

# Windows to Ourselves or the Visual Worlds of Social Network Sites – Introduction

ULLA P. AUTENRIETH, KLAUS NEUMANN-BRAUN

Online interaction and communication currently takes place primarily on Social Network Sites (sns), such as StudiVZ, SchülerVZ<sup>1</sup>, MySpace, Facebook, and Tilllate, which are frequently used by the vast majority of adolescents in Western countries. Facebook, which is the market leader at the moment, currently combines more than 700 million users under its roof. The research on the phenomenon of social network sites has hitherto focused mainly on the quantitative utilization of the sites or on its overall significance for the communicative behavior of its mainly adolescent users. The emphasis of the research so far has rather been put on the text-based functions and its meaning for the private and social development of adolescents and young adults. However, in addition to language, visual practices of self-expression are crucial for identity development and relationship building on these websites, that is, the use and communication of images is of equally great importance.

In order to make clear how images on social network sites are, one just needs to look at the following numbers: at the end of 2010 approximately 60 billion images had been uploaded on Facebook. Every month some six billion new images are added, which means that by summer 2011 approximately 100 billion images will be posted online. Facebook is, therefore, the biggest picture library on the Web. By means of comparison, one can say that other photo-sharing online platforms that are specialized on showing and distributing pictures possess only a fraction of the contents displayed on Facebook – Photobucket has eight billion photos, Picasa seven billion, and Flickr has five billion. Images are, therefore, the »Killer-App« on the online platforms, that is, one of the most used functions on the social network sites. Apart from showing and viewing pictures for pleasure, they are used for all sorts of communication. For example, one can link pictures to friends, post comments, or rate them.

In the present book, we will be analyzing some aspects of the use of images and the communication and interaction through images on social network sites. We will be looking, on the one hand, at the product level of communication: at the patterns, traditions, and strategies of graphic self-display, as well as at the recep-

1 Popular social network sites in German-speaking countries according to *Facebook*.

tion level with its various utility models and functions of its mainly adolescent users. All of the results presented here have been collected during the research project »Images of Youth in the Internet«.

### *1. The research project »Images of Youth in the Internet«*

The research project »Images of Youth in the Internet. Visual representation of adolescents in the tension between competing photographic frames« (time span: 01/01/2008 – 30/06/2011, lead: Prof. Dr. Klaus Neumann-Braun, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation) deals with visual self-expressions and image-based communication of adolescents and young adults on social network sites. In the process, photographs of adolescents are analyzed as a media-based contribution to identity work and relationship building that would not be imaginable without the influence of media communication.

While traditional mass media is commonly considered relevant in terms of socialization because of its exemplary unidirectional communication from producer to consumer, there are other topics to be raised when it comes to social network sites. As yet unacknowledged questions concerning the forms and social functions of mutual identity, negotiations among adolescent peers within public communication gain importance for research efforts in media and social science.

Within the social exchange processes on social network sites, the personal self-expressions in terms of photographs are of the utmost concern. The overlay of private communication addressed to an informal circle by public communication addressed to a dispersed mass audience causes a hybrid space of self-expression, where strategies of public and private, formal and informal as well as global and local communication entangle.

Against this background and on the methodical basis of a comprehensive Internet ethnography, the study investigates how adolescents arrange these different elements in their photographs and if and to what extent they draw on traditional patterns of photographic design.

Therefore, a variety of empirical surveys was conducted. This included representative telephone interviews with 650 Swiss teenagers and young adults at the age of 12 to 24 years, 50 semi-structured interviews and 12 focus group discussions, as well as network analyses and online ethnographical studies.

On the basis of extensive exemplary case analyses, it is imperative to appraise in what way the adolescents' »self-images« are in fact created autonomously and how strongly the necessities of the new medium (the Internet) as well as the influences of old media (photography, TV) impact the production of photographs. The aim of the current project is to analyze the different photographic self-expression strategies that are used by adolescents in web applications and to con-

trast them with the traditional patterns of design used in classical private photography as well as those used in public (commercial) photography in printed media.

Furthermore, we try to draw conclusions concerning the meaning of various competing »worlds of images« for the structuring of interpretative patterns (by adolescents and adults, respectively) on adolescence and youth cultures as well as finding valuable clues to the question of if and to what extent youth discourses are reflected in competitive, image-bound communication specific to media, especially social network sites. For more information about the research project please see [www.netzbilder.net](http://www.netzbilder.net).

