

How Do U.S. Teens And Young Adults Construct Their Identities In And Through Self-Taken Photographs?

Methodical Considerations And A First Glimpse At Select Findings From On-Going Case Studies

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Abstract: *The following article explores the ways U.S. adolescents and young adults are utilizing self-taken photographs on Instagram in order to self-present, as an important means of identity construction. Firstly, it is discussed how and under which assumptions photographs can be used for identity research. Secondly, two methods are briefly introduced: Objective Hermeneutics (Oevermann 1979/1987) and Segment Analysis (Breckner 2003). Finally, results from three exemplary profiles are considered in respect to general implications.*

Keywords: *Identity construction, adolescents, young adults, self-presentation, self-expression, social network sites, photographs, Objective Hermeneutics, Segment Analysis*

The significance of pictures and images, in and for society, has often been underestimated in academic disciplines such as pedagogy, psychology, or sociology. Instead of shifting the focus of research onto pictures, these have been rather marginalized. For instance, in the field of identity development research, only little is known about the way adolescents and young adults use pictures to form their identities, particularly on social network sites (SNS).¹ However, research indicates that teens increasingly prefer to share photographs of themselves as they become older (e.g. Madden, et al. 2013).

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¹ About the lack of research on identity formation online: e.g. Wicki 2015, p. 119.

Adolescents and young adults are spreading out and joining SNS with a particularly visual focus, as can be seen on platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat (just to name two popular representatives amongst a vast variety of platforms). According to the Pew Research Center, 52% of U.S. teenagers, ranging in ages from 12 to 17 years, use Instagram and 41% use Snapchat (Lenhart 2015, p. 28ff.). A key element to the great rise of these “specialized SNS”, is the ascent of *app-culture*. In this contribution, app-culture describes the shift from mainly web browser-based to smartphone-app-based SNS designs. With the vast distribution of mobile devices and affordable mobile Internet plans, these app-based SNS have permanently altered the “social networking landscape”.

In the past, many studies have been conducted to investigate manifold aspects of SNS in general. Specifically Facebook has been at the center of attention for a variety of studies (e.g. Blease 2015; Montgomery 2015; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin 2008). Unlike “traditional” all-in-one SNS (e.g. Facebook), platforms with a visual emphasis (e.g. Instagram) primarily focus on visual interactions, underlining the change.

The following article aims to provide a first glimpse at how U.S. teenagers and young adults employ photographs to self-disclose and self-present themselves, as part of identity construction. The article will give an overview of an excerpt of results drawn from qualitative case studies starting in late 2014 up until today. Therefore, this work should still be considered as a “work in progress”. As it appears, there is only little (if at all) empirical work on this particular matter. The following article, therewith, attempts to introduce a modest qualitative approach for basic research in this field. The great popularity of pictures makes it inevitably clear that we, as a society, are dealing with a fundamental shift in communication patterns; namely from written to visual forms. This, however, doesn’t imply the end of the written word. On the contrary, the written word still upholds a very essential role in online communication and, most likely, will continue to do so. The question is rather: *What kind of importance do pictures occupy in adolescent and young adult lives (online)?* Or to put it differently: *How do adolescents and young adults employ pictures for identity construction purposes?*

The following article may be of importance, not only for researchers and professionals dealing with adolescents and young adults, but also for policy makers around the globe, as they may want to consider the changing communication paradigm and the way teens and young adults are using photographs and pictures in terms of identity construction processes, as well as in general. The following contribution is split into two parts: The first section will provide an overview on how and why photographs can be subject to academic investigations and will orient itself along the lines of different approaches, ranging from art (e.g. Mitchell) to the social sciences (e.g. Breckner). The second section will present results from ongoing case studies that concern themselves with the great question of self-presentation amongst teenagers and young adults within the field of identity development on SNS. Additionally, the utilized methods, Objective Hermeneutics (Oevermann) and Segment Analysis (Breckner), will be briefly introduced, since they are not that common in international social sciences.

1. The importance of the visual for up-to-date social science and pedagogical research

1.1 The pictorial turn as a starting point

With the rise of the so-called *linguistic turn* (e.g. Rorty 1967) in the 20th century, photographs, paintings, and other visual documents were marginalized in sociology, pedagogy, and other research disciplines for quite some time. The *pictorial turn* (e.g. Mitchell 1994), as opposed to the linguistic turn, promises to introduce the visual back into academia as a “postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture” (Mitchell 1994, p. 16) and calls for “a contemporary paradigm shift within learned disciplines” (Boehm & Mitchell 2009, p. 115). It is not a trivial label for the rise of so-called “visual media”, but is rather part of what Mitchell calls the *four fundamental concepts of “image science” (Bildwissenschaft)* (Mitchell 2014, p. 27). However, the pictorial turn is a complex concept. To claim that the picture can replace the written word (or to be more general: written language), would be to ignore the pictorial turn’s genuine nature.

Although the terms picture and image are widely used synonymously in everyday language and across multiple academic disciplines, a distinction between the two is proposed (ibid., Mitchell 2005, p. III). On this behalf, a picture is considered as a material object. It’s both visible and can be physically held. In opposition to this, an image can be characterized as immaterial or as something, which appears in the picture (e.g. mental representation, figure, motif, etc.)².

To overcome the two prevailing but opposing views about what a picture is (one perspective understands pictures in the light of [textual] language, while mainly the visual arts conceptualize pictures as independent from textual language), Mitchell suggests to neither exclusively recognize pictures, nor language of being of either “pure” pictorial or textual nature: “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous” (Mitchell 1994, p. 5). Even though there is no such thing as a distinct pictorial or textual way of thinking (cp. also: Arnheim 1969; Arnheim 1980), both picture, respectively image, and text do not translate into one another. They are rather interwoven, regardless if one is dealing with a seemingly outright piece of visual representation or with that of a text (Mitchell 1994, p. 89, 98f.).

