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Virtual Playgrounds:

Exploring Identity and Shame Through Artistic Research

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ABSTRACT

This artistic research investigates the relationship between shame, concealment, identity, and space through a series of artistic experiments. Through these experiments, it explores how shame operates as a social and political force, how it contributes to the regulation of identities and behaviours, and how confession and anonymity function as contemporary strategies for negotiating visibility and concealment.

The methodology follows an artistic practice approach that moves continuously between literature comparison, data collection and analysis, and artistic experimentation. Rather than functioning as separate stages, these processes inform and reshape one another throughout the research. Conversations from queer dating applications, personal stories, and anonymous online confessions were collected and transformed into artistic material through sound, text, artificial intelligence, and participatory installations.

The project culminates in three artworks: *Shame On You*, a sound installation that relocates private conversations from queer dating applications into public space; *A Walk of Shame*, an audio walk based on stories connected to experiences of shame; and *Too Ashamed to Admit*, an installation that distributes AI-generated confessions derived from a large dataset of anonymous online disclosures. Rather than proposing definitive conclusions, this work treats artistic practice as a mode of inquiry through which the social conditions that produce shame can be examined, questioned, and made temporarily visible.

Keywords: shame, queer identities, concealment, disclosure, play theory, public space

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1. PROLOGUE

1.1 Background & Context

This research started when I came across an exhibition by Francis Alÿs. I had the chance to experience his work *Children's Game #19: Haram Football* (2017) in person, and it led me to question the structures at play within the work itself. The piece, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, depicts a group of children playing football without a ball in a context where football had been banned by the Islamic regime. What struck me most about the work was that the children found a way to continue playing by removing the ball and pretending it was there. Around the same time, we were given a brief on the notion of shelter during my master's studies, and this work made me realise that shelters can emerge in ways other than the traditional forms that usually come to mind when we hear the word.

This realisation led me to *Homo Ludens* (1938), in which Huizinga discusses the play's ability to create temporary magic circles where the outside world can be suspended. Every time we play, we enter these magic circles where the outside world temporarily ceases to exist and where we can become who we want to be. After encountering Sutton-Smith's (1997) rhetoric of identity, in which he argues that play can be used as a tool to reinforce and celebrate particular identities, I began to realise that we play far more than I had previously thought as adults. Drawing from my own life and experiences, I started exploring location-based queer dating applications since these applications also provided spaces where we could be who we wanted to be and play as much as we wished without the repercussions of the outside world.

Working on these virtual playgrounds made me question the very reason for their existence. Foucault (1986) describes such spaces as heterotopias of deviation and argues that they are constructed because societies require places where those who deviate from dominant norms can be located. Throughout this process, shame repeatedly emerged as a concept that functioned both as a cause and a consequence of these spaces. Deviations, including queer identities and topics such as sex, became confined to these environments because shame accompanied their open existence in everyday life. Both metaphorically and literally, as long as these acts remained behind closed doors and society did not directly encounter them, they could continue to exist, but silently.

Hence, shame became the centre of this research. I became increasingly interested in why it emerges and how it operates. According to Sara Ahmed (2004), shame is both an internal emotion and a relational one. It exists only in situations where there is a witness. In this sense, an external authority becomes necessary for shame to emerge. As Bartky (2015) explains, this witness does not necessarily need to be physically present but may also exist virtually or mentally. Consequently, shame functions as a regulatory tool through which certain norms and expectations can be imposed upon the subject.

Ute Frevert (2020) demonstrates how shame has historically been used as a regulatory mechanism through practices of public humiliation. Public pillories and confessional structures were among the practices I encountered that were used to impose particular norms upon society. One of the reasons these practices were, and continue to be, so effective is the contagious nature of shame, as described by Weiss (2018). Shame travels through people, actions, and social interactions, constantly reconstructing itself in different forms. Consequently, these witnesses did not, and do not, need to be legal or religious authorities alone. The general public can also become the defender and enforcer of social values through shame.

As expected, certain groups and issues proved to be more affected by these structures than others. Thus, during the later stages of the research, my focus shifted towards the act of confessing. As Foucault (2021) suggests, we have become a confessional society in which our daily relationships, scientific settings, literature, and many other fields are shaped by the act of disclosing personal information. In my opinion, understanding what needed to be confessed, and who needed to confess, could reveal more about the underlying structures of shame and the ways in which different groups are affected by them.

This is where anonymous confessional platforms came into the picture. These platforms, where people confess despite the absence of an external authority to pardon them and where they can remain entirely anonymous, transformed confession into a form of play as well. They temporarily create playgrounds where people can communicate without the immediate repercussions of the outside world. At the same time, they provide a space through which the mechanisms behind the need for their existence can be observed in one of their most open and honest forms.

1.2 Research Questions, Aim, and Limitations

Whether through play, queer dating applications, or anonymous confessional platforms, the same issue kept appearing in different forms. Certain behaviours, identities, and desires seemed to require spaces where they could exist away from the gaze of everyday life.

This repeatedly led the investigation back to questions surrounding shame, social norms, and public visibility. As a result of these sub questions:

- Why do certain behaviours, identities, desires, and forms of expression require spaces where they can exist away from the gaze of everyday life?
- How does shame contribute to the emergence and maintenance of such spaces?
- In what ways does shame contribute to the concealment or disclosure of particular behaviours, identities, desires, and forms of expression?

The central question of this research became:

- Which behaviours, identities, desires, and forms of expression become associated with shame, why do they require spaces of concealment, and what can artistic experimentation reveal about the social conditions that produce this relationship?

The aim of this research is not to define shame through a single disciplinary framework, nor to establish a universal explanation for why people conceal certain aspects of themselves. Rather, it seeks to investigate the relationship between shame, concealment, identity, and space through a series of artistic experiments. By combining theoretical inquiry, data collection, and artistic production, it aims to examine how shame appears across different contexts and how it contributes to the formation of certain environments.

I believe here, several limitations should also be acknowledged. This text functions as the written component of an artistic research project rather than as a traditional academic dissertation. Consequently, it does not attempt to produce a comprehensive theory of shame, nor does it seek to represent the experiences of all individuals who encounter it. Similarly, the collected conversations, stories, and confessions should not be understood as sociological

evidence intended to generate generalisable conclusions. Rather, they function primarily as materials for artistic inquiry and experimentation.

Lastly, the artworks produced throughout the experimentation phases rely largely on text and sound. Due to this, the text does not include visual references. In my opinion, visual material would not adequately represent the experiences these works attempt to create. The projects presented throughout this research rely primarily on sound, language, and reading, all of which unfold through temporal and individual encounters rather than visual observation. Some of the works exist through listening, while others depend on the act of reading itself, which remains a personal relationship between the reader and the text. Therefore, I have intentionally refrained from the use of visual material and chosen instead to centre this written component around textual and reading-based experiences.

I sincerely do not believe that any form of visual documentation or visual reference I could have provided here would be fair to what these works are attempting to create. Much like Tino Sehgal's *Constructed Situations* or *Live Sculptures*, these works and the experiences they evoke are meant to travel from one person's mind to another. At their core, they construct liminal spaces through which one is invited to confront, observe, and reflect upon oneself. Because of this, I believe that providing visual clues would contribute little to the understanding of the works and would instead risk becoming a distraction from the experiences themselves.

This does not mean that the research process itself remains undocumented. Since the works rely heavily on text, sound, and collected materials, I have chosen to accompany the written component with a project books titled *Poems of Shame* with three separete chapters corresponding to *Shame On You*, *A Walk of Shame*, and *Too Ashamed To Admit*. These appendices function as written documentation of the materials and processes used throughout the development of the works. However, they should not be understood as documentation of the experiences produced by the artworks themselves.

