthetics which renders the discussion of this kind of artifact extremely interesting also with regard to the attempt to delineate the difference between technical and artistic objects (see Terrone 2024). Another example is Saarinen's work on paintings considered as solid affective scaffolds (Saarinen 2019; 2021).

Having framed the activity of posting pictures in the debate on situated affectivity (Griffiths and Scarantino 2009; Colombetti and Krueger 2015), and explored the interpretation of posts on social networks both as potential examples of affective artifacts (Piredda 2020) and as pieces of our extended selves (Belk 2013; Candiotto and Piredda 2019; Heersmink 2017), we are now ready for some conclusions. While it is clear that we post partly in order to show ourselves to others (contacts, friends), seeking their appreciation and praise, it is also true that we post partly for ourselves. And this becomes clearer once we interpret

posts as possible examples of affective artifacts and pieces of our extended selves.

It is commonly argued that posting pictures is an inherently social and communicative act, as social networks are systems that connect people. And this, in my account, is possibly being neglected. I agree with the view that it is an inherently social and communicative act, but I think that, while this fact has been extensively acknowledged in the literature, the fact that it is also a *personal* act has been neglected. And this is what I have intended to focus on: our personal reasons, our personal view of the story. I think it is also a personal act – just as art is personal as well as social and communicative – and not merely an act of vanity or search for appreciation, even if both dimensions are present.

Thus, admitting that we ourselves represent an important recipient of our posts, the activity of posting happy memories of our lives – professional and personal achievements, for example – has a role in constructing our life narrative and also supporting our personal well-being (see for example Toma 2016). Posting on social networks would then be a way to celebrate happy or important moments of our lives, sharing them with others and constructing a (socialized) photo album that we may often return to and look through for affective reasons. It is a way to extend our memories and construct pinpoints in our life narrative. A first-person perspective on this problem changes the evaluation of this fact, and highlights the role of photography in structuring our life-narrative – a role it enjoyed well before the arrival of social networks.

5. *Critical and concluding remarks on the role of photography in our life narrative*

The last part of the paper will be dedicated to the discussion of several points of criticisms and limitations of my proposal, followed by some conclusive remarks.[6] First of all, one could speculate that the relevant activity I should discuss is not *posting* pictures, but rather just *taking* pictures. In other words, it is not the act of posting them that make them affective artifacts but just the act of taking them (after all, even old-style physical pictures might have played the role of expressive affective artifacts and they were certainly not posted, even if printed). I don't see this point as very problematic. I have already clarified that, in some cases, some pictures that we don't post can be even more

[6] For these critical points, let me thank the audience of three different presentations devoted to this paper: the conference of SIFA 2024 (Alessandria), the conference of AISC 2024 (Genoa) and a kind invitation to Lisbon by the IFILNOVA ArgLab Group (Gloria Andrada, Robert Clowes, Maria Grazia Rossi, Giulia Terzian).

significant from an affective and expressive point of view than the ones that we post on SNS. It could be the case of pictures with content that we want to protect for privacy reasons: they may concern our children, our parents, ourselves or our more intimate life. So, it is possible that in some cases the proper action to focus on is the action of taking pictures – and, probably, looking at them and managing them privately as important elements in our affective life. But normally what happens is that the pictures that we post are selected from among many pictures that we have taken, and it is for this reason – and not simply because they have been taken – that they become one of our expressive affective artifacts.