1.2 The language of photographs

As mentioned in the introduction, *photo sharing* has become an integral part of SNS usage for older teens, who like to post photographs of themselves on their SNS-profiles (Madden, et al. 2013, p. 33). Consequently, there is an increase of SNS usage with a visual emphasis in the U.S. (cp. Lenhart 2015, p. 28f.), as well as in Europe (e.g. Germany; cp. Feierabend, Plankenhorn, & Rathgeb 2015, p. 49). Therefore, it appears virtually inevitable to ask: Why are pictures so important to adolescents and young adults online? For instance, do pictures (respectively images) speak a language of their own which is perhaps better suiting for their needs, as opposed to the more “traditional” forms of written

² “By ‘image’ I mean any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other.” (Mitchell 2005, p. XIII)

language? If so, it seems advisable to begin by asking, what this *language of images* is. How can it be characterized? Although language of images may refer to multiple aspects of the way we understand the relationship between image and language, this paper shall solely focus on *images considered as language*, in respect to the medium of photography. The notion of photographs incorporating some sort of language is fairly intriguing, as it may mark an access point for understanding their value for society. In fact, this is neither new nor revolutionary. It is one of the two most popular approaches for characterizing pictures on that regard. On the one hand, photography can be considered as something separate from language: a “purely objective transcript of visual reality” (Mitchell 1994, p. 281f.). Essentially, this derives from the belief that photos are a product of an automatic and ever-repetitive process that is immune to manipulation. However, the claim that photos copy reality objectively (as an uncoded “objective transcript”) has been dismissed in manifold art discourses. But even outside of these discourses, this view can be excluded from these considerations, as “camera attributes” like sensor or the choice of lens and motif already decide a photo’s subjectivity – at best it would be able to depict one aspect of reality. The second approach, however, understands a photo as having a language of its own or as becoming absorbed by language in actual usage (coded) (ibid, p. 282). In this particular view, a photograph is seen as being something that forms a reality, which is independent from language and even recedes it (Boehm 2006a, 2006b).

But, when can we consider a photograph as something that implies its own language and when is it “just” something that is an adjunct or a supplement of language? Mitchell proposes (based on the ideas and conceptions of Roland Barthes) that the *resistance* of both photography and language, as well as how it is possibly overcome, is of great relevance (Mitchell 1994, p. 284f.). For example: Does a photograph “work” without text (its own language) or is it dependent on a title, or even an explanatory subtitle of some sort (an adjunct of language)? He goes through four case studies to exemplify this but does not conclude a universal answer. Rather, it is argued that pictures call for a qualitative approach: Each and every photograph needs to be carefully assessed regarding its nature.

1.3 Picture reality or picturing reality?

The query regarding language inevitably shifts focus to the nature of the relationship between photographs and reality: What kind of reality do they depict? Do they constitute reality themselves? The dominance of our *photographic perspective*, which is generally acquired over the years, tricks us into believing that photographs are realistic in the sense of being an objective copy of reality (Böhme 2004, p. 120). Unfortunately, it is more complicated than that. Although one may find several conceptions on the relationship between picture and reality in different disciplines, Gernot Böhme (2004) has introduced a systematic overview that provides us with an impression of that variety. He gives examples of photographs as: “quasi-copies” (Abbildungen) (however, not in an isomorphic sense, like a “objective transcript”, but rather as the picture’s utmost comparative form of *mimesis* [imitation, reproduction]), signs that can be described by their reference to the signified objects (which

opens up the possibility of translation into language), photographs as an agent of communication (the photograph is determined by its use), and the photograph as hyper-reality (Böhme 2004, p. 111-127; cp. Breckner 2007, p. 128). According to Böhme, hyper-reality refers to the idea that the photograph determines what reality actually is. Over the years, we have grown accustomed to the way pictures structure our perception and, therewith, the way they reveal what we consider to be reality (Böhme 2004, p. 119ff.). The “character” and function of a photograph, regarding its relation to reality, may be difficult to understand prior to analysis, especially since photos may incorporate some of the before-mentioned aspects. Therefore, the grasping of different “characters” and functions of the particular photograph needs to be part of the inquiry (cp. Becker 2007).

Despite the fact that photographs are widely regarded to as “copies” of reality in everyday language (e.g. private photo album or as evidence in trial), they do often go beyond this “plain description” and refer to additional characteristics such as aesthetics, communication, or even semiotic elements (Breckner 2003, p. 39, 2007, p. 129). Considering the example of advertising, Erving Goffman (1979) showed that these characteristics may be agents for creating *hyper-realities*. That we, as a society, still think that photographs can be objective copies of reality, seems to be a relict of past days, when photos were used to assist science in capturing outcomes more precisely (Dubois 1990, p. 34). Ultimately, this derives from the idea that photographs leave us with the ability to document the physical existence of someone or something in a particular photographic way (Barthes 1982, p. 85; Dubois 1990, p. 39). Hence, photos have a special relationship with the past: “What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once.” (Barthes 1982, p. 4) But, this only seems to count for unedited photos. Today, due to advanced computer technology, pictures can be generated through software. What we see, must not have necessarily taken place; it might as well be a computer-generated illusion in some cases.