1.3 Methodology and the Structure of the Thesis

This research follows a methodology structured around a continuous movement between literature comparison, data collection and analysis, and artistic experimentation. Rather than

functioning as separate stages that follow one another in a linear order, these components constantly overlap and feed into each other. The process resembles a spiral where each experimentation phase generates new questions that require returning to theory, collecting new forms of material, and producing new artistic responses.

The starting point of the process was not shame itself, but an interest in queer location-based dating applications and the conditions that allow certain behaviours to emerge within them. Through the initial literature review, I found myself repeatedly returning to concepts such as play, liminality, shelter, and heterotopias. These concepts became the theoretical foundation for the first experimentation phase. However, throughout the development of the work, it became increasingly difficult to discuss these virtual spaces without also discussing the social conditions that make them necessary. The more I analysed these platforms as temporary shelters, the more I encountered the notion of shame. This led the research towards a new cycle of literature comparison and theoretical investigation. In this sense, theory did not function as a stable framework that was established at the beginning of the research and later applied to artistic production. Instead, theoretical inquiry emerged alongside the artistic works themselves. Questions that appeared during the experimentation phases often became the starting points of subsequent literature reviews. Rather than illustrating existing theories, the artistic works became tools for identifying gaps, tensions, and unanswered questions within the research. Each experiment therefore generated the conditions for the next one.

Alongside the literature comparison, the research relied on different forms of data collection and analysis. Depending on the needs of each experimentation phase, this included collecting conversations from dating applications, gathering personal stories through encounters and discussions, and assembling large datasets of anonymous online confessions. These materials were collected not to establish statistical findings or produce objective measurements, but to understand how shame, concealment, disclosure, and anonymity emerge within everyday life. The collected materials functioned as traces of behaviours, emotions, memories, and social structures that could later be transformed through artistic practice.

The transformation of these materials into artistic works constitutes the third component of the methodology. Artistic experimentation functions here as a form of inquiry rather than a method of representation. The works were not designed to communicate predetermined conclusions but to create situations through which the questions raised by the project could be explored

from a different perspective. The production process itself became a way of thinking through the themes discussed in the theoretical framework. As a result, the works often produced observations that could not have emerged solely through literature review or data analysis.

This movement between theory, collection, and experimentation forms the methodological structure of the thesis. The first cycle, Chapter 2, focuses on play, queerness, and shame and results in the production of *Shame on You*. Through this work, I became increasingly interested in shame itself rather than only the spaces it produces. This shift led to the second cycle of literature comparison and experimentation, Chapter 3, focusing on the historical, social, and political dimensions of shame and resulting in *A Walk of Shame*. Throughout the process of collecting stories and engaging with personal experiences of shame, another question emerged regarding the act of disclosure itself. The methods I used to gather stories and conversations repeatedly placed me in situations where people shared personal information that they might not otherwise reveal. This observation led the research towards confession and anonymity, Chapter 4, which became the focus of the final cycle and the basis for *Too Ashamed To Admit*.

Because of this structure, the chapters should not be understood as separate investigations but as interconnected stages of the same process. Each chapter begins with a theoretical exploration of a specific theme, moves towards data collection and artistic experimentation, and concludes with a reflection on the outcomes of that process. The reflections then become the starting point of the following chapter. Consequently, the text develops through a continuous movement in which theory informs practice, practice challenges theory, and both contribute to the emergence of new questions. Rather than aiming to arrive at definitive answers, this methodology allows the research to follow the questions that emerge throughout the artistic process and to treat those questions as productive sites of inquiry in themselves.

2. PLAY, QUEERNESS, AND SHAME

2.1 Play

Play is a concept that has been extensively explored and analysed throughout history from various perspectives, including psychology, philosophy, art, design, and many more. Plays are abstract concepts that share common qualities and characteristics but are very independent of one another. Hence, they are not easy to define or categorise; yet throughout history, there have been many attempts to categorise what constitutes play.

One of the most influential figures in the study of play is Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian and cultural theorist. In his book titled *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1938) identifies three key characteristics of play: *its free nature*, *its separation from ordinary life*, and *its rule-boundedness*. He states that these three characteristics construct a playground which he refers to as the magic circle and it is an in-between space where the act of playing happens.

The first characteristic, the free nature of play refers to it being a voluntary activity. According to Huizinga, it is an activity that cannot be enforced; it is played for play's sake and is inherently tied to the freedom of the player. There is no necessity to play; it only exists when the players want it to exist. It does not impose itself on the people who are playing or want to play.

Because of this free nature, play exists outside of ordinary daily life. It creates temporospatial playgrounds that can provide an escape from the outside world. It has a beginning and an end, which allows this liminal space to exist. One can enter this playground whenever they want, just as they can leave whenever they want to.

The third characteristic he proposes is the play's ability to create an order through rules. However, according to him, these rules are not imposed upon but self-imposed. They are flexible and create the structure of the play while providing a separate reality from the ordinary world. The rules of the ordinary world do not apply to the play; only the players are bound by these "constructed" rules, and since it is a voluntary act, it can serve as an escape.

Another play theorist, Sutton-Smith (1997), in his book called *The Ambiguity of Play,* talks about these ambiguous characteristics of play and classifies it under seven rhetorics: the

rhetoric of progress, the rhetoric of fate, the rhetoric of power, the rhetoric of identity, the rhetoric of the imaginary, the rhetoric of self, and the rhetoric of frivolity. In the rhetoric of identity, he states that playgrounds are liminal spaces that can create and reinforce identities, both individually and collectively. According to Sutton-Smith, the play can create a space where people can explore their identities, feel a sense of belonging, and create resistance and protest against the oppressors of these communities. It is a tool to regain control, to temporarily or actively suspend the norms and power dynamics while allowing the members of these communities a safe space. He provides examples of carnivals and festivals of minority groups or nations as demonstrations of these collective identities. In today's society, I suggest that we can also add queer neighbourhoods, nightclubs, and location-based queer dating apps to these spaces. These spaces can be said to act as a place where these communities can find refuge or become visible through the act of play while reinforcing their identities. However, this brings the question of why certain groups need to reinforce their identities and why they need play to do so.

Foucault (1986) points out, in *Of Other Spaces*, that there is a big distinction between public and private spaces, social and family spaces, cultural and useful spaces. These spaces are still governed by institutions, religions, and a certain set of hidden rules that also construct these oppositions. He states that a type of space called heterotopias is born out of the need for crisis or deviance. These places (such as psychiatric hospitals, religious spaces, and prisons) exist for people who do not belong and do not (permanently or temporarily) conform to the dichotomous society around them. I believe, queer spaces such as dating apps or queer neighbourhoods and clubs can also be considered as heterotopias since they are also born out of a need to exist outside the norms of society. These spaces, too, produce spaces that fall outside the ordinary life, the norms, even the ordinary time. Hence, it can be said that they possess a lot of the qualities of magic circles. The people who go to prison become just inmates with numbers, in psychiatric institutions, they become just patients with codes, and in dating apps, they become profiles with pictures and usernames. They turn into characters rather than human beings through the act of play.

An Italian philosopher, Agamben (2005), in his book *Profanations,* talks about how games are the repurposed versions of sacred rituals. According to him, these rituals consist of two layers: *Ludus* (physical play) and *Iocus* (wordplay), and play has the ability to separate these two layers from one another while stripping these rituals of their religious ties. Due to this ability of

separation, the play creates a reality that is freeing and independent, aligned with Sutton-Smith's (1997) and Huizinga's (1938) definitions. Agamben provides the example of children who, through play, transpose any object that is heavy with history or political connotations into simple toys, the same way profanation works with religious rituals, which closely aligns with the characteristics of Huizinga's (1938) "Magic Circle", the carnivals of Sutton-Smith (1997), or even Heterotopias of Foucault (1986) described above. He refers to the temporary nature of play, how normal life must go on its course after the play ends, and how the act of playing turns into something else once it is over. Hence, a profanation act is a way to go against these dichotomies, a way to blur the lines between private and public, or religion and culture. In other words, as we have seen above, play is a profane act that can help form these spaces.