## *2. About the structure of the book*

The book presents an overview of some of the results collected during the research project »Images of Youth in the Internet«. The main focus has been placed on nightlife portals, such as Tilllate as well as friendship platforms, such as Facebook. Every chapter will be summarized in short abstracts in order to make it easier for the reader to gain an understanding of the subject matter.

### **2.1 JÖRG ASTHEIMER, KLAUS NEUMANN-BRAUN, AXEL SCHMIDT** **MyFace: Portrait Photography on the Social Web**

In their contribution »MyFace. Portrait Photography on the Social Web« Jörg Astheimer, Klaus Neumann-Braun and Axel Schmidt examine the portraits of adolescents on social network sites. The portrait, seen as a means to expose a human being, belongs to the most important social aspects of image usage. We use it in order to show ourselves and others who we are or who we would like to be. In that way, iconic displays of ourselves and of other people around us influence the ideas/images that we form of each other. The same rules apply to the social media on the Web. The users of social network sites display pictures on their profiles in order to present themselves/introduce themselves to other users. These portraits are called profile pictures and they are essential for the users' self-representation. They function as representatives of the users in the virtual world of the social network sites. Facing these communicative undercurrents of the user profiles, the authors pursue the question of how adolescents portray themselves through their user profiles. In order to be able to do this, they introduce a typology of profile pictures, which has been designed using social-scientific and hermeneutic image analyses. The typology makes clear that the

traditions of portraiture definitely does not disappear but rather re-appears in a digital guise.

## 2.2 ULLA P. AUTENRIETH

### MySelf. MyFriends. MyLife. MyWorld. Photo Albums on Social Network Sites and Their Communicative Functions for Adolescents and Young Adults

An essential part of the activities on social network sites has to do with images, done as an own photographic production as well as by using images from the mass media. Beyond the simple viewing of pictures, a series of communicative negotiations take place facilitated by the various possibilities for interaction offered on the portals. This contribution will focus on online albums, which can be created on most social network sites. The flood of images is not random, however, but can be divided into 10 types, which are located along three main subject areas centered on: »persons«, »occasions«, and »objects«. The scale and design of the albums can vary considerably, depending on the users' age. The results presented in this text predominantly deal with findings from an extensive study of image production and reception on social network sites by teenagers and young adults aged 12-24. Against the opinion often voiced in the (mass) media, those images are not used for exhibitionist self-display of its owners, but rather offer multifaceted possibilities of »impression management« and, beyond that, have further important functions for the adolescents and their extended peer groups. In particular, some kinds of identity and relationship management are performed on social network sites in a partly public, peer-reviewed process. Moreover, in the paper, the author will deal with the overall social importance of digital face work and the maintenance of »weak ties« in the context of online communications.

## 2.3 JÖRG ASTHEIMER

### Personal Glam Worlds on the Social Web – Photo-documented Facework and Its Performance on Nightlife Platforms

The research into the structures and dynamics of photo usage on social network sites is followed by an analysis of the images on Nightlife Portals in chapter 3: What do we find in them and what kind of aesthetic are they following? The analyses show that nightlife photography is playing to the tradition of portrait and glamorous star photography, varying these slightly as it incorporates them. The codes of the global star system, propelled by cultural-industrial considerations,

are used as guidelines and partygoers showcase themselves before the eyes of the spectators on site at the party for the (mass) public before their computer screens all around the world as an imitation of the originals. The pressure of mediatization and commercialization is applied to activities such as downtime and partying. The reward for »getting dolled up« and posing lies in the achievement of being the most attractive, of being at the top of the ranking lists – maybe not the »Next Topmodel« but at least the queen of the online list or local party.

## 2.4 ROBERTO BRUNAZZI, MICHAEL RAAB, MORITZ WILLENEGGER Bravo Gala! Users and Their Private Pictures on the Horizon of International Star Culture

Chapter 4 adds the angle of the photos taken by the users themselves to the analysis. Thereby, the emphasis is placed on the one type of images to be considered as typical of the amateurs' efforts: imitation of the beloved star and posing before the cameras like they do. Embedded in a continuative discussion of stardom terminology, the authors investigate as to what extent the global star system, propelled by cultural-industrial considerations, has arrived at the point where users have their decisive say in the creation and upkeep of stars. The participation of consumers may go as far as to experiment with the character of a DIY star: partygoers modulate star estheticisms and radicalize their aesthetics with the firm intention to attract attention within the Display Culture – at any cost.