1.4 What are the implications for identity research?

So, what does this all suggest in conjunction with identity construction processes in and through photographs? First off, it appears to be advisable to formulate a clear definition of reality, as the term may incorporate different conceptions. Regarding identity-formation processes (as individual processes), reality is experienced and constructed by each person and relies on multiple (intrapersonal) factors, such as emotions (e.g. fear or happiness), beliefs, experiences and motivations. These shift attention to certain aspects of what is actually taking place (“social perception”). One is never capable of perceiving everything there is to perceive and, therefore, one experiences things or moments different than others may. In this sense, reality is more of a personal, respectively social reality than an “objective” one, which is present regardless of the mental construction processes of the experiencing individual (e.g. the earth revolving around the sun). Yet, photographs capture more than what one may experience. However, they also cannot record everything there is. One illustrative example is that of shadows: We know that chromatic shadows exist and sometimes we even visually notice them. But,

unlike with humans, standard cameras have trouble recording their color, as either no or too little light reaches the sensor (Böhme 2004, p. 120f.). Another example is that of electromagnetic radiation: What both the human eye and standard cameras are able to capture is the so-called “visible light”, having wavelengths ranging from 400-760 nm (Wenisch 2010, p. 464). However, other forms of electromagnetic radiation, such as infrared (longer wavelength) or ultraviolet rays (shorter wavelength), cannot be seen or captured (unless specific cameras are employed). Nonetheless, they are present and part of “objective” reality. Thus, when considering typical photographs as being an “objective” copy of reality (in the sense of mathematical accuracy [“Abbildung”]), one must come to the conclusion that standard photographs can never reach such high-stacked claims – regardless of if referring to a “objective” or a “subjective” reality. For identity research, this means that photographs first and foremost provide the subjective view of the photographer at a given instant.

2. The method(s): Objective Hermeneutics and Segment Analysis

“What do pictures want?” (Mitchell 2005): At first, this seems to be an odd question. To take it literally would ignore Mitchell’s point. This question rather acknowledges the complexity and individuality of photographs, which in turn calls for a qualitative approach. Objective Hermeneutics may provide the specific tools needed. The method first came to be known in German sociology and pedagogy. Fortunately, English literature on the method has also been published in recent times (e.g. Wernet 2014; Reichertz 2004; Lueger & Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 1994; Oevermann et al. 1987). Objective Hermeneutics is considered to be a *Kunstlehre*³ (Oevermann et al. 1979, p. 391-394), essentially deriving from the works of Ulrich Oevermann (1979/1987), a Frankfurt sociologist. As studies in many kinds of academic disciplines have shown (e.g. *policy evaluation*: Mann & Schweiger 2009; *marketing*: Wagner, Lukassen, & Mahlendorf 2010; *psychotherapy research*: Borcsa 2016; *educational research*: Scheid & Twardella 2011), the method can be utilized in many fields. Although Objective Hermeneutics was primarily developed to be used in (written) protocols of everyday interaction, over the course of time it has also been successfully applied to literature, paintings and alike. The method aims to reconstruct *objective* structures of significance (Bedeutungsstrukturen) and latent structures of meaning (Sinnstrukturen). The reconstruction becomes necessary, as Oevermann et al. argue: “We might also say that a text⁴, once produced, comprises a social reality of its own that must be reconstructed with procedures adequate to it.” (ibid.) Unlike other methods, Objective Hermeneutics was rather designed to be used on material that derives from everyday experience and was produced less for “special analysis purposes”. The theoretical basis of the method refers to Structuralistic Theory (Wernet 2014, p. 235). As this article will further discuss results drawn from the before-mentioned case studies, no in-depth debate about the method can be provided.

³ *Kunstlehre* refers to what Kai-Olaf Maiwald calls “*guided learning-by-doing*” (Maiwald 2005, n.p.).

⁴ Oevermann et al. (1987) refer to “all recorded interactions, in whatever medium and in whatever technical format, which may be regarded as valid interaction texts” (p. 438).

2.1 Methodological positions⁵

Objective Hermeneutics operates under the assumption that *social action is lead by rules*⁶, meaning that we can see the visible choice of action derived from a “reservoir of action options”. It is presumed that these rules, which are not to be mistaken for “norms”⁷, exist way before the action even takes place and apply to the case structure (e.g. subject) being examined, as well as to the examiner (Wernet 2014, p. 238). The action options of a *Lebenspraxis* (“life-practice”) and their consequences are predetermined by social rules and, therefore, structures can be reconstructed. The decision (selection) about the choice of the particular action option is presumed to be an act of free will and, thus, is only determined by the acting person. This protocolled *decision* of an action option reflects not only the particular of a given case, but also “its reality” (Wernet 2009, p. 15). Since a given document of interaction usually contains more than one point of decision, this leads to the idea of understanding a given case as a “*story of decisions and justifications*” (Kleemann, Krähnke, & Matuschek 2009, p. 121). Each selection of an action option is not arbitrary (Oevermann et al. 1979, p. 394), but follows a structure, which gives the recorded *Lebenspraxis* its specific character.

As a protocol of social reality generates both manifest, as well as latent structures of meaning, especially the *reconstruction of latent structures of meaning* and, therewith, the reconstruction of objective structures of significance are of particular importance. Latent structures of meaning are not immediately accessible and not always mentally realized by the subjects while interacting with each other. The manifest level (subjective-intentional representations) consists of opinions, views and alike and, on a procedural level, has to be disregarded during the reconstruction of latent structures of meaning. This is due to the Objective Hermeneutic notion that manifest structures of representation cannot be traced back to the text’s⁴ genuine social reality (cp. beginning of this chapter). Nevertheless, the method does not completely ignore what occurs within a subject (Oevermann et al. 1987, p. 438). Manifest structures of representation, however, can only be considered after the latent structures of meaning have been extracted (Wernet 2014, p. 235f.; Wernet 2009, p. 18). Otherwise, researchers run the risk of becoming lost in circularity, as they may only try to understand a given case through its superficial context. The difference between manifest intentions and latent structures of meaning⁸ is very critical to Objective Hermeneutics (Oevermann et al. 1979, p. 380; 1987, p. 349). The reconstruction of the relation between intentions and latent meaning of action gives us an insight on possible differences, tensions, and even contradictions (Oevermann et al. 1987; Wernet 2014, p. 235f.).

