

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

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## 1. Introduction

The communicative activities of adolescents and young adults on social network sites (sns) have been a very popular topic for media reportage since their inception. This popularity has even intensified since the impressive success of the on-line platforms. An especially frequent topic are the users' photographic practices, which entails both the quantity and the content of the mostly private photographic self-productions that are displayed. With the aid of headlines that verge on the sensational – such as *Nackt unter Freunden* (Naked Among Friends, see Blech et al. 2009 in *Spiegel*) or *Ausziehen 2.0* (Undressing 2.0, see Kutter 2008 in *Zeit Campus*) – a picture is drawn of a generation that has apparently lost any need for private lives. An equally gloomy future scenario through the supposed »end of privacy« (see von Bredow et al. 2010) has been projected as a result.

Depending on their perspective, diverse scholarly publications on the phenomenon of social network sites and their users – see ARD/ZDF 2009; Autenrieth et al. 2010, in this volume; Busemann/Gscheidle 2009; Lenhart/Madden 2007; MPFS 2009; Ofcom 2008; Prommer et al. 2009; Schmidt/Paus-Hasebrink/Hasebrink 2009; Waechter/Triebwetter/Jäger 2010; Wagner/Brüggen/Gebel 2009) – have now labeled them as the Net Generation (Tapscott 2008), Digital Natives (Palvrey/Gasser 2008; Prensky 2001), or the Millennials (Taylor/Keeter 2010). However, these publications mostly concentrate on the general use of the platforms. Up to now, a first step toward examining the aspect of the users' photographic practices in this specific media environment has been taken on the one hand by looking at nightlife photography (see Neumann-Braun/Astheimer 2010), as well as with respect to their potential for social structuring (see Pfeffer/Neumann-Braun/Wirz 2010). The present essay is intended as the next step in this direction. Its objective is to gain further objectifying insights into the photographic activity by adolescents and young adults in online photo albums on sns.

The results presented here are part of the research project »Images of Youth in the Internet. Visual representation of adolescents in the tension between competing photographic frames« (for more information about the research project see [www.netzbilder.net](http://www.netzbilder.net)), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, in which a total of approx. 200 adolescents and young people between the ages of 12 and

24 were consulted in focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and peer group analyses as to their use of self-produced photographs on sns<sup>28</sup>. Some of their online photo albums will now be analyzed as examples.

For this purpose, the two primarily relevant photographic types on sns – the profile picture and album pictures – will be initially compared with each another. This is followed by a description of the communication situation, as well as an analysis of the themes and functions of photo albums, in the lives of young people. In conclusion, a connection will be made between photographic activity on sns and sociological analyses of developmental tendencies in contemporary society.

## 2. *Photo Albums on SNS: Functional Structure and Communicative Framework*

### 2.1 Profile Picture vs. Photo Album

As a standard, almost all social network sites offer users some type of option of making pictures and photographs available online for their social environment. The most obvious variant of this option at first glance is the profile picture, which is usually placed on the upper left edge of the respective profile as a type of identification photo. It functions as a kind of visual representative for the respective user in the various communicative interactions on sns. The content of profile pictures usually shows the profile owner in various poses and scenarios (see Astheimer/Neumann-Braun/Schmidt 2011 in this volume). The use of a profile picture is not actually obligatory for the operation of a corresponding online profile; however, it is practiced by most users. Most portraits that are used for this purpose lend a face to one's own website profile and therefore aid other users in recognizability and authentication.

Through this striking positioning as a solitary individual photo, the profile picture largely dominates a profile page overall impression and places the user's image at the center of attention. Moreover, this is particularly interesting based on the fact that a miniature version (thumbnail) is always included next to the text content in many communicative activities, such as wall comments or messages. As a result, it continually represents the user and is usually visible for every user because profile pictures often cannot be hidden. This is why users must carefully select a suitable photograph.

In addition to the profile picture with its diverse functions as a unique attribute, recognizable representation, and identification document, complete col-

28 For a detailed description of the methodological approach see Autenrieth 2011.

lections of pictures with an almost unlimited scope can be placed online on sns in the form of photo albums and presented to the interested contact network as a result. This makes it is possible to visually depict larger narrative contexts within which the profile owners can present themselves and their environment in various contexts in a multifaceted way.

The albums are usually not directly on the profile page but are linked to the profile as a sub-page through a button. Consequently, it is only visible after a second look at the detailed view of the profile. Depending on the platform used, access to photo albums can be regulated through corresponding security and privacy settings so that – unlike the profile picture – they are often only accessible to a limited audience and can be presented within a protected environment<sup>29</sup>.

While the profile picture is usually very specific in terms of theme and function (with the majority of them showing the profile owner), photo albums are more broadly oriented in their function and are more diverse in their themes. Aside from depictions of the actual person, profile owners frequently document the broader context of their lives here.

The degree to which this occurs underscores that a profile picture as a sole visual representative sign is experienced as insufficient by a majority of users: About 2.5 billion images are uploaded by users onto their respective profiles every month just on market-leader Facebook (see Facebook 2010). As a result, broad segments of the users make an affirmative decision with regard to presenting additional photographic works.