All these scholars and their definitions have characteristics we can use to understand the abstract notions of shelters as well. Play's ability to be independent from reality and be protective while enforcing one's identity can serve as a shelter when one needs it. A concept now I call play-shelter can be extended to children's games, drag performances, theatre, nightclubs, dating apps, demonstrations, social media platforms, role-playing, and more.

One of the examples of this play-shelter can be seen clearly in Francis Alÿs' video work titled *Children's Game #19: Haram Football* (2017). The video portrays a group of children playing football without a ball in Mosul, Iraq. The title refers to the Islamic State's ban on playing football and categorising it as an act that is haram (forbidden by Islamic Law). Yet, he captures a group of children who managed to overcome this ban through play that mimics but transitions to the actual sport that was banned. Here, we see clearly the shelter notion of play, where it serves as a liminal playground that offer refuge while creating an independent reality that temporarily suspends the boundaries of existing systems such as the Islamic law.

2.2 Queerness

These shelters described above are not limited to bans on Islamic laws or sports. Queer people, throughout the history had also created various spaces to be able to be themselves. This need can be seen clearly when we look at the historical trajectory of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* which is a classification system published by the American Psychiatric Association that provides standardized criteria for the diagnosis and classification of mental disorders. In the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

Disorders (DSM-I) published in 1952, homosexuality was not listed as a separate diagnosis but was generally understood within broader categories of personality disturbances and maladjustment. By the publication of *DSM-II* in 1968, homosexuality was explicitly classified under “Sexual Deviations”, reflecting dominant psychiatric theories of the period that regarded heterosexuality as the normative outcome of psychological development and same-sex desire as a pathological deviation from this norm. A revised category called "Sexual Orientation Disturbance" was introduced in 1974 for individuals distressed by their same-sex attraction, and this was later replaced by "Ego-Dystonic Homosexuality" in *DSM-III* (1980), referring to people whose sexual orientation conflicted with their self-image and who wished to change it. These categories maintained a psychiatric focus on homosexuality through the lens of personal distress rather than orientation itself. In 1987, "Ego-Dystonic Homosexuality" was removed from the *DSM-III-R*, resulting in the complete depathologization of homosexuality within American psychiatry. The trajectory of transgender identities followed a somewhat different path. DSM-III introduced diagnoses such as "Transsexualism," which were later reformulated as "Gender Identity Disorder" in *DSM-IV* (1994). *DSM-5* (2013) replaced "Gender Identity Disorder" with Gender Dysphoria, shifting the focus away from transgender identity and toward the distress that may arise from incongruence between one's assigned sex and gender identity.

One of the biggest critiques towards this clinicalisation and scientific categorisation can be found in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (2002). Butler argues that genders are not biological realities but social constructions. They are produced through social norms, other practices and systems of power that decide certain ways of living natural while categorising the others as not. According to them, sex, gender and desire also do not follow one another. There is not a natural sequence where one “sex” would have a certain gender and that would be followed by a desire towards a certain group unlike the society expects. These binary approaches also come with their own power of control. Heterosexuality is not merely one sexual orientation among others; it functions as a regulatory system that helps maintain the binary categories of "man" and "woman". Butler argues that gender norms are often policed to preserve heterosexuality, and that queer identities reveal the instability of the categories that heterosexual culture takes for granted. When people fail to conform to expected relationships between sex, gender, and desire, they expose the fact that these categories are constructed rather than natural.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Sara Ahmed, talks about how sexual orientation is not simply about who one orients towards in terms of desire. This orientation also affects the other things one does. It influences how bodies are oriented towards and away from others and, consequently, how they move through social spaces. These spaces are already structured around certain bodies, desires, and ways of living, meaning that orientation affects not only whom one desires but also how one exists within the social world. In this sense, sexual orientation shapes what bodies can do and where they can go. Therefore, failing to orient oneself towards the socially accepted sexual object affects one's relationship to the world and becomes readable as a failure to reproduce existing social norms. As a result, non-normative sexualities are often perceived not only as deviations from expected forms of desire but also as threats to the social order that depends on their continuation.

Thus, Sara Ahmed (2004) talks about the cycles of shame and states that shame can emerge due to the failure of not meeting said societal norms. According to her, shame has an alienating quality that can expose individuals and when it comes to queer identities, she suggests that shame is born out of the discomfort in heteronormative spaces. She states that:

> This double play of concealment and exposure is crucial to the work of shame. The word 'shame' comes from the Indo-European verb for 'to cover', which associates shame with other words such as 'hide,' 'custody,' 'hut', and 'house' (Schneider 1987: 227). Shame certainly involves an impulse to 'take cover' and 'to cover oneself.' But the desire to take cover and to be covered presupposes the failure of cover; in shame, one desires cover precisely because one has already been exposed to others. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 104)

Queer shame then, is not an unexpected or a surprising concept. The historical trajectory of stigmatisation and Ahmed's (2004) arguments show us that exposure is as powerful as the controlling mechanism behind it. Playgrounds, then, can provide shelter or places for queer people to exist only while reminding them why they need such spaces in the first place.

2.3 Location-based Dating Apps

For most queer people, queer neighbourhoods, nightclubs, cruising spots, and as contemporary extensions of these, dating apps are the primary spaces where they can visibly and comfortably perform their identities. They serve as an escape from the heteronormative reality where they cannot be themselves entirely or act as the persona they want to be. It is a well-known fact that even in the most tolerant countries, queer identities are not entirely integrated on a societal

level, and unfortunately, in not-so-tolerant countries, to put it very kindly, society tends to criminalise or frown upon the performances of these identities; hence queer people engage in various forms of space-making practices in order to create magic circles where they can exist which, in my opinion, can be considered as heterotopias of deviation as well.

Location-based dating apps for queer individuals, such as Grindr and Hornet can be considered as one of the most used examples of these queer spaces in the 21st century. On their main screens, these dating apps display a grid of profiles in close proximity to one's location. They act as spaces where people can interact with other users from the same community and vicinity. This virtuality serves as an escape from reality with a touch of your finger, transporting you to a liminal space where you can interact with other queer people. More importantly, they allow users to switch between public and private spheres. A cultural anthropologist Thomas Baudinette in his paper called *Gay dating applications and the Production/reinforcement of queer space in Tokyo* (2018), shows us how these virtual spaces, which scholars initially thought were going to be the end of physical queer spaces, in fact, became an extension of physical spaces and demonstrates how they possess the ability to strengthen and extend this community feeling. He describes these apps as in-between spaces that remain dormant when not in use, supporting the argument that they exhibit play and liminal qualities.

When we look at how Grindr and similar apps are used, it is safe to say that the main aim of using them is to find casual encounters. In a world where most public displays of affection and sex are still considered vulgar and frowned upon, especially for queer people, this need for shelter for casual intimacies is not surprising. With this need, also the feeling of shame emerges. Banner-Thompson, in an article called *Queering Digital Temporalities* (2023), talks about how this shame still exists and sometimes even changes its shape. He argues that while shame can be the cause of resistance, activism, and political change, it can also act as a recessive agent. The article shows that even in more tolerant countries this vulgarity that is imposed upon sex still affects people. The participants of this study reported that in public spaces, they are hesitant to open the application, not because it is criminalized, but because being seen as actively looking for casual encounters still feels shameful. This is also in line with Agamben's (2005) transitory quality of play:

> No one knows better than children how terrible and disquieting a toy can be once the game it forms a part of is over. The instrument of liberation turns into an awkward piece of wood; the doll on which the little girl has

> showered her love becomes a cold, shameful wax puppet that an evil magician can capture and bewitch, and use against us. (Agamben, 2005, p. 73)

Whether it is a toy that looks creepy once you stop playing, or the panic you feel when you display queer public display of affection, or when you turn off the app, a wave of shame hits you. It emerges from the moment you leave heterotopias of deviations. Which might mean that shame specifically related to sex and sexuality plays a preliminary role in how and why these spaces have been produced.