⁵ The following considerations are based on a media pedagogical method workshop article (German): cp. Fischer 2016 [in press].

⁶ There are two main sets of rules, those with a (1) universal (e.g. the Theory of Universal Grammar by Noam Chomsky as well as rules of morality: “Thou shalt not kill”; address methodological control) and those with a rather (2) “convertible” (depend on several factors, such as milieu, social stratum, region or generation; address research interest) character (Kleemann, Krähnke, & Matuschek 2009, p. 114).

⁷ Norms describe what one should do and rules imply what it means to have done or not done something (Wernet 2009, p. 13).

⁸ The difference between manifest structures of representation and latent structures of meaning is analogous to the difference between manifest and latent functions (Merton) and the difference between the manifest topic of a dream and its latent idea (Freud) (Wernet 2014, p. 235f.).

Another important assumption of Objective Hermeneutics regards the “generalization of structure”. Both the general, as well as the particular are intertwined in a case of social reality. For example, while the selection of action options is a perfect example of the *particular* in each and every case, these decisions regarding the choice of the particular action option are based on *universal* rules, which are a representative for the general in a case.

As formerly mentioned, a given case is perceived as a “story of decisions and justifications”, which means that each and every decision concerning an action option is to be understood as a subsequent connection possibility. *Sequence Analysis* describes the methodical tool needed to properly analyze this “story”. Most importantly, the text⁴ and its natural succession must lead the researcher, not the other way around. Sequence Analysis works fine with written documents, however, not so much with pictures, as they do not have an obvious succession that can be followed in a sequential manner. Roswitha Breckner tries to overcome this issue by developing *Segment Analysis* (2003, 2007, 2010), which shall be briefly presented.

2.2 Methodical procedure: Segment Analysis

Obviously, a picture is not the same as a written text. One of the greater differences lays in the way we approach it: While in western societies, written texts are composed and read from left to right and top to bottom, pictures appear not to have such a universal, objective procession for their viewing. In fact, it seems as if the spectator perceives the picture in an intrapersonal and *almost* simultaneous process. Seemingly, there is a visible chronological order missing. For the methodical procedure of Objective Hermeneutics, this generates a severe problem: How can one apply Sequence Analysis when there is no sequential order observable? In regard to the works of Rudolf Arnheim (1980), we know that pictures may have something similar to a sequential order to offer. It is argued that our view is guided by structures (lines, figures etc.): “The process of structuring, in which each element receives its character by taking its place in the whole, occurs to some extent below the level of consciousness. What the viewer ‘sees’ in the picture is already the outcome of that organizational process.” (Arnheim 1980, p. 494) In other words: *Gestalt*⁹ constitutes itself through structures and its realization takes place in the process of perception, which also means that *gestalt* can still be altered within the process (cp. also Imdahl 1980; Breckner 2010, p. 280;). Objects and spatial aspects of a picture direct the process of viewing as much as iconic elements and their possible interconnections (Breckner 2007, p. 130). That being said, it becomes evident that viewing a picture is no arbitrary process. However, as long as it is not transferred into a shared sphere (usually written form), it remains an internal process.

Roswitha Breckner therefore proposes to gradually describe and analyze *segments* within the photograph that are almost simultaneously perceived. Segments basically refer to meaningful elements, motifs, and figures (so-called *elements of meaning*) (Breckner 2003, p. 41; 2012, p. 148).

⁹ The *gestalt* of a picture can be colors, forms, figures or lines that constitute particular perspectives, compositions or structures within the picture (cp. Imdahl 1980).

The methodical procedure is based on Arnheim, who suggests to “draw a fence around each of the elements and consider them in succession rather than in a synoptic overview.” (1980, p. 495)

The *first step* marks a reflection of one’s own perception process. This means that one is to “observe” his or her own way of looking at the photograph. With this, a “*timeline*” of the viewing process is generated. Time, in general, is essential for the idea of *sequentiality* (without time, there is no successive order of events and, therefore, no “story of decisions and justifications”) and by generating a sequence of perception, time is introduced back into the interpretation process. This helps both to identify the different segments that grab our attention, as well as to describe the formal structure of the picture.

Once the formal setup of the photograph and the way one approaches it (as an intrapersonal process) is transferred into written form, analysis may be performed in a *second step*. When referring to the Objective Hermeneutic methodology, in-depth analysis of the commencement of a given interaction document (e.g. photographs, texts, etc.) is crucial (Lueger & Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 1994, p. 300). As photographs do not provide us with an obvious “beginning”, Segment Analysis starts with the segment that appears to be constitutionally crucial for the entire photograph. Analogous to Objective Hermeneutics, each segment must be investigated apart from external context knowledge¹⁰ (so-called context-free interpretation¹¹). Hence, different hypothetical “readings” regarding the thematic, symbolic, and iconic meaning of the segment are formulated (Breckner 2007, p. 130). This is achieved by constructing different hypothetical contexts, which fit the particular segment in the sense that they are still meaningful even within the previously generated hypothetical contexts.¹² By doing so, one can extract the latent structures of meaning.

A *third step* concerns itself with the *pragmatic context*: How was the photograph made, kept, used, and received? This is supposed to help in investigating whether the potential meaning of the photograph was realized through usage and how it possibly became constituted during this process (Breckner 2007, p. 131).

In a *final step*, all previous steps and their results are to be considered together: How does something become visible through and within a photograph? It is assumed that knowledge about the particular organization of a picture and its use in a specific case may provide insight into the “structuring of meaning” (Breckner 2007, p. 131).