A narrative potential for the visual representation of events and life contexts develops with the presentation of pictures in the form of complete photo albums. Follow-up communication and participation between album owners and album recipients is made possible by the multitude of communication variants in connection with the pictures, such as comment functions and links. This simultaneously represents a kind of interactive reverse channel because the audience reactions to the content displayed are transmitted directly to the album owners. For the user, photographic depictions on sns and the on-site discursive negotiations are therefore also always a peer-reviewed system of symbols for discussing the communicative significance of the pictures.

This fact supports and requires a certain strategic calculation in the creation of photo albums because the image of an individual can – and must – always be created through the presentation of personal photographs.

29 But glitches happen on a recurring basis (see Spiegel 2010). This situation was aggravated by Facebook's new default settings (see Kirkpatrick 2010).

The concrete options that users have for using pictures on their own profiles will be analyzed in the following section. This question will be investigated by employing Facebook as an example to explain which variants and options for creating photo albums exist on sns, as well as the ways in which communication can occur with and within photo albums.

## 2.2 Creating an Individual Photo Album

Facebook generally offers two options for placing photographs online: On one hand, images can be loaded from a PC onto the personal profile; on the other hand, they can be sent to the profile by email through a cell phone. Both variants have their own distinct implications. When users create an album directly on a PC, they are presented with a large number of design options. In the Photos tab on their own profile (which is standard on all profiles), users find the Create an Album button at the top. Clicking on it opens a form that allows them to enter various details for creating a new album. It is first necessary to enter a name for the new album since it is not possible to create an album without this obligatory information. Moreover, a Location can be entered (for albums with vacation photos, this may be the travel destination) as well as a Description for explaining and more precisely defining the pictures that are shown. Finally, the sns contacts with permission to gain access to the album's content can be added in the Privacy field. The current standard (default) setting for this is Friends Only<sup>30</sup>. If this is not changed, the result is that only personal contacts that have been confirmed online can access the images. However, these settings can be restricted even more by granting individually defined users access authorization. They can also be opened further, such as to Friends of Friends, the user's own network<sup>31</sup>, or

- 30 An intensive discussion has broken out about Facebook and its default settings. Many consumer advocates, politicians, and scholars have a very critical view of Facebook's treatment of its users' data. The lack of clarity concerning the privacy settings and the comparatively open default settings have been criticized. After changes to the Terms and Conditions in the winter of 2009/10, the default setting for albums was still Friends of Friends. With an average of 130 contacts on Facebook, this could quickly mean 15,000 people.
- 31 The Network is understood here to mean larger sets, such as high schools or companies/employers, with which users can associate themselves. However, each user is only allowed to be a member of one network. If a user grants access rights to his or her entire personal network, everyone who is a member of that network can see the pictures.

Everyone. In this case, Everyone means all interested Internet users including those who do not have their own Facebook profile<sup>32</sup>.

In order to be able to create an album via cell phone, a user must first assign a personalized upload email address to his or her profile. This makes it possible to post status updates, photos, and videos directly from a mobile telephone to a personal profile. The respective reference of the email is used as a caption without requiring any further effort whenever it contains a photo or video. If this is not the case, then the reference automatically appears online as a status update. However, it should be noted that the default setting Everyone is activated as a standard feature with this variant. This actually makes these pictures visible to everyone for the first moment. Changes to this setting can only be made afterwards with a new visit to the profile. The images loaded onto Facebook via cell phone are automatically collected into an album called Mobile Uploads.

In general, two photo album variants can be distinguished: On one hand, those that are created manually by users at a PC and for which all settings can be adjusted directly; on the other hand, albums through which the users post individual pictures to their profiles. These pictures are then automatically generated to albums by Facebook and can only be fine-tuned by the profile owner afterward. Aside from the previously described Mobile Uploads, there is another series of automatically generated photo albums. For example, all profile pictures uploaded by a user are saved in the Profile Pictures album. Correspondingly, pictures that are posted to one's own wall are collected in a Wall Photos album. Moreover, use-oriented albums are created from the online games<sup>33</sup> that exist on Facebook, for example and can be collected through screenshots of game play. In addition, all pictures in which the user has been linked are collected under Photos of ... (first name of the user). This not only includes the pictures that were placed online by the involved user, but all images to which his or her profile has been linked. The following explanations refer primarily to online photo albums that are created directly by the users themselves on PCs.

As mentioned above, once an album has been created, it is possible to change or revise it. By clicking on the Edit Album button, the user is directed to a sub-page with five different tabs through which various changes can be made.

32 »When you publish content or information using the ›everyone‹ setting, it means that you are allowing everyone, including people off of Facebook, to access that information and to use it and to associate it with you (i.e., your name and profile picture).« (Facebook Terms and Conditions, URL: <http://www.facebook.com/photos.php?id=1142305100#!/terms.php?ref=pf>; date of last revision: May 27, 2010).

33 The best-known example is Farmville.

On the first Edit Photos page, all of the pictures in an album are displayed with several editing options. In the Caption field, the users have the opportunity to describe individual pictures more precisely and as a result, beyond the general description of the album, the individual images are more precisely explained to the observers. Moreover, an album cover for the respective album can be selected or individual pictures can be deleted or moved to other albums.