Foucault, in his book titled *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976), explains how sex, once a public and ordinary subject, has been moralised during the Victorian period. According to Foucault, due to this moralisation, at first, sex became a topic of taboo and privacy, and a part of the private sphere; however, with the rise of positivist sciences, medicine, psychology, and others that positioned sex as a topic to be analysed and understood, later it entered the public sphere again, but with a different tone and type of language. With this change, the ordinary language around sex has changed into a medical and/or legal one and has become the norm. Sex has entered these high-status places at the expense of being clinicalised. However, the language we now know as vulgar did not disappear but kept existing in the practice of religious confessions or in clinicalised academic and scientific language and has been used to control and inflict guilt and shame upon people, and still exist even in the most daily encounters.

2.4 Experiment 1: *Shame on You*

It is not a surprise that the etymology of the word that causes one to seek shelter also serves and replaces the words we use when we talk about shelters. Whether we call them shelters, heterotopias, magic circles, carnivals, or playgrounds, they all refer to a space that is born out of and from shame. Hence, shame, especially linguistically, is one of the keys to these space-making practices.

This phase focuses on the notions of shame and vulgarity discussed in the previous sections. It revolves around the question of whether, if shame can paradoxically be considered one of the reasons why these dating applications exist while also emerging from the actions that take place within them, repositioning these actions into an ordinary public space might expose the very structures and norms that produce these systems.

My main aim was to create a setting that would rupture the fabric of ordinary life. I argue that if practices and behaviours that belong to these heterotopias of deviation were to emerge from their confined spaces, people who do not belong to those specific environments might be confronted with a reality they have not previously encountered. This liminal space of confrontation can feel uneasy or unsettling, but it can also create a moment in which people begin to question why these behaviours do not belong to their everyday public lives as well.

2.4.1 Shame on You

The result of this experimentation, *Shame on You,* is an installation that consists of four separate audio tracks that mimic private conversations that take place on Grindr and relocate them into public spaces. The dialogues are generated from real conversations that were collected anonymously and later used to train an AI model called *MythoMax*, a generative language model specialized in roleplaying and creative writing applications. These exchanges, which are usually confined to private digital environments and are often perceived as vulgar in public contexts, are reintroduced into physical space through sound. By exposing this language outside of the environments where it normally circulates, the work attempts to recreate the tension between exposure and concealment that characterizes queer digital spaces.

The textual material used in the installation originates from screenshots submitted anonymously through an online form. The collected conversations include messages related to cruising and sexual encounters, often written in direct or explicit language that would rarely be heard in everyday public situations. Because the collected dataset was limited, the material was expanded using a pre-existing linguistic model called *MythoMax*. The model was trained in three stages. First, the collected conversations were used as stylistic input. Second, I have talked to the model myself to broaden the data pool and the variety of the conversations. Finally, the generated outputs were evaluated and rated by me within the system in order to adjust the model's responses and reinforce the desired linguistic patterns.

The resulting conversations form the basis of the installation. Selected conversations are converted into audio tracks and played through speakers placed in a public or semi-public environment. The installation produces a stream of conversations that resemble the rhythm of real-time chat interactions. Short sentences, invitations, hesitations, and explicit requests appear and disappear in the soundscape.

Encountering these messages in a public setting produces a moment of reaction. The language that usually belongs to a private digital interaction or private spaces suddenly becomes audible to strangers. Passersby are placed in the position of overhearing conversations that were never meant for them. This moment of exposure creates a form of situational confrontation, not necessarily because the content is illegal or forbidden, but because it disrupts the social expectations of what can be heard in a public space. The installation, therefore, operates through a small but noticeable rupture in the everyday soundscape.

This rupture is intended to recreate the dynamics described earlier in relation to play and heterotopia. Dating applications already function as spaces where users move temporarily between visibility and anonymity, public and private spheres. By transferring the language of these platforms into a physical environment, *Shame on You* attempts to construct a similar liminal condition. The installation becomes a temporary playground in which the boundaries between private talks and public presence are blurred. In this sense, shame does not only appear as an emotional reaction but also as a mechanism that reveals the spatial structures that normally keep these interactions hidden. Conversations that appear ordinary within the context of dating applications take on a different quality once they are detached from their interface and placed in a public sonic environment. The same sentences that feel routine within the application suddenly become uncomfortable or disorienting when heard out loud. This shift aims to reveal how strongly the meaning of these exchanges depends on the spatial and technological structures that contain them.

2.5 Reflections

According to its own website, in 2026 Grindr is censored or restricted in the following countries: Indonesia, Turkey, Lebanon, Qatar, Pakistan, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Crimea, Syria, North Korea, Cuba, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, China, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, the Maldives, and Morocco (Grindr, n.d.). This demonstrates that although virtual platforms have the potential to function as shelters, these shelters are still not accessible to everyone. Even though I currently live in Portugal, I was born and raised in one of the countries mentioned above. This project and its subject, therefore, emerge directly from my own lived experience. I experienced firsthand the use of these applications and the challenges that queer communities face while navigating them.

I must admit that I also felt quite embarrassed throughout the production process. Whenever I had to make someone listen or read through the materials I was working on, I hesitated more than I would have liked to. Even though I am quite comfortable talking and sharing these issues with my friends and close circles, the academic environment, maybe due to the reasons explained by Foucault (1976) above, made me feel on edge about bringing very raw conversations into an academic environment, which is also the very reason why I produced this work.

I did not produce *Shame on You* to be didactic or to propose solutions to the problems faced by queer communities. Rather, I would like to believe that art, in any form, has the potential to render certain issues visible. Because of this capacity, the aim of this project is not to direct the audience toward a predetermined reaction, but to invite them to question what they feel and why they feel it. Any attempt to impose a specific emotional response would neither be feasible nor necessary. Instead, I can only hope that the work opens a space for the audience to reflect on what happens in spaces that remain hidden or are actively rendered invisible, and to consider how we might also participate in sustaining the very structures that shape these conditions.

In this sense, shame appears to operate in a circular manner. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, it tends to reproduce itself through the norms and expectations that have been imposed upon us. Because of this, art can function as a tool for conveying understanding outside of the clean, polished academic and scientific setting. More importantly, it can contribute to the creation of new shelters, new playgrounds, and new spaces, at least until the moment when such shelters are no longer necessary.

3. THE MANY WALKS OF SHAME

After the production of *Shame on You*, I felt the need to focus more directly on shame and to better understand how it operates. As the research progressed, I found myself branching out into different forms of shame due to the realisation that shame, unlike what more positivist approaches often suggest, cannot be dissected into separate categories and analysed in isolation. Rather, it emerges from a complex network of norms, legal systems, historical practices, and countless other social forces. Therefore, this chapter focuses on what shame is, how it has been understood throughout history, and the ways in which it has been used as a power tool.

3.1 What is Shame?

Shame is a sensation that most of us experience but often struggle to define precisely. We recognise when it appears and how it manifests itself, yet we do not necessarily experience it in the same way as others or under the same conditions. As a result, there is more than one way to understand and analyse it. Different fields approach shame from different perspectives. Sociology, for example, examines it differently from psychology and other disciplines. Because of this, shame has been defined and interpreted in various ways throughout history. The following perspectives illustrate some of the different ways in which shame has been understood and analysed.