¹⁰ Objective Hermeneutics differentiates between external and internal context knowledge. The latter refers to the “inner context” of interpretations. The later refers to knowledge that comes from outside the given document (Wernet 2014, p. 243).

¹¹ As pointed out earlier, external context knowledge must be disregarded at first, so that latent structures of meaning can be properly extracted. In a later step, the manifest structures of representation (e.g. wishes, hopes, thoughts, etc.) are contrasted with the latent structures of meaning (cp. above).

¹² This implies that only those contexts are constructed, which still remain within plausible scenarios.

3. The aesthetics of death and the beauty of life: A look at the case studies

The following excerpts from case studies attempt to reconstruct identity construction processes in and through photographs on Instagram¹³. As photographs are an important aspect, yet not the sole aspect of Instagram, results drawn from photo analysis must be considered in relation to the comments. This will be done in the hopes of displaying the context in which photographs were posted, along with displaying the overall spectrum. Due to the fact that the procedure of Objective Hermeneutic analysis is fairly extensive (cp. section on the methods), this article must limit the discussion to select findings and results that appear to be characteristic of identity construction in and through photographs on SNS. A detailed description of particular aspects of the investigative process would certainly do the matter greater justice, however, it is impossible to go into further detail given the limited space. Consequently, this contribution is only capable of providing a first glimpse on the matter.

3.1 A brief introduction of the sample

Since this work is currently “in progress”, only exemplary excerpts from three profiles shall be discussed. The profile owners are US-American teenagers¹⁴ and young adults between the ages of 16 and 19 (entire sample: 12 to 21 years of age). The profiles investigated, however, date back to times when some of the teenagers were 14 years old.

The following case studies focus on Instagram profiles from US-American teenagers and young adults due to several reasons: *First*, developments in the field of visual SNS in the United States have been progressing noticeably faster than in Germany (although German teenagers and young adults are catching up). *Second*, SNS, with an emphasis on the visual lucidly, show the shift from mostly written to more visual interaction forms. *Third*, *app-culture* has profoundly shifted into research focus.

3.2 Analysis procedure

Roughly speaking, almost all SNS have developed and followed a plain but effective framework over the years: profile picture, name, basic statistics (e.g. quantity of postings), and content. The profile picture is probably one of the more critical components. It is designed to take the profile owner out of Internet anonymity and provide him/her with a visible identity. The profile pictures, therefore, may have a function similar to that of an ID-card or a passport in everyday life: especially, since they can be viewed by everyone (even by visitors who have not been granted full access to the profile as *followers*). Unlike a passport picture, profile owners have the power to decide over how and what they want to depict in their profile pictures. That being said, extensive analysis was performed on the profile picture in a *first step*. *Subsequently*, the posted pictures in the profile are clustered in regard to obvious themes (e.g. hunting, love relationships, friendship, school, etc.). Ideally, the extracted themes and clues from profile picture analysis are reflected in the cluster. However, this would constitute a rare ideal case, since the identities are in the midst of their formation processes and, with that, themes

¹³ As the current most popular SNS with visual emphasis.

¹⁴ Parental consent was obtained from minors. All participants gave their permission.

are very likely to change over the course of time. Therefore, it is more plausible that an up-to-date profile picture connects thematically with the latest postings, rather than with the older ones. In a *third step* results are brought together.

3.3 My cabin, my girlfriend, and look who I met! Self-presentation as a means of Identity construction

Who am I? Or, how do I want to be perceived by others? These are inevitable questions one faces when trying to find the “right” profile picture. As it is visible to followers and non-followers alike, the profile picture takes on an important role for identifying the profile owner. Although the choice of the particular picture is theoretically unlimited, Instagram, however, predetermines a round form for the picture’s display. Sometimes, this round form can provoke confusion, especially when a picture is chosen which does not conform with the circular frame.

Adolescents and young adults need to find a picture that ultimately suits their personalities. Particularly for younger teens, this poses a fairly challenging task, which can be solved by either using pictures from the Internet (e.g. pineapple picture), or a photograph of a specific object (e.g. a cabin in the forest). In contrast to this, older teens and young adults mostly utilize pictures depicting themselves or depicting them together with friends, siblings, partners or celebrities.

In almost all cases, the profile picture gave some sort of hint as to which “themes” the visitor should expect when entering the account (e.g. hunting, friends & family, etc.). Also, the profile picture needs to be seen in a light of self-expression. In these cases, self-expression took on many forms and it sometimes resulted in a complete refusal. “A”¹⁵ (20 years old, female), for instance, chose to leave the profile picture blank. In her case, it can be assumed that her refusing to choose a profile picture meant her not wanting to take much part in the community: The profile only hosts two postings (from September 2015 and from February 2014), although it has existed since February 2014. “A” rejects to post a profile picture and it seems as if she barely uses the account.

At a first glimpse, it appears as if “B” (16 years old, male) also refuses to present himself to the Instagram community with a “proper” photograph of himself. Instead, he uploaded a photograph of a cabin in the forest. But, as analysis revealed, this sort of profile picture should not be understood as a comprehensive refusal, but rather as a way, in which the teenager chooses to present himself: It’s not the cabin per se that he focuses on – it’s the place; it’s nature and the activities (e.g. game control) that he takes part in while there. The picture only seems to make sense if one has access to the rest of the profile or knows “B” and what the cabin represents for him. Therefore, the profile picture may generate a particular uncertainty for the viewer, concerning whether or not one is dealing with “B” or some other person with a similar profile name.

¹⁵ All profile names have been made anonymous.