On the next tab with the label of Add Photos, the respective album can be expanded with additional pictures. Under the Sort column, it is possible to reorganize the images in an album or to reverse the order in which they are displayed. On the Edit Info tab, it is also possible to change the details that were entered when the album was created (album name, location, description, and privacy settings). On the last tab, the entire album can be deleted at once and therefore removed from the personal profile completely.

## 2.3 Communicating with and through Pictures

The communicative discussions as to the meaning of the events, persons, and objects depicted can begin at the moment that a photo album is created. Users have various communicative tools available for this purpose; in turn, carry various implications with them.

For both the album producers and the album recipients, it is possible to post information about a particular album in a user's profile and thereby create a link between the profile and the photo album. This action on the user's part results in all of the respective contacts receiving information about the photo album on their own Facebook profile. So this is a simple way to make a more or less large circle of people – depending on the number of one's own contacts – aware of an album with relatively little effort.

On the other hand, if a user just wants to inform one particular person about an album or a single picture, the album or photo can be shared, which means that a specific is sent a message, the content of which refers to the corresponding picture medium. This means that only one individual person is addressed directly.

In order to make clear that a person likes a particular picture or an entire album, Facebook has what is known as the Like button. This allows the individual to express appreciation with a simple click that produces a note in the profile and timeline.

If someone would like to remark about a picture or album in greater detail, this can be done in the form of a Comment. A special comment function for this is available beneath each album and individual picture. If something is entered in the field provided, this text is displayed directly under the album or picture along with the name and a thumbnail of the author's profile picture. Complete dialogs

between various users, album producers, and album viewers can develop as a result.

Furthermore, it is possible to create a link between a user and a picture. What is known as a Tag can be generated for this purpose. If a user has been tagged (or has tagged himself or herself), then the corresponding picture is displayed in his or her own profile in the automatically generated Photos of ... (first name of the user) album. As a result, it is possible to create a direct reference between a user and a picture for reasons such as documenting that the user is depicted in the photo, participated in an event, or is in some other way related to that picture. Tags are visible through markings on the corresponding pictures in the form of a squared frame. Along with the name of the tagged person, they become visible by using the computer's mouse to touch them with the pointer.

Moreover, there are various functions for receiving an overview of all tags and comments of a particular picture or an entire album: A complete list-like overview of all previously posted comments can be created on the album level through the View All Comments function. In addition, Everyone in This Album can be listed when an album is displayed. This is where thumbnails of the profile pictures can be seen along with user names followed by their respective number of tags in the corresponding album in parentheses.

3. The Thematic Structure of User-Generated Photo Albums on sns

An initial analysis of the photo album content presented on sns reveals that there are three key thematic points for organizing the albums (see fig. 1), which can be separated into person-centered, occasion-centered, and object-centered.

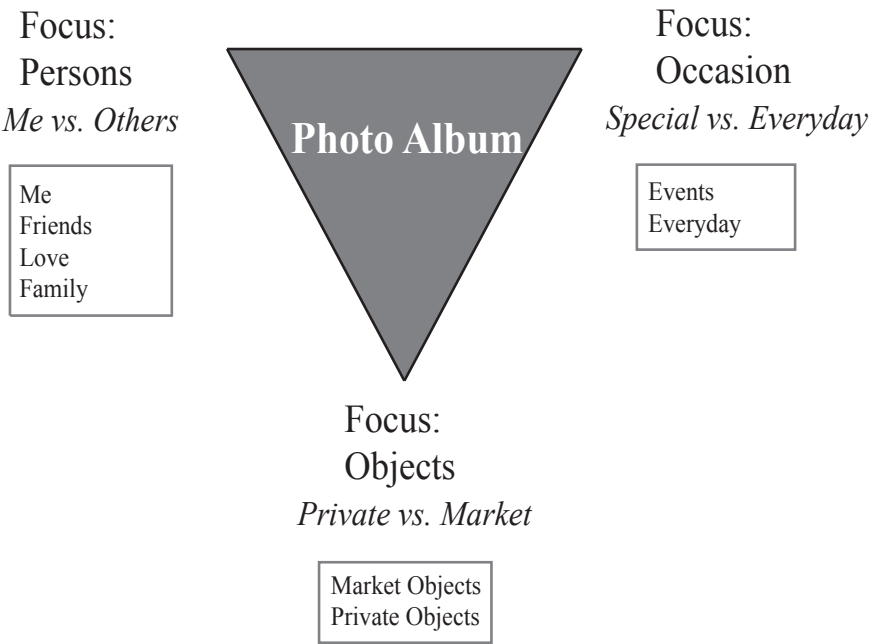


Figure 1: Thematic Structure of Photo Albums on SNS

The structure of the content and the thematic design of the photo albums is examined more closely below and with that, we will attempt to create an analytic typology. For the detailed description of the design model for the content, we tried to find the most ideal typed examples for the different album variants. In fact, some albums can be associated with more than one type or diverse themes can be combined with one another within an album.

a) *Person-Centered Albums (Me vs. Others)*

People are the focus of the image. On one hand, this identifies the content of the pictures; however, it is most clearly shown in the album's title or description, which might say something like My Friends and I. Two variants can be distinguished in this category: On one hand are what are known as Me albums in



which the profile owner primarily presents himself or herself; on the other hand, there are photo albums in which other people – usually the user's friends, i.e. the peer group – are represented.