According to Stearns (2017), from a psychological perspective, shame has generally been characterized as a self-conscious emotion that requires higher levels of cognition compared to more reactive emotions such as anger. Since shame depends on an understanding of the self, Stearns notes that many psychologists argue that it does not begin to emerge until around the age of one. Unlike emotions such as anger, which often arise as immediate reactions, shame requires a higher level of cognitive development and self-awareness.

Sara Ahmed (2004) explains shame as both a feeling and a bodily sensation:

> Shame can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body. Certainly, when I feel shame, I have done something that I feel is bad. When shamed, one's body seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject

> ‘being against itself’. Such a feeling of negation, which is taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure, is usually experienced before another. (p. 103)

She describes shame not only as an internal emotional state but also as a relational experience that emerges in the presence of others. Although everyone can experience shame, she argues that it requires a witness who is significant to the subject. This witness does not necessarily need to be physically present and may instead exist mentally, even when one is physically alone. Shame therefore becomes tied both to memory and to present action.

Sandra Bartky (1990), in *Femininity and Domination*, on a similar topic, argues that before the imaginary witness, one should experience the same in a physical form to construct the imaginary one afterward. According to Bartky, shame requires becoming an object in the eyes of the other, and looking at oneself through those eyes, and due to this, not every group experiences it similarly. Some groups, like women who have been objectified much more in the society compared to men, are more affected by this.

As discussed in the previous chapter, shame suggests a failure in relation to an ideal and, in doing so, simultaneously confirms the existence of that ideal. This is in line with Ahmed (2004), where she suggests that shame also functions as a mechanism that reinforces social norms and regulates participation within social structures. As she states, “Shame can also be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence.” (p. 107)

Shame is neither a new feeling nor one that is exclusive to certain groups. From the moment individuals become aware of themselves, they are exposed to ideals, behaviours, and social expectations that gradually construct and reinforce the notion of shame. In this sense, shame functions as a mechanism of power that affects those who fail to conform to normative structures, as well as those who wish to act outside of them. This structure of normativity and its power can be observed in seemingly simple practices such as toilet training, where one learns where it is acceptable to perform certain bodily functions, as well as in more complex matters such as queer identities, which have historically been positioned outside dominant social traditions and ways of living.

As discussed above, shame is deeply connected to social perception and normative behaviour. Consequently, it has historically functioned not only as an emotional condition but also as a social and political instrument. Different societies have institutionalised shame through public

rituals, punishments, and forms of humiliation intended to regulate behaviour and reinforce collective norms.

3.2 Shame As A Regulatory Tool

Ute Frevert (2020) demonstrates a clear history of how shame has been used as a regulatory tool in *The Politics of Humiliation: A Modern History*. According to her, public humiliation operates through a structure in which the victim alone is held responsible for deviating from accepted norms and the shamed individual often has little possibility of defending themselves and may continue to lose honour and social respect even after reintegration into society.

One of the examples Frevert (2020) discusses is the pillory, a wooden structure with openings for the head and hands that began appearing in legal sources during the late Middle Ages. During this period, individuals were forced to stand before the public trapped within this structure as punishment for crimes they had committed. This suggests that the shame of public exposure itself was considered a powerful form of punishment. Frevert notes that in seventeenth-century Munich, some individuals were required to stand before the public for three hours on three consecutive Sundays or holidays. However, standing in the pillory was not the only aspect of the punishment. Members of the public often participated by spitting on those displayed or by throwing rotten food and faeces at them. According to Frevert, in 1780 two men in London were severely injured by stones thrown by a crowd of approximately twenty thousand people while they were being exhibited in a public pillory for engaging in homosexual acts.

The pillory was not the only form of public humiliation. Frevert (2020) mentions that women in England who were considered to have mistreated their husbands were subjected to skimmington rides, during which they were placed backwards on a donkey and paraded through the city while being mocked by the public. One participant in a skimmington ride in 1604 stated that the purpose of the practice was not only to shame those who had committed such acts but also to serve as a warning to others to behave accordingly.

However, the purpose of public humiliation and social warning was not always directed at individuals alone but could also target entire groups. Frevert (2020) illustrates this with the example of German soldiers in occupied Poland in 1939, who shaved the beards of Jewish men in public as a way of asserting power and domination over them.

These examples demonstrate how shame and public humiliation have been used as tools through which individuals and institutions assert power and authority over particular groups. Depending on the political and geographical context, the nature of these perceived transgressions varied according to the governing regime and the social values of the period.

One example highlighted by Stearns (2017) demonstrates how shame became embedded within social systems not only through acts that were believed to have been committed but also through suspicion alone. He refers to the Code of Hammurabi, a legal text established in 1754 BCE by King Hammurabi of Babylon, in which a woman accused of relations with a man who was not her husband was expected to throw herself into the river if suspicion was directed towards her.

In my opinion, these examples and theories clarify what shame is and how it has been used historically as a tool of power. They might also explain why certain groups and actions feel heavier than others when exposed to the gaze of the general public. As an extension of these discussions, I believe it is important to understand how shame emerges, who it emerges in, and in what ways it operates. Analysing these aspects may help us peel back the layers of shame that we experience.

3.3 Who is Ashamed and Why?

Just like any other social issue, it would be difficult to analyse and discuss shame without an intersectional approach. Intersectionality is a way of analysing how different social categories, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and age, overlap to shape people's experiences of privilege and oppression, rather than treating each category separately. The term was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain how Black women's experiences of discrimination were not fully captured by frameworks that examined race and gender separately.

However, intersectionality can also be useful for understanding shame by drawing attention to who gets to be ashamed and in what ways. Queer shame, for instance, emerges differently from racial shame or the shame that may arise during everyday activities. Therefore, it is important to consider not only the feeling itself but also the conditions through which it emerges.

Based on the examples provided in the previous section, a question emerges regarding whether shame should be considered solely an individual or a collective feeling. It is not the aim of this research to answer that question. However, I believe it is important to understand who experiences shame more frequently and in what contexts it occurs.

As Weiss states in *The Shame Of Shamelessness* (2018), racial, sexual, and other minorities are more prone to experiencing shame than other groups. Furthermore, shame does not occur only when someone behaves "inappropriately" or when one witnesses another person behaving shamelessly. Weiss identifies another condition under which shame emerges. Specifically, women, racial minorities, people with disabilities, and others whose bodies fall outside dominant norms of whiteness, masculinity, thinness, and able-bodiedness often experience shame simply through being looked at and identified by others. In these situations, shame can emerge even when no action has been taken that would ordinarily be considered morally questionable. To illustrate this, Weiss quotes Fanon (2008), who describes the experience of a Black man being perceived and judged despite having done nothing at all:

> I was responsible, not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders - Disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far,very far from myself and gave myself up as an object. (Fanon, 2008, as cited in Weiss, 2018, pp. 542-543)

This quote shows that the gaze we feel upon ourselves does not necessarily emerge from the present moment or from an action we have performed. Sometimes, it is the result of a historical accumulation of stigma, categorisation, and social perception. Here, the intersectionality of shame appears in the way one looks, the shape of one's body, perceived gender, the colour of one's skin, facial features, and many other characteristics that are visible to others.

According to Weiss (2018), shame can also emerge from a secondary source. One can be shamed by another person's shameless actions or even take on the shame of those who witness a shameless act. Thus, shame can always find a new place, a new home, a new target. It is a boomerang emotion that is contagious and moves from one person to another.

On the other hand, Tomkins (1995) argues that this contagiousness can also serve a positive function. It can bring people and communities together by strengthening social bonds, as it

allows individuals to act shamelessly in situations where shame is rooted in norms they no longer accept. The queer community provides one of the clearest examples of this. Even the term "Pride" is used to describe a position taken against the shame produced by a heteronormative society. In this case, the rejection of shame becomes a way of reinforcing community bonds.