Photograph 2: The original photograph of C's profile picture (© by "C")

In opposition to this, "C" (19 years old, male) is rather straightforward with his chosen photograph: It depicts him with a girl who is pinching his cheeks, while he's smiling with closed eyes. The scene appears to be a happy one and the intimacy of both is obvious. However, the relationship status only becomes evident when comparing other posted pictures or the header, in which "C" has posted several hearts. The profile picture, therefore, provides us with a thematic clue; namely, that he's in a relationship. At a simple first glance, it doesn't seem to fit in with older postings. However, when interpreting the profile picture in light of finding and establishing a gender-identity as a striving force, it seems to actually form a connection with older postings as well. Especially in older sports-related photographs, he noticeably presents himself as a "man": someone who accomplishes things (e.g. winning a football game, etc.). This attempt, however, mostly fails and appears to be a fairly juvenile one, since he is still "stuck" in a teenager's body. It's noteworthy, that manhood is often communicated through showing a muscular body or athletic abilities. Although "masculinity" still remains a theme throughout his recent postings, the older he becomes (and the more his body develops), the less he distinctively underlines it. Let's take the profile picture as an example: There is no necessity to prominently stage-manage masculinity or "being a man", since a heterosexual relationship already suggests both. Another example may be the way he presents himself as being a successful businessman (selling sneakers). There is no need to emphasize being grown-up anymore, since operating a business already implies taking on some of the responsibilities of adulthood (as law prohibits minors from concluding contracts or running businesses).

A similar, yet rather emerging behavior can be seen with "B". He presents himself to the community mainly, but not exclusively, as a hunter (an activity that is certainly reserved for responsible adults). With that, he is caught in a field of tension: On the one hand, he seems very childlike. On the other hand, he already takes on some adult-like and rather masculine responsibilities and is enthusiastic to show this to his peers. Some pictures show him carrying a firearm, while others show him having shot wild animals or caught fish (cp. photographs 4 & 5).

In general, "B's" profile is a good example of how slow identity construction at first unfolds. With each posting, the field of tension appears to increase in its visibility and, with this, the issue of "becoming a man" becomes more evident. In some of the posted pictures we can find "B's" rather

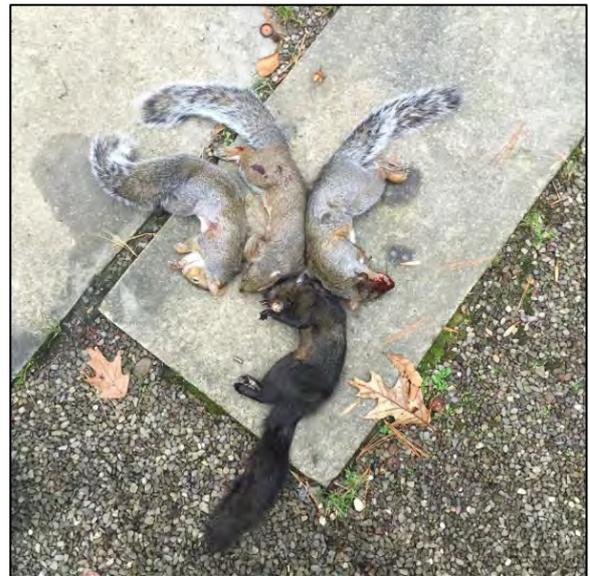


Photograph 3: “Beautiful landscape” (© by “B”).



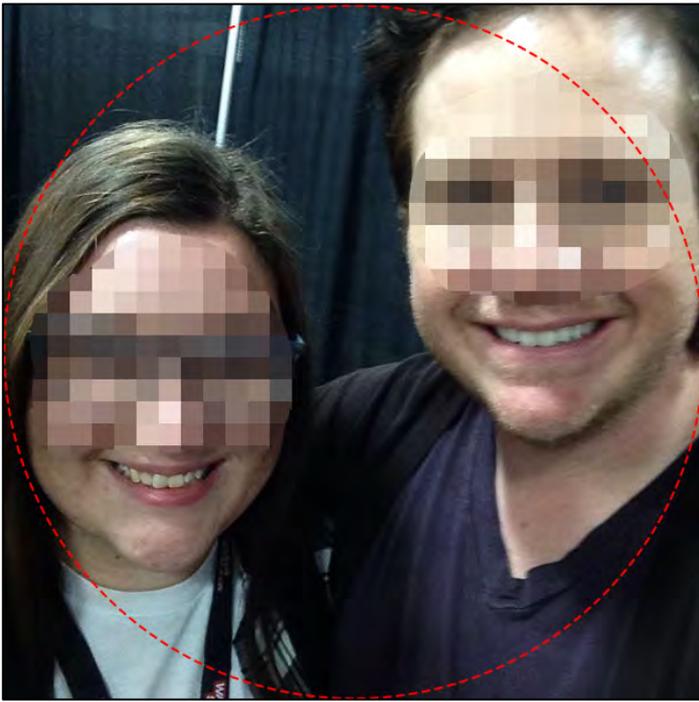
Photograph 4: Caught fish (© by “B”).

childish attempts at somehow trying to “heal” his deadly deeds; for example, by arranging the hunted squirrels in a thoughtful, yet slightly clumsy manner (cp. photograph 5). On the other hand, he also provides us with a realistic view on hunting. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the boy has been coarsened – that would be a naïve urban perspective on nature and how humans interact with it (e.g. strolling, hiking, etc.). The care and protection of game is an essential part of caring for nature. Taking pictures of the preparations and outcomes of such activities gives the profile visitors insight on how the boy deals