*Me Albums (fig. 2): Self-Representation* – The central object of this album type is often clear from the titles of the albums, which are often simply Me. The content of the pictures shown here predominantly documents the respective profile owner. The entire photo series presents pictures that show the individual person in various contexts. However, the focus is often on the face or the facial expression. It is often clearly visible that the pictures are self-portraits created with the help of a cell phone, digital camera, or a camera that is part of a personal computer. This often displays a conflict in young people's self-depiction between the need to represent oneself in the most authentic way possible (»This is who I am«) on one hand; on the other hand, in the most idealized way possible (»This is how I look good«). It appears to be feasible to show various facets of one's own personality in the form of the pictures that are used, which emphasizes the diversity of the individual's character. These are usually clearly staged pictures that employ familiar poses, which means no spontaneous snapshots.



Figure 2: Me Albums (festzeit.ch)

The significance of control over one's own image is expressed in two ways: On the one hand, through the homemade production of the picture; on the other hand, in the control over the expressions of one's own body. In the poses that are assumed, both young females and males orient themselves strongly upon the heteronormative models that are seen in the media and advertising (see Brunazzi/Raab/Willenegger 2011, in this volume, following Goffman 1981). The intention here is frequently receiving an acknowledgment from the social environment about one's own image and person. The communication functions of the tags and the comments are of central importance here. Friends and contacts are linked to one's own pictures (even if they do not seem to be involved in the action shown in the picture), which amounts to a request for a comment. The persons who are contacted this way articulate their (decidedly positive) opinions of the given picture in these comments. As a result, tags and comments can be perceived as discursive elements supporting a peer-reviewed self-image that is negotiated between album owners and commenting contact networks.

*Friend Albums (fig. 3): Friends/Acquaintances/Personal Environment* – A profile owner's closer friends are primarily what is shown in Friend albums. Sometimes these are listed individually with portrait photos and the relationship to them described in detail with additional information (e.g. name, ranking in the Friend portfolio such as »best friend«) or they can be snapshot-style pictures showing the significant others in a joint activity. If multiple people are portrayed in the pictures, their bodies are often very close – i.e. an intimate relationship is demonstrated by the mutual poses. In these albums, the particular emphasis of the friendship is critical. This is often clearly expressed in the title of the album: A typical example of this is *My Best Friends*, which announces the closeness of the friendship bond. The corresponding persons and the connection to them are shown to be something special through their representation in an album. This makes it clear that the term »friend« is still very distinct from »Facebook friend« for young people. Although the reciprocal contact confirmation on sns gives evidence that the participating persons are »friends«, this is nonetheless understood as a simple relationship between two nodal points because this does not take the emotional depth of the relationship into consideration (see boyd/Ellison 2007). This form of identification that is made available by the provider is strongly differentiated in the form of the Friend album or the concept of friendship is recontextualized on the part of young users themselves. While young people have an average of about 130 »friends«, in the sense of contacts on their profiles (see Facebook 2010b; Autenrieth et al. 2010; Schmidt/Paus-Hasebrink/Hasebrink 2009), usually a maximum of about ten people in the special Friend albums represent the closest or best friends in the eyes of young people (see Alisch/Wagner 2006).



Figure 3: Friend Albums (festzeit.ch)

A certain reciprocity or positive feedback on the part of those depicted is critical in these albums. Since they are also part of the online network in the great majority of cases, they have the opportunity (and simultaneously the implicit responsibility) to react to the depictions and therefore the public dissemination of the friendship (see boyd 2008)<sup>34</sup> in a similar way. The owner of a corresponding album often links to the people depicted in it so that they are immediately informed by the given platform about their presence in the album. Ordinarily, a gesture of gratitude for the link is made in the form of a comment on the picture and a corresponding counter-depiction in one's own album of best friends. As a result, the mutual close friendship is confirmed and therefore validated through the mutual depictions, comments, and links.

*Family Albums (fig. 4): Parents/Siblings/Relatives (Family of Origin)* – In the style of the classic (i.e. analog) family photo album, young people also have pic-

34 danah boyd (2008) talks about »Public Displays of Connection«.

ture albums in which their families of origin (see Burkart 2008) are presented on social network sites. These show people whose roles in the family environment are often clearly attributed in the form of captions. The connection with the user's own family is represented, which simultaneously serves as a closer self-description in the sense of »This is where I come from«. However, the relatives who correspond to the same age cohort and are also on the online platform are often primarily depicted. Only infrequently are parents and older relatives presented. Siblings and cousins are therefore mainly depicted online. At the same time, these relatives are part of one's own peer group and contribute – due to the articulated family relationship – to a greater authentication of the profile owner's identity because family is considered stronger than friendship as a constant component of the individual biography.