3.4 Experiment 2: *A Walk of Shame*

Even though the most public punishment practices revolving around shame discussed in the previous sections have disappeared in most countries, their contemporary extensions are still present in the society we live in today.

Walk of shame is a popular expression used to describe the journey home after a sexual encounter, most commonly a one-night stand. The term usually refers to the morning after the encounter, when a person leaves the place where it occurred and returns home. The expression, and the social implications it carries, can be seen as an extension of older public humiliation practices such as the skimmington rides discussed earlier, where individuals were paraded through the city after acts that were considered socially inappropriate.

Taking its name from this popular expression, this experimentation phase focuses on how shame emerges in different individuals and the kinds of memories with which they associate it. By using personal stories collected through encounters and conversations, it aims to bring together the different ways shame is experienced, understood, and remembered.

3.4.1 A Walk of Shame

A Walk of Shame is an audio walk I developed in collaboration with performance artist Agnieszka Janasik where participants are given media players and headphones and are asked to follow Janasik silently throughout the walk. The work consists of a guided route through Porto that begins at Fabrik, a queer club in Porto, passes through Avenida dos Aliados (one of the main squares of Porto) and Zoom (another queer club), and ends at Praça dos Poveiros (another main square). The route itself is based on a path I frequently take after my nights out in the city to come back home, transforming a familiar personal trajectory into a temporary collective experience. Throughout the approximately one-hour walk, participants move

together through public space while listening to a continuous audio track composed of four different stories regarding how rooted shame is. Each story begins once the group arrives at a specific location and is followed by a period of silence during the walk toward the next stop.

The stories revolve around different experiences of shame, including physical bullying, sexual harassment, feelings of intellectual inadequacy, and experiences connected to belonging to an ethnic minority. Rather than being directly collected through a formal call, the stories emerged gradually through personal encounters and conversations. The stories were later rewritten and partially fictionalized to protect anonymity and detach the narratives from identifiable individuals. In some cases, details such as the specific ethnic background of the storyteller were intentionally removed to produce a more universal structure of identification.

The audio track is synchronized with the physical route of the walk. Janasik receives separate audio instructions through an earpiece that indicate when each story begins and ends, allowing the movement of the group to correspond to the pacing of the narration. During the silent intervals between stops, participants continue walking collectively without speaking to one another. These silent sections function as moments of reflection in which the stories remain suspended within the experience of movement through the city. The work therefore alternates between listening and walking, narration and silence, constructing a rhythm shaped by both physical displacement and introspection.

While the work takes the form of a guided tour, it intentionally avoids the informative structure normally associated with tourism. Janasik leads the participants while carrying a deconstructed umbrella, referencing the visual language of touristic groups moving through the city. At the same time, the silent movement of participants wearing headphones produces a subtle performative situation within public space. The group becomes temporarily visible as a collective body moving through familiar urban environments while remaining detached from the everyday rhythms surrounding them.

Unlike *Shame on You*, where private conversations are exposed publicly through sound, *A Walk of Shame* operates through a more intimate mode of listening. The stories are heard individually through headphones, yet they unfold collectively through movement in public space. Shame, therefore, appears less as a direct confrontation and more as a shared condition carried through the body while walking. The city itself functions as a structure that connects the stories together. Queer clubs, public squares, and transitional spaces become part of the narrative

environment even when the stories are not explicitly tied to the locations themselves. By moving through these spaces while listening to anonymous experiences of shame, the work attempts to produce a temporary situation in which personal memory, bodily movement, and urban space become intertwined.

3.5 Reflections

To be completely honest, *Walk of Shame* was the most difficult work to produce among the three this research consists of. Not being able to detach myself from the actual subjects of these stories, and hearing through their voices to collect, made me identify more with the narratives than the other two works here. In this sense, Weiss' (2018) contagiousness of shame really played a crucial part in how this work was produced and performed. The stories are generated and written in the first person, and at times this made it confusing to experience it as an other's experience. There were moments where I could not differentiate between my own thoughts and the narration of the stories even though the stories had distinct markers such as the voices of the narration.

The shame I have experienced here, was very different from the embarrassment I felt while producing *Shame on You*. I think one of the reasons is that *Shame On You*, comes from an action that is voluntarily conducted. People who sign in to the app and have these talks are not ashamed because they committed such an action but are ashamed mostly due to the fact that they have been exposed. The gaze of the other, forces those interactions to exist in certain places, whether we call them heterotopias, playgrounds or shelters, hence publicising those actions carry a certain weight, not because you do perform them, but because you perform them in an inadequate place. The stories in *A Walk of Shame*, consist of stories where one is feeling the shame of the historical accumulation rather than the act that has been conducted.

The story that takes place in Fabrik, which focuses on the physical bullying of a queer person experienced in high school, has nothing to do with the actions of the victim, but rather with who they are. Not only the feeling of not being able to protect yourself but also the feeling of reinforcing the fact that you are involuntarily detected, as in Weiss' (2018) example of Fanon's black man, makes you face the reality you live in. Especially, if that reality does nothing to protect you as it is the case in that story, shame becomes even more complex and intense.

The second story that is placed in Avenida dos Aliados, refers to a situation where a woman feels intellectually inadequate to the point she stops speaking. The constant inner fight she has with the people she is surrounded pushes her to a point where she does not feel worthy of talking. Gender here plays a crucial part as well, since it would be naive to say the intellectual pressure women carry is the same as the one man do. Hence, this one comes from a western environment where there is also a hierarchy of interests and intellectuality instead of an action one performs.

The third story, in Zoom, is about a sexual harassment one woman experienced as a child. What is striking about this story is that, unlike the first one, she has an adult with her that takes an action against the perpetrator. However, the public, this time targets the adult woman and the punishment of exclusion falls on her. I cannot predict what made the child and the narrator of the story to experience shame in that moment, but I have been told that the adult woman's reaction made her feel more ashamed than the incident she could not even name yet. In my opinion it was the shift of shamelessness act and the boomerang effect mentioned previously, where the shame found a new target.

The last story focuses on a woman who comes from an ethnic minority and how she found this out. It starts by her learning through other kids, who probably also do not have the social awareness of an adult, of a certain stigma regarding that minority group. We witness a conversation with the mother where she also passes on this social stereotype which ends with her learning, she is indeed a part of that group. Witnessing a moment where she realises that she carries a detectable target she did not know anything about, creates an intense moment where we as the audience can see the first step in how a shame forms and emerges.

None of these stories refer to an action that should be shamed but refers more to the ways of being instead of ways of living. I am not proposing here that ways of living are chosen whereas ways of being are not. Rather, I am simply suggesting that the shame that comes from ways of being carries a different type of weight compared to the shame that comes from ways of living.

4. CONFESSING AND ANONYMITY

Throughout this research, I kept returning to Foucault's (2021) analysis of confession and the ways it has been used both as an extractive and a regulatory tool. The methods I employed during the previous experimentation phases often placed me, the artist, in a similar position. Through collecting stories and conversations, people shared private information about themselves that they might not otherwise have disclosed. This led me to reflect on the act of confessing itself and the conditions through which it emerges. Hence, this chapter and the experimentation phase focus on confession and the ways it continues to appear in everyday life.

4.1 Confessing

In *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Volume 4* (2021), Michel Foucault describes confession as a manifestation of one's awareness that they have sinned, as well as a desire to liberate themselves from the sinner they have become. He defines it as a testimony in which both the subject and the object are the person themselves. It is essentially the act of telling the truth about oneself in hopes of salvation or purification. Rather than simply listing all the sins one has committed, confession functions as a promise to change.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1990), Michel Foucault demonstrates that, since the Middle Ages, Western societies have used confession as an instrument through which truth could be reached. Similarly to shame discussed in Chapter 4, confession also structurally requires an external figure, since one cannot confess without the presence of an authority. It requires someone who can save, judge, or purify the confessor of the things they admit. Whether voluntary or involuntary, and whether taking the form of interrogation or torture, confession became a tool for revealing what is concealed, or for satisfying the dominant desire to admit something hidden.