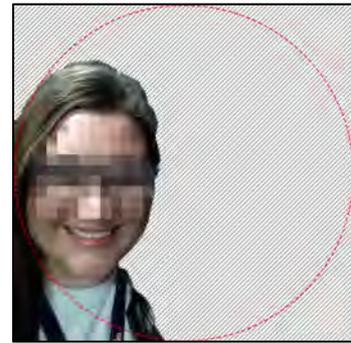
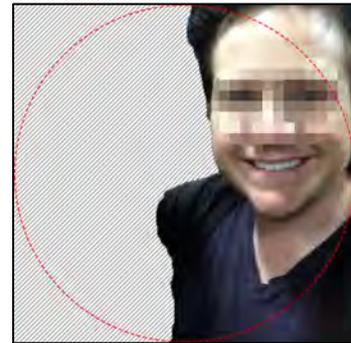


Photograph 5: Arranged squirrels (© by “B”).

with this elementary issue: Eating food always means death, regardless of when speaking of the death of an animal or that of a plant. “B” provides us with a realistic, yet sometimes childish view on this topic: With his attempts at “healing” his deadly deed (by arranging the dead animals in a rather thoughtful manner), he creates an *aesthetic of death* in his photographs. This has to be seen in contrast to the *beauty of life*. The contrasting beauty becomes noticeable in photographs that depict, for instance, a fawn drinking by a river or a beautiful forest scene (cp. photograph 3). The contrasting beauty can also be seen in family portraits or pictures with friends. However, what is quite perceptible is that “B” does not focus on the actual process of the hunt and the skills required. This is only implicitly depicted through photographing the “end result”. It’s most likely due to the fact that photographing while hunting is quite challenging and counterproductive for both the hunt, as well as



Photograph 6: The original photograph of D's profile picture; the red circle represents the actual frame of the profile picture (© by "D"/edited: F.F.).



Photographs 7 & 8: Segments of the left-hand photograph (© by "D"/edited: F.F.).

the picture.

When having a look at the profile of "D" (19 years old, female), other aspects of identity development become evident. Unlike other profile pictures, it doesn't appear as if the profile owner, but rather another person, is accentuated. When examining the profile picture more closely, this effect is due to the overall space that the man takes up in the photograph. When cropping both segments (man and girl) out and viewing them separately in regard to the overall composition, the man significantly takes up more space. Also, the man appears to be better lit than the girl, which shifts even more focus onto him. However, what makes this man so special that she willingly shifts focus away from herself? When looking at the original photograph, in the photo section of the profile, we see two things that weren't noticeable, simply by looking at the profile picture: First, the focus of the photo is actually on the girl, not on the man. Second, the commentary on the side reveals the identity of the man; he's an actor. Unlike profile pictures of other young adults, the girl (as the profile owner) is not emphasized all that much, but rather the other person depicted. This is not accidental, as a profile picture has to be actively chosen. When understanding a profile picture as some form of identification on SNS, then "D" clearly addresses two sorts of community members: Those who know her from face-to-face situations and the people who like the actor and, therefore, are also interested in individuals who may have met him or appreciate his work. On that regard, she introduces herself to the community with a "bang": "Look who I met!" In terms of identity formation, she seems to seek peers who share the same interests. Among other factors, depicting and emphasizing a TV celebrity in the profile picture may aim for the admiration of fellow peers. She displays it in a similar way, in which a sportsman would display a trophy: She's proud of her accomplishment and wants to show it.

The seeking of other peers who share common interests is an integral part of the way she currently self-presents. Before, most posts were concerned with school friends and after-school activities (e.g. marching band). These changing themes need to be seen in the context of a transition that is located outside of the platform; namely “going off to college”. Visitors are also presented with different clues regarding this assumption, for example, a picture of a mug from a fraternity she recently joined.

This new chapter in life implies the unfolding of new possibilities that enable her to experiment with different roles. Whereas older photos were mostly taken in the area around where “D” went to high school, new pictures show various places: fan conventions (mostly “The Walking Dead”), museums, college, stadiums, the beach, different cities (e.g. New York City), etc. Also, earlier photographs were mostly concerned with friends and family. Closer analysis of these photographs revealed some ambivalence that needs to be seen in the context of this transition. Also, hashtags (#) that are provided with almost every post seem to be an integral part. The hashtag pages that they refer to can be viewed by anyone, regardless of one being a follower of a particular profile or not. With that, she theoretically expands her possible audience and reaches out to peers yet unknown.

In all three discussed exemplary cases, both popularity and “reputation” amongst peers appeared to be very important themes. Depending on their ages and genders, the ways in which adolescents and young adults pursued popularity and “reputation” were different. For example “B” and “C” tried to come across as being both tough and masculine men. Apart from the comments of peer acknowledgments, such as “*Alright C*” (with a devil and a crying smiley) or “*Oh my*” (with four smiles that have heart shaped eyes), “C” and his girlfriend are virtually showcasing their “perfect” relationship (“*You’re beyond perfect [...]*”). However, it’s the juvenile way of displaying first love (e.g. certain poses), which reminds the viewer that we are still dealing with teenagers. Also, “D” is trying to receive some recognition from her peers by presenting them with a celebrity she recently met. She goes as far as presenting herself with him on her own profile picture. Another similarity one can



Photograph 9: E.g. of edited photo (© by “C”).



Photograph 10: E.g. of edited photo (© by “C”).

find with all three profiles is that most of the followers, who take part in the community by making comments, are people they know from everyday life (e.g. by commenting on events that they took part in). As seen with photograph 3 (B's profile), pictures were sometimes edited to match the viewer's experience with that of the photographer's at the time. Other photographs seem to have been edited to accentuate a certain perspective or to show that the photograph and what it contains belongs to the past (cp. photographs 9 & 10). With that, focus was laid on aesthetics and *aesthetical experience*. However, aesthetics were not exclusively connected with editing a picture with the app, but could also be realized by the photographer through arranging motifs, as seen with photograph 5 (B's profile).