Another group of possible criticisms has to do with the character that I have given to my proposal: I admit this could be a more innocent proposal about the activity and the interpretation of posting pictures. This is not in line with a development in 4E cognition that highlights the fact that until recently the typical examples given by the 4E literature were all examples of a perfect and idealized "user-resource" dyad which perfectly fits the needs of the user, without any analysis of the potentially dangerous and risky effects in the other direction, from the resource, designed and owned by designers to work in a certain way and even to influence the future choice and attitudes of the individual user. This criticism can be summarized in the idea that 4E cognition has suffered from the so-called "dogma of harmony" (Aagaard 2021), and that the time is now ripe to focus on the negative, hostile and bad scaffoldings (Timms and Spurrett 2023; Spurrett 2024) and the mechanism of mind-invasion rather than mind-extension (Slaby 2016). While these theoretical developments of 4E cognition are certainly more than welcome, I think that much "traditional" philosophy of technology suffers from the opposite problem of the dogma of harmony: precisely from a certain kind of "dogma of catastrophe". Every new technology has been welcomed with enthusiasm on the one hand, and real worry and fear on the other – and as we well know, panic and fear are much more easily diffused in the population than enthusiasm and, perhaps, balanced critical thinking and analysis (Orben 2020). So, I don't see a serious problem in developing a view in which one critically wonders whether there may be – beyond the many negative aspects of our use of social networks (already deeply analyzed in the literature) – something innocent and functional in our use of these systems, and why, despite our recognition of their potential dangers, we still use them so much (see also Fasoli 2021 for a critical appraisal of this point).

The same is true of another major possible criticism that could be addressed to my account. Social networks are owned by large corporations interested not in our self-expression, but in our data, in order to sell them to other companies and make more money for members of the elite. While I recognize this to be

true, I think that it is only part of the story, and that it would be limiting to reduce all discourse on social networks to this point: why do we use them so much, despite knowing all of this? Something similar could be said of the editorial system that characterizes the academic publications and production that we all use in order to publish, and to advance in our academic careers.

Connected to this point is another criticism that could be addressed to my analysis. I have argued that posting pictures is an activity that responds to one of our needs: that of scaffolding our narrative identity by pinpointing it through the use of posted pictures. Maybe I'm placing too much trust in our good intentions. Good intentions are not sufficient for an activity to be considered beneficial for the individual. There are scenarios in which the fact that we have posted pictures on SNS may have negative effects on our well-being: for example, when we break up with someone and have many pictures with them on our social profiles. The sight of such imaged could generate negative feelings in us, and it may take time before we work up the determination to delete them. I admit that there are various situations in which we may experience negative emotions when looking at certain pictures. But the fact is that this is perfectly normal even beyond social networks, and is a situation that occurs every time we experience a trauma, such as a breakup, or grief. We don't argue that it is dangerous to keep certain phone numbers in our address book because one day those people will cease to be part of our life and it will then become painful for us to look at the address book. Or – for the same reasons – nobody argues that we should not hold on to pictures. Moreover, a broad discussion on the potentially therapeutic uses of technology is currently underway, with numerous papers addressing the existence and role of chatbots, for example, in handling cases of grief (cf. Candiotto and Stapleton 2024; Fabry and Alfano 2024; Grodniewicz and Hohol 2024).

In this paper I have tried to defend an innocent interpretation of our activity of posting pictures on social networks as a way of expressing ourselves and creating a materialized structure of our life narrative. This has been done by presenting the activity of posting pictures within the framework of situated affectivity, and highlighting the possible role of posted pictures as a special kind of affective artifact: namely, the expressive affective artifact. This new notion has the merit of connecting the debate on situated affectivity with the domain of aesthetics, which is of course an affective dimension in which photography, representing reality through the use of photographic instruments, plays a central role – a role that predates the explosion of social networks, as photography (and before it, other forms of art) has always had a role in producing documents that aid our mnemonic engagement from both a cognitive and affective point of view.

So, admitting that we ourselves are an important recipient of our posts, the activity of posting happy memories of our lives – professional and personal fulfillments – has a role in constructing our life narrative as well as supporting our well-being (see for example Toma 2016). Posting on social networks is thus a way of celebrating happy or important moments of our lives, of sharing them and constructing (socialized) photo albums that we cherish and often look at for affective reasons. It is a way of extending our memories and constructing pinpoints in our life narrative. Thus, taking a first-person perspective on the problem changes the evaluation of these facts, and highlights the role of photography in structuring our life-narrative – a role it enjoyed well before the arrival of social networks.

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