Although it initially emerged around sexuality and the assumption that sex contains the ultimate truth about the self, confession gradually extended its influence into science, relationships, justice, and even the most mundane aspects of everyday life. It transformed into a practice through which people confess not only sexual sins, but also desires, thoughts, crimes, and personal troubles. According to Michel Foucault, confession became so ordinary and

mandatory that we eventually forgot the power structures that compelled concealment in the first place. Instead, we came to believe that power only exists in situations where truth cannot easily be extracted. As a result, confession began to be perceived as an act of liberation rather than as a consequence of the taboos, norms, and forms of censorship to which we had long been subjected. However, confession did not remain solely a Catholic ritual. It transformed into letters, books, therapeutic settings, and scientific modes of knowledge production, while continuing to persist throughout society in different forms. (Foucault, 2021)

As much as Foucault explains how confessions became integrated into society and in what forms, it does not necessarily explain the reason behind why people confess. Confessing is not an easy act to define since it comes in all different forms such as the catholic one, literature, and therapeutic settings; thus, the reasons behind it are also not very visible and apparent as it also changes from setting to setting and from confession to confession. According to John Bossy in *The Social History of Confession in the Age of the Reformation* (1975), the absolution from their sins did not come with the act of medieval confessing. It came from the necessary action taken afterward. The confessors were aware that they would not be purified of their sins if they continued to behave as such. In a sense, just like shame, confessions also worked through a collective level as well as the authorities that imposed them.

With the shift of societies from physical to virtual spaces, this confessional society, as Michel Foucault describes it, also transferred its deeply rooted habits of confession into the virtual realm. As Zygmunt Bauman explains in *Consuming Life* (2013), virtual spaces became social playgrounds where there appeared to be no authority to control, judge, or report to, allowing people to expose the inner truths about themselves online. However, similarly to the illusion of freedom within confession itself, these playgrounds were also products of different forms of authority such as companies, governments, and digital platforms.

A society already obsessed with consumption also began consuming itself as a commodity through these online environments. People started marketing themselves through these platforms to find jobs, partners, communities, and visibility. In order to achieve this, they had to transform themselves into desirable products. Hence, to become more visible and more attractive, individuals increasingly shared behaviours, identities, and lifestyles they considered socially desirable. Things that once belonged to the private sphere gradually became part of this virtual public realm, while those who wished to preserve anonymity or invisibility started

to risk exclusion, since social networking platforms positioned themselves around the sharing of personal information.

It can be argued that this created a paradoxical relationship between becoming a commodity and simultaneously believing in the illusion that these platforms operate without authority or control. In order to be desired, individuals started presenting the aspects of themselves they considered acceptable, attractive, or superior to others. Consequently, the confessional setting in which people once revealed their deepest desires, fears, or impulses that could potentially turn them into outcasts no longer functioned in the same way within environments where visibility depended on desirability and self-marketing.

As explained in Chapter 2, these playgrounds gradually became more diverse and increasingly community or interest specific. Individuals who believed they would not be accepted within certain social circles started navigating toward spaces where they could find recognition and belonging. At the same time, in cases where people wanted to confess aspects of themselves without the repercussions of social norms or authority structures, the virtual realm provided an escape through which they could become characters, personas, or, in some cases, remain completely anonymous.

4.2 Anonymity

Anonymity of confessions, in my opinion, signifies a shift in the reason for a confessional act. If confessions arose from a desire to be saved or pardoned by an authority or society, then anonymous confessions do not share the same aim, given the lack of salvation they would ultimately provide. However, the urge to share the inner truth about oneself, especially one that would not be acceptable by the people around and the society one lives in, can be said to exist still. It brings up the question of why people confess online if there is no purification in the end, and why does this urge still exist in these settings?

Ross and Bhatia (2024), in a study titled *@Fesshole and the discourse of confession on X: A study of online sharing and community building,* examine a confessional page on X (formerly Twitter) through 100 posts collected between 2019 and 2020. They suggest that the motivations behind these anonymous online confessions were to build a community and foster relationships while building an authentic self. One similarity between the traditional confessing and this

virtual space was that the audience was able to react and comment on these posts, even without knowing who the confessor was. This can be considered similar to Bauman's arguments in *Consuming Life* where he explains that the social self also becomes a commodity where one shares themselves to benefit from the group feeling. I believe, in a setting like this, it is possible to make a connection between salvation and anonymity since the confessor is still able to read the reactions of others, and a collective acceptance might be established. However, their analysis regarding Foucault's read on confessions, where they claim that it is contrasting since there is no authority present, in my view, overlooks the fact that there is still more than one authoritarian level to consider. Firstly, the platform has a moderator who chooses to publish which confessions to post. This moderator can also serve as an external eye and might make people be careful about the language they choose to use. Secondly, and I believe more importantly, there is still an authority that makes these declarations both confessions and also anonymous, this can be considered either the public who responds or reads or the norms that make the content something that cannot be said in public. As long as these things have to be confessed and/or anonymity is required, I would argue that it would signify the presence of an authority, one way or the other.

Another study on confession pages called *Anonymity, Community, and Expression: Unveiling the Dynamics of Confession Pages on Facebook,* conducted by Tal Lator (2025), analyses 1280 posts from confessional pages on Facebook and conducts interviews with 15 followers of these pages. Here, the study suggests that these platforms serve as a catharsis, allowing people to feel relief after sharing. This can be seen clearly in one of the interview snippets they shared:

> . . . Sometimes, you have experiences that weigh you down, and you know that if you reveal them in your unit. . .there could be penalties and negative reactions. However, you also know that sharing them with others will bring out some empathy and understanding. It's a space to vent, where readers understand where you're coming from. (Lator, 2025, p. 8)

This snippet demonstrates that the main catharsis effect of the online confessions come from the reaction of the audience who read them. Unlike pardoning in the traditional catholic confessions, these confessions aim for finding a community or a group of people who have been through the same thing or can understand what is going on without the confessor getting any repercussions on a societal or a legal level due to the anonymity.

4.3 Experiment 3: Too Ashamed to Admit

As discussed in the previous sections, confession has historically functioned as a way of revealing truths that would otherwise remain concealed. At the same time, contemporary digital environments have introduced new forms of confessing that often operate through anonymity rather than direct exposure. Unlike traditional confessions that seek forgiveness or absolution from an authority, anonymous online confessions frequently emerge without the possibility of redemption. Yet the desire to disclose remains.

This experimentation phase focuses on this paradox. If anonymous confessions do not provide the salvation associated with traditional confessional structures, why do people continue to produce them? What kinds of thoughts require anonymity in order to be expressed? More importantly, what do these confessions reveal about the social conditions that make concealment necessary in the first place?

4.3.1 Too Ashamed to Admit

Too Ashamed to Admit is an installation centered around the question of what happens to the confessions if there is no confessor or authority to pardon and focuses on the social conditions that produce the need for them. The work consists of a modified gumball machine that dispenses transparent plastic capsules containing printed confessional statements. Each capsule contains a unique fictional confession generated by an AI model trained on a dataset of approximately 16,000 anonymous online confessions collected from a public confession site called confessyoursinsonline.com.

The confessions were used to train a LLaMA-based language model capable of reproducing the linguistic structures and emotional patterns present throughout the dataset. Rather than generating factual testimonies, the model produces fictional confessions that resemble fragments of collective expression. Some outputs appear intimate, absurd, disturbing, vulnerable, aggressive, mundane, or emotionally detached. Because the generated confessions no longer belong to identifiable individuals, they occupy an unstable position between fiction and authenticity, where the boundaries between personal disclosure and collective language begin to collapse.