4. Summary and future implications

The briefly presented overview reveals the great need for the qualitative analysis of photographs on SNS. As formerly remarked, the presented results are part of an ongoing endeavor and are by no means concluded. Therefore, future investigations shall be conducted. However, when summarizing the results from the above-mentioned investigations, heuristic categories with respect to identity construction can be formulated:

Self-presentation: As shown, older adolescents and young adults utilize photography on SNS to negotiate their identities by the means of self-presentation: How do I see myself? How do I want to be seen by others? Especially profile pictures provide an effective tool for presenting oneself to followers or other SNS users. Profiles from younger adolescents did not turn out to be quite as concerned with self-presentation. When reviewing literature on identity formation, this seems coherent, as identity development is mostly connected to what Piaget introduced as the *formal operations stage* (cognitive development). Piaget's final stage refers to the individual's ability to hypothetically reason, which is typically developed during the ages of 12–15 years (Piaget 2008/1972, p. 41). Hypothetical reasoning is needed in order to cognitively explore different social roles (Kail & Cavanaugh 2013, p. 316).

Defining and establishing a gender-identity: The investigated photographs were used, in part, to depict one's affiliation with a certain gender. Especially the male participants depicted themselves as being masculine (e.g. as a hunter) and heterosexual (e.g. as a boyfriend). "D", analogously, aimed to come across as feminine (e.g. feminine appearing selfies), especially in older pictures.

Popularity and keeping up appearances: Popularity amongst peers was another major finding. Reviewing the example of "D", we were able to see that "self-presentation", in the sense of communicating what one is doing or what one has accomplished, is fairly important. Photographs are quite tempting in that way. From advertisements or commercial films, we know that if we acquire the necessary skills and spend enough money and time, we can get it just right: the perfect illusion of oneself. "C" acts in a similar way, by depicting a perfect love with his girlfriend. But this "illusion" crumbles when self-image and reality collide in one picture: for instance, in "C's" older pictures, in which his youthful appearance is contrasted by the partially failing attempt to look adult-like and

manly. These ambivalences especially characterize photographs from middle and late adolescence, the time in which first steps are taken towards experimenting with one's own identity.

Aesthetics as a means of expressing emotions: To put emotions into words is a difficult undertaking. This can require a large mental thesaurus and some eloquence in formulating a suitable sentence. Photographs provide a tool for expressing what could be called an *aesthetic experience*. As Martin Seel (1993) argued, aesthetics doesn't begin with art. In fact, art is just a special form of aesthetics (p. 48). Therefore, pictures don't have to appear artistic in order to inherent aesthetics. Although Instagram provides its users with a large variety of tools to express themselves through artistic pictures, these tools are not always necessary. Sometimes aesthetics are acquired in other ways (cp. "B"). On that behalf, aesthetic experience is essential for both the photographer, as well as the spectator. By setting the mood through the use of filters or by composing the photograph in a certain way, the profile owners grant us the opportunity to experience the ways that they both explore and learn about the world around them, as well as how they connect to it.

Real friends in a virtual environment: Not every follower must be an acquaintance from the "real world". However, through the way in which "D", for instance, choses her profile picture, we can assume that she generally knows the people hanging out on her profile. Also, most comments on the investigated profiles refer to incidents from "real life"

Picturing identity or pictured identity?

This contribution aims to provide a first glimpse at how identity construction becomes visible through and takes place in pictures on SNS – regardless of the platform or the actual medium (analog/digital). Instagram, as a popular representative of SNS with a distinct visual emphasis, is one tool, amongst many others, that provides a social space where teens and young adults can congregate and do what they have always been doing: constructing and negotiating their identities. Self-presentation is especially relevant and a great tool to help with doing so, foremost when utilizing photographs. The important question to be asked is: *What does it mean when teenagers and young adults choose SNS to express themselves via pictures?* I have been arguing that they present themselves, not only as *makers* of the photograph, but also as *doers* of the things they depict. In the case of "B", for instance, it would be foolish to assume that the sole thing he cares about is hunting game. Namely, it's more about going out into the wild, looking for the right spot, waiting for the game, and so on and so forth. This, however, is hardly presentable in a photograph. What we see is only the end result.

Using such platforms and photography for identity formation tasks confronts teenagers and young adults with a new form of self-expression. As Mitchell, referring to Nelson Goodman (1978), puts it: Pictures are "ways of worldmaking" (Mitchell 2005, p. XIVf.) and not just a mirror. When taking this proposal seriously, one may argue that identity construction is not just "mirrored" by a given photograph, but identity can actually be co-constructed through it. Photographs generate almost unlimited forms of self-expression. This self-expression through photographs, therewith, forces both

the way that teens and young adults view themselves and how they are viewed by others into a new relationship. As in everyday interactions, both views are mostly part of a fluid process that only becomes immanently visible through actions, making both types of perception less determinable. The determination and ultimately the materialization of these two views in the same medium have implications on identity development and must, therefore, be assessed critically. The entire scope of these implications needs to be part of future psychological as well as pedagogical investigations.

One important implication may certainly be connected to the fact that the Internet never “forgets”. The individual will always be confronted with his or her different identity exploration aspects, which are visible in one way or another. This circumstance especially needs to be regarded by professionals dealing with adolescents and young adults, as well as policy makers alike, since it may create future fields of tension for both the individual and society (as both are intertwined). The individual may be effected due to the roles that he or she may have experimented with and which are perhaps no longer of relevance. These may create a twisted impression at a later time (e.g. at a job interview), especially when the former roles stand in opposition to the current one. Society may be effected due to the uncertainty as to whether or not a posted photograph and its content, as well as its implications should be taken seriously. Lastly, and independent of any particular SNS platform, the great importance of pictures and images to adolescents and young adults can also pose a threat when pictures are misused (for instance, by terrorist online propaganda), as teens and young adults are particularly vulnerable during their search for a “correct” self and role in society.

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