Figure 4: Family Albums (festzeit.ch)

*Love Albums* (fig. 5): *Relationship/Expressions of Love/Own Children/(Potential) Own Family*) – Heterosexual love<sup>35</sup> and relationships are also photo-album themes. Couples are essentially seen in very different contexts and poses, but the couple constellation is always strongly emphasized in order to clarify the situation to the viewer. On the one hand, this is done through the corporeal proximity of the protagonists in the form of clearly connoted gestures such as kissing and embracing. On the other hand, the viewer is usually explicitly informed of the relationship situation through both the album title and the captions (e.g. »My sweetie and me«). On the whole, a strong emphasis is placed on the emotional bond. Moreover, the photographs often esthetically and romantically emphasize the day-to-day elements of the relationship.



Figure 5: Love Albums (festzeit.ch)

- 35 The pictures on sns are strongly oriented toward heteronormative models and moral concepts. Young people with a homosexual orientation meet on special platforms, such as [www.gayromeo.com](http://www.gayromeo.com).



This may be done with symbols such as hearts and roses, which are added through digital post-production. This can be used as an explanation for why only albums of the current relationship and partner are documented under this theme, i.e. in contrast to the tendency to otherwise archive pictures on social network sites. Online photo albums with ex-boyfriends/ex-girlfriends are rarely found because they would point out the fragility of relationships. This would be a reminder of the possibly limited nature and impermanence of the depicted romantic relationship ideal, suggesting the potentially finite nature of one's current happiness.

### b) *Occasion-Centered (Everyday vs. Event)*

With this variant, the focus is on the occasions for which the photo albums were created. Information about the thematic focus is frequently found right in the album titles, such as »My Birthday Party« or »Summer Vacation 2009«. A more distinct difference can be seen between everyday occurrences, such as school attendance or sports practice, and clearly special events, such as attending a party or traveling.

*Everyday Albums (fig. 6): School/Hobby* – The content of the everyday albums is pictorial documentation of experiences that are hardly extraordinary but still provide insight into the ritualized routines of everyday life. For example, these may be pictures in a school setting, professional activity, illustrations of pursuing a hobby, or simply »chilling at home with friends«. The personal private environment, one's own inclinations and interests, and routinized activities that occur on a regular basis are documented here. This illustrates additional facets of the user's personality and further authenticates the individual profile as a result.

A strong connection between the image viewer and the image producer arises through these relatively private glimpses into the album owner's world. At the same time, the presentation and publication of these pictures once again testifies to the great value that the album's owner attaches to his or her own person and the individual living environment.



Figure 6: Everyday Albums (festzeit.ch)

*Event Albums (fig. 7): Occasions (Party)/Locations (Travel)* – In the classical sense, i.e. similar to their analogous predecessors, online photo albums are also created for particular events. These can be extraordinary experiences, such as vacation travel, or social occasions, such as parties (see Autenrieth 2010; Neumann-Braun/Astheimer 2010). However, the focus here is always on the non-typical nature of the event, which is shown through its spatial or social distance from the ordinary. Although people, scenarios, and artifacts are represented, the event is the main point of interest. This means that the primary purpose is not to show person X, but rather to show person X in this particular context or this particular place. This is clear from the album titles, which often unambiguously identify the event. Examples of this might be Summer Vacation in Croatia or My 21st Birthday. Links tend to be more exclusively to participating persons who are usually also depicted in the images or at least have participated in the corresponding event in one way or another. By comparison, the quality of the photography is highly valued, i.e. »beautiful« photographs (in the sense of esthetic composition) such as landscapes or vacation destinations are attempted to the best of the user's ability.



Figure 7: Event Albums (facebook.com)

These are then combined in the albums with more candid, snapshot-style photos that serve as reminders of the event. The individual network is granted access to personal experiences through the presentation of these photos, creating contact opportunities for further communicative activity as a result. The recipients of these pictures and albums can react to what is displayed with comments and positive assessments and then (somewhat) publicly demonstrate further interests and friendship ties.

### c) *Object-Centered Albums (Private vs. Market)*

Along with people and occasions, objects play a central role in the online photo albums of adolescents and young adults, particularly for younger users. On the one hand, they present artifacts from the personal environment, such as pets or favorite articles of clothing. On the other hand, market images – i.e. illustrations of brand logos, products, and film and music celebrities – have a strong presence in the albums.



*Private Object Albums (fig. 8): Objects from the Personal/Private Environment: Favorite Objects, Pets, etc.* – Unlike Market albums, the user's personal possessions and everyday objects are more commonly found in Private Object albums. Therefore, the pictures are mostly self-produced and the focus is more on the significance of the objects for the individual person than on prestige value. Examples of this might be pictures of pets, favorite articles of clothing (but with an emphasis on the personal value and not on the brand logo), or objects that reference one's own interests, such as an amateur photographer's camera or the person's bicycle. As a result, the personality of the album owner is more precisely characterized by the depiction of private objects and their strong connection to the user's everyday world.

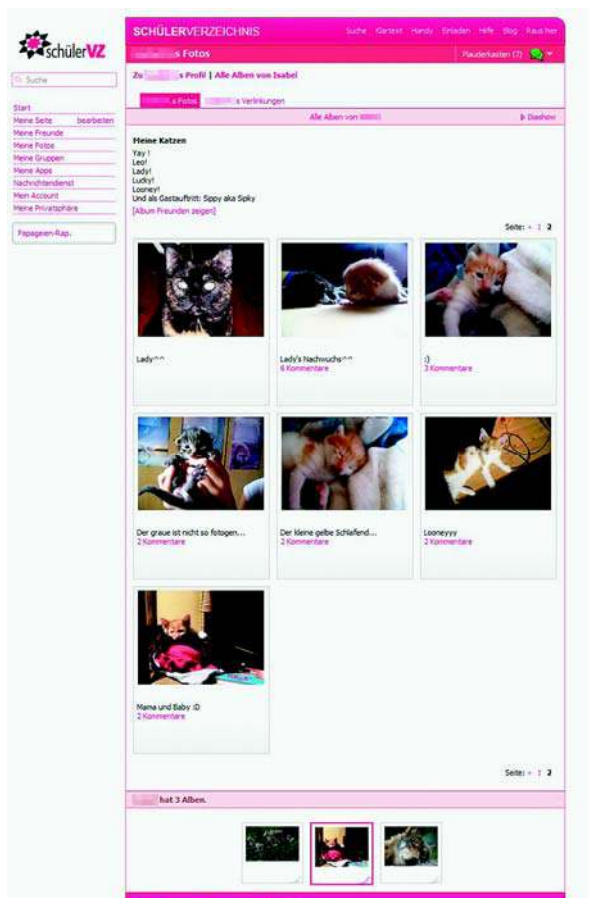


Figure 8: Private Object Albums (schuelerVZ.de)

*Market-Object Albums* (fig. 9): *Media/Products/Brands/Celebrities* – Market albums show pictures of brand labels, products, and celebrities from the world of media, music, and sports. However, the majority of illustrations depicted in these albums are not private, self-photographed pictures but rather market icons that usually come from the Web and are copied from it into the user's profile. Entire picture series of individual brands and products are often created with a structure reflecting the layout of a sales catalog. Above all, the products presented are predominantly items that represent desired objects, i.e. they are not already in the album owner's one's personal possession but reveal his or her desires. Moreover, this documents a fan relationship with the brand logos and celebrities. This is often shown again on the basis of group memberships and profile entries, such as the fan pages on Facebook or group memberships on StudiVZ<sup>36</sup>.



Figure 9: Market-Object Albums (festzeit.ch)

- 36 The sns Netlog offers users direct brand, product, and celebrity pictures that can be transferred into their own profile.

The pictures of prominent persons, as well as brand symbols, represent membership in the corresponding symbol communities. Evidence of membership in specific youth scenes and style communities is shown by depicting specific objects and brands within one's own profile. At the same time, these pictures offer opportunities for follow-up communication with sns contacts who have similar preferences so they can link themselves to or comment on the pictures in order to proclaim their preference for the same products or celebrities. The market symbols that are represented simultaneously have the corresponding potential to develop the user's image through their respective brand images (see Paus-Hasebrink et al. 2004). The attributed characteristics of brands, products, and celebrities therefore also become online pieces of the puzzle for a young person's identity development.

#### *4. Photo Albums on SNS as Visually Documented Socialization Experience and Age-Dependent Identity Development*

The relationship between a user's age and the content of photographic representations on sns is investigated in the following section. The central themes in the lives of adolescents and young adults are reflected in the described album categories. In this manner, the albums document their everyday lives and socialization experiences.

From the perspective of socialization theory, the essential development work that young people must cope with is based upon their age. The central development work for young people is detachment from their parental home and development of their own coherent identity (see Abels 2006; Hurrelmann 2007; Schäfers/Scherr 2005; Keupp et al. 2008). With the onset of puberty, adolescents become psychologically detached from their families of origin (see Papastefanou 2006) and their parents' influence loses significance; at the same time, the moral concepts and opinions of the peer group increasingly take over and the social environment is intensively examined. On the one hand, this leads to a clear dissociation from the ideals of the adult world; on the other hand, integration into new peer group-based communities such as friend cliques and youth subcultures takes place. This is where individual moral concepts and social norms that are relatively independent of the adult world are developed (see Hurrelmann 2007: 132).

In addition, mothers and fathers also lose their superior orientation functions from an emotional and intimate perspective. They are replaced by self-selected relationship partners (see Hurrelmann 2007: 118), to whom closer ties are progressively developed with increasing age (see Neubauer 1990). Young people also free themselves from their families of origin on a cultural level during this development, i.e. they develop their own esthetic preferences in connection with

a lifestyle that is often different from that of their parents (see Hurrelmann 2007: 118; for early examinations of the media role in the process of adolescents detaching from their biological families see Charlton/Neumann 1986; Neumann-Braun 1991).

The central tasks of this developmental phase involve the questions: »Who am I?«, »What position do I have in my social environment?«, and »Where do I stand in the world?«. The contents of young people's online photo albums reflect their search for the answers to these important questions. They show a clear relationship to the respective environment and stage of development in which users find themselves. The important themes in the respective period of life turn up again in the pictures by adolescents and young adults. As a result, the search for an individual identity in the form of representations of personal individuality is documented in the Me Albums. This means an examination of one's own appearance and personal image within the peer group. The growing development of extra-familial friendship and love relationships – represented by the simultaneous dissociation from the family of origin and development of relationships with new significant others, which is also linked with increasing attention to the various youth scenes (see Hurrelmann 2007: 132f.) – is revealed within the scope of the Love and Friends albums. Last but not least, the development of one's own individual taste and the association with or dissociation from style communities is clearly displayed on the basis of Market albums that represent objects and symbols belonging to a particular scene, which accomplishes an association with one's own person.

Accordingly, the various album types are not found equally divided among all of the users; instead, there is primarily an age-dependent involvement with the individual themes and their translation into photography.

In order to better assess the frequency with which the various themes appear in the albums, a total of 692 photo albums from 232 Facebook and SchülerVZ users between the ages of 12 and 25 were analyzed<sup>37</sup>. The results (see fig. 10) clearly show the extensive differences in the distribution of the content themes. By a large margin, the most common overall themes are events and experiences in particular, which comprise nearly 40% of all of the included albums. At 22.5%, the friends theme was clearly reduced and Me albums have a 15% share.

37 Some of the albums came from participants in systematic surveys by the author (see Autenrieth 2011); other albums were selected from publicly accessible profiles of both networks (according to different age, gender, and education groups). The assessment makes no claim to be representative, but shows empirical trends and developmental tendencies.

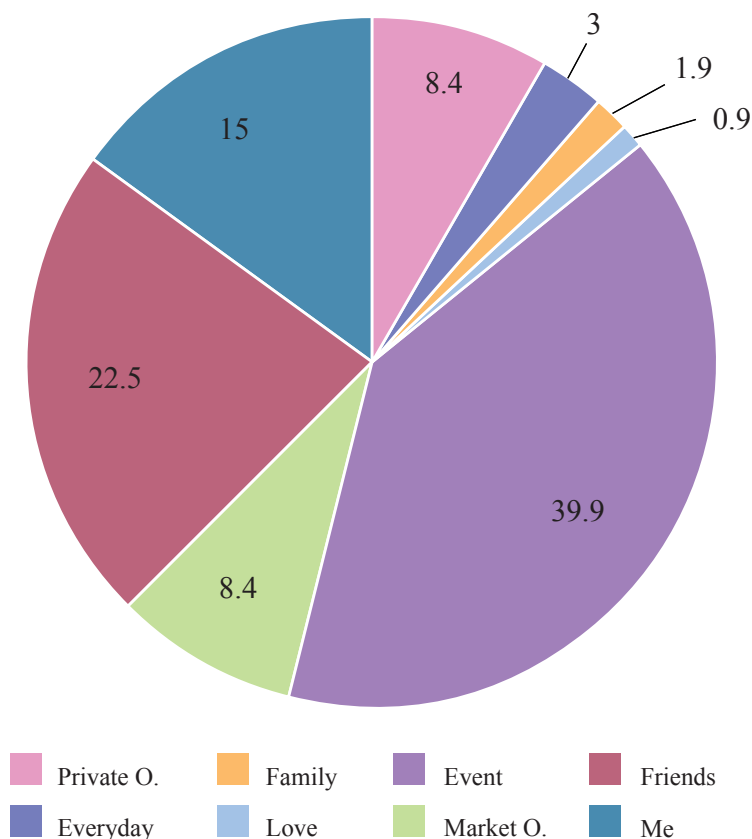


Figure 10: Differences in the distribution of the themes in % (N=692)

By contrast, picture albums of the market and artifacts from the personal environment had only an 8.4% share each. With values between 0.9 and 3%, the themes of love, family, and everyday life appeared only marginally.

However, this distribution is not the same for all user groups. Major differences with respect to the content depicted appear primarily between the youngest and oldest of the examined user groups (see fig. 11).

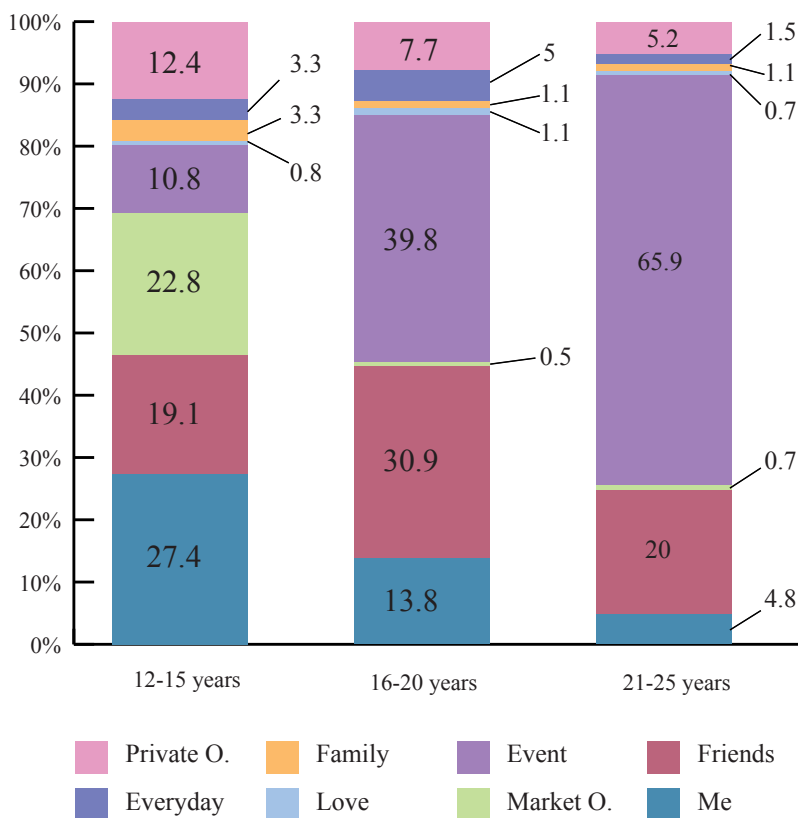


Figure 11: Differences in the distribution of the themes according to age groups in % (N=692)

When the investigated users were subdivided into three age groups, the different preferences were clearly apparent – particularly regarding the 12-15 year olds vs. the 21-25 year olds: At 27.4%, photo albums of the individual person (Me albums) made up the largest portion among the youngest users; however, they only constituted 4.8% among the oldest group considered here. The results were similar with Market Object albums, which at 22.8% were most favored among the young users but had only marginal representation later at about 0.5%. The ratios among the Event albums were just as clearly differentiated: They comprise only 10.8% of the albums among the youngest users while clearly dominating by a large margin and a ratio of almost two thirds of all of the albums shown in the 21-25 group. Photo albums in which a person's friends are predominantly shown appeared at a comparable consistency. They each made up about 20% of the albums in the youngest and oldest groups, and represented almost 31% among the

16-20 year-olds. Depictions of private objects (Private Object albums) are comparably popular at 12.4% among the youngest; however, this value drops significantly in both of the other age groups and only represents a ratio of 5.2% of the albums among the oldest. In all three age groups, the three themes of everyday, love, and family had similarly low standing in the one-figure area between 0.7 and 5% each.

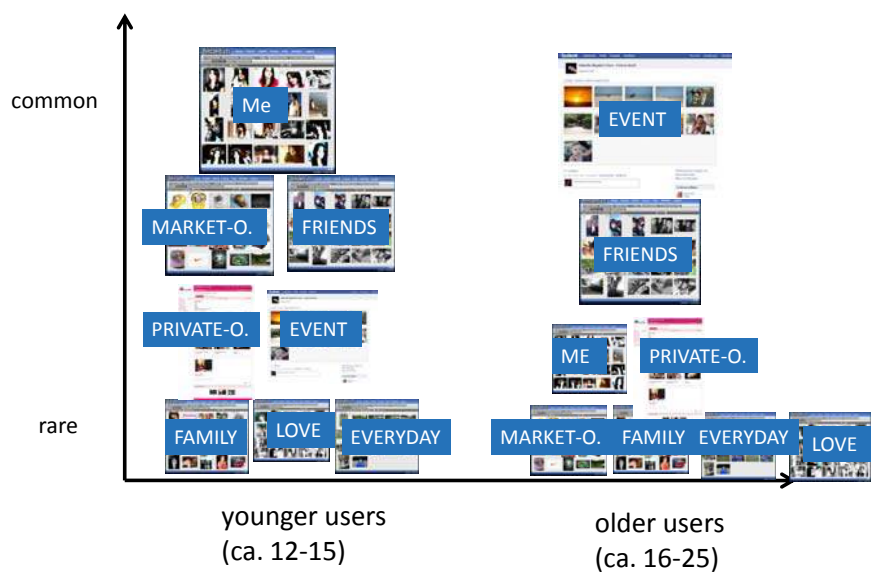


Figure 12: Overview distribution of the themes according to age groups in % (N=692)

Even if the numbers are not representative, they allow for an initial assessment of the fields with the thesis that a relatively clear tendency toward differentiating thematic preferences between age categories can be identified.

A clearly more significant level of self-reference is apparent among the younger users: An examination of or search for one’s own individuality is documented by Me albums as the dominant album theme (see fig. 12). This occurs in a kind of digitalized peer-review process through the subsequent (partially) public communicative discussion of these pictures in the form of comments and links. Equally incisive for this age group is the search for an individual style and the accompanying association with specific youth culture scenes, which is documented in Market albums. The explicit, visualized representation of friendship relationships based on Friend albums is a theme that has a central value in both age groups; yet, it is clearly more strongly represented among those older than 16 to the extent that it is the second-most common album theme in this group.

The strong focus on a person's »self«, as well as links to depictions of market products, clearly plays a less significant role in this age group. Identity development moves away from an ego- and object-centered perspective to a predominantly social positioning process in which the peer group takes a more dominant role.

The personal action radius of young people increases with age. With growing legal and financial opportunities, the attention turns more to occasion-oriented themes (primarily evening excursions and travel with friends) that take up much more space for the 16-25 group.

On the whole, it is apparent that themes such as family and romantic relationships appear rather rarely. Pictorial representations of objects from the private environment, as well as intimate views into one's everyday personal life, are presented with comparable infrequency. Some of the reasons for this may be found in the lack of attractiveness when depicting everyday life. However, the lack of attention shown primarily to the themes of love and family is noteworthy. The reasons for this are presumably found less in the lack of attractiveness by the people who are potentially represented; instead, these areas are often seen by users as comparably private and worth protecting so that they are rarely placed online for this reason, as illustrated by this