The decision to use a gumball machine emerged from the playful qualities that appear throughout this research. Similar to the role of play discussed in the previous chapters (Huizinga, 1949; Sutton-Smith, 2001), the machine creates a temporary structure organized around curiosity, anticipation, and chance. Participants do not choose which confession they receive and cannot predict what kind of intimacy, discomfort, or absurdity the capsule contains. The act of obtaining a confession becomes playful and transactional at the same time.

Unlike the previous works in this research, the installation does not focus on relocating existing conversations or memories into public space, since they are already in a virtual public space, but instead on the act of confession itself and the structures that allow these confessions to emerge. The collected dataset contains a wide range of disclosures, including sexual thoughts, personal fears, intrusive ideas, experiences of violence, desires, regrets, feelings of inadequacy, shameful memories, and ordinary everyday situations and the fabricated confessions expose these topics as well.

Studies regarding online anonymity and self-disclosure suggest that invisibility, anonymity, and reduced authority alter the ways individuals regulate themselves and present their identities (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Suler, 2004). Under such conditions, people may reveal thoughts, desires, fears, and emotions that would otherwise remain concealed within everyday social life (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). In this sense, the work can be considered less about the individual confession itself and more about understanding why certain thoughts seem to require anonymous systems in order to be expressed at all. The confessions do not emerge because these platforms simply exist, but because they produce temporary conditions in which visibility, judgment, and self-awareness become altered.

As discussed previously through this chapter, confession has historically functioned not only as a form of expression but also as a mechanism through which individuals position themselves in relation to systems of morality, judgment, and social regulation. Confession requires a listener, witness, or authority to whom one speaks. However, within anonymous online confession platforms, this relationship becomes unstable. One confesses not to a priest, institution, friend, or identifiable individual, but to an undefined collective composed entirely of strangers. The authority of confession, therefore, becomes displaced into the anonymous structure of the platform itself.

The installation aims to reverse the traditional position of confession. The audience does not confess; instead, it becomes the recipient of confessions. By receiving and carrying these statements, participants are temporarily positioned as anonymous witnesses to thoughts and experiences that were never meant to belong to them specifically. The confessions circulate without resolution, response, or identifiable ownership. In this sense, the work attempts to construct a situation in which strangers become temporary holders of displaced intimacy and self-disclosure.

4.4 Reflections

What interests me in this work is not whether the confessions are true or not, but why certain thoughts and experiences seem too difficult, shameful, absurd, or socially risky to be expressed openly. Due to their complicated and highly loaded history, confessions can be understood as the result of the norms and boundaries within which one lives. Hence, I believe they can also function as a way of exposing those very norms and social structures.

The need to confess may also suggest the presence of a restricting force behind these subjects, one that prevents individuals from voicing such thoughts openly in public spaces or settings. Historically, these norms have changed considerably and do not necessarily align with our present moral values, yet they can be said to be closely connected to the historical evolution of shame. What I find striking, however, is that, although I am not denying that social progress has taken place, some of the norms and structures that bind us still remain.

The homosexual couple who became the victims of a public pillory in London in 1780, discussed by Frevert (2020) in Chapter 3.2, likely went through confessional structures before their punishment. Had they lived in our own decade, they might instead have shared their thoughts, desires, or relationship through one of the online platforms discussed earlier. The pillory may no longer exist in its historical form, but, much like confession itself, it continues to reappear in different ways. Therefore, approaching the confessions generated in *Too Ashamed To Admit* with the question of why they needed to be confessed may help us understand what kinds of mechanisms continue to operate around us today.

5. EPILOGUE

When this research began, my interest was not in shame but in shelter. What started with a group of children playing football without a ball gradually expanded into questions of play, queerness, shame, visibility, concealment, confession, and anonymity. Across these different contexts, however, the same pattern kept appearing. Certain behaviours, identities, desires, and forms of expression seemed to need spaces where they could exist outside of everyday life.

Following this observation led me through different concepts, theories, and artistic experiments. What initially appeared as separate subjects gradually revealed themselves to be connected. Playgrounds, heterotopias, dating applications, anonymous confessional platforms, and even the artworks produced throughout this research all shared a similar quality. They functioned as temporary environments where the ordinary rules of everyday life could be suspended. They provided conditions under which certain things could be expressed, disclosed, or performed that might otherwise remain hidden.

Throughout this process, shame repeatedly emerged as a central element. Not only because it appeared as a personal feeling, but because it seemed to play a role in the production of these spaces themselves. The more the research progressed, the more difficult it became to separate shame from the structures that surrounded it. Historical practices of humiliation, contemporary forms of visibility, anonymous confessions, personal memories, and everyday interactions all demonstrated different ways in which shame continues to operate. Although the forms through which it emerges have changed considerably throughout history, many of the mechanisms discussed throughout this research remain present in different ways.

The artistic experiments approached these questions from different perspectives. *Shame on You* focused on the relationship between shame, visibility, and queer digital spaces by relocating private conversations into public environments. *A Walk of Shame* shifted the focus towards personal experiences and memories, exploring how and what kinds of shame become attached to different bodies, identities, and life experiences. *Too Ashamed to Admit* examined confession and anonymity, questioning why certain thoughts, desires, and experiences continue to require anonymous systems to be expressed. Rather than functioning as illustrations of theoretical concepts, these works became tools through which the questions themselves could be explored.

This exploration process also made visible the ways my practice itself contributed to my understanding of these questions.

Shame on You made me realise that my relationship with these conversations was far more complicated than I initially thought. Even though I have been using these applications for years and discussing them openly with friends, relocating them into an academic setting made me unexpectedly uncomfortable. I, too, was ashamed whenever I had to make someone listen to or read through the materials I was working with. In a way, my feeling became as important as the work itself. It reminded me that the boundaries between what is considered acceptable and what is considered vulgar are still very much present, and that I was still struggling with these. Rather than simply examining queer digital spaces from a distance, the work made visible the extent to which I also carry the structures I was attempting to understand.

A Walk of Shame changed my relationship to this project in a different way. Collecting these stories and listening to them repeatedly made it increasingly difficult to maintain the distance I had assumed I would have as the artist producing these works. The stories often stayed with me beyond the work itself and, at times, I struggled to distinguish between my own memories and the experiences being narrated. It made it clear for me that shame can move between people, attach itself to bodies that were never there, and can continue to shape the ways we understand ourselves and others.

Too Ashamed to Admit made me think differently about my own position within this project. During the process of collecting and working with these confessions, I found myself in a role similar to the confessees. Even though the confessions I used in this project had originally been shared with me voluntarily, I was still the person deciding which ones would be selected, how they would be transformed, and which ones would eventually become visible through the works. This made it increasingly difficult for me to think of confession as a simple act of relief or disclosure. Instead, I became more aware of the structures that make certain desires and experiences feel like they must be confessed in the first place, and of my own participation in reproducing these structures through the act of collecting and presenting them.

My aim was never to propose solutions or to determine which forms of shame existed. Instead, I aimed to investigate the relationship between shame, concealment, disclosure, and space

through artistic experimentation. In this sense, the works were not produced to tell audiences what to think or feel, but to create situations in which these questions could become visible.

Whether we call them shelters, playgrounds, heterotopias, dating applications, anonymous confessional platforms, they all point towards the existence of conditions that make such spaces necessary. If there is one conclusion that I can draw from this research, it is not that shame has disappeared, nor that these spaces have solved the problems that produced them. Rather, their continued existence suggests that there are still behaviours, identities, desires, and forms of expression that struggle to find a place within the visibility of everyday life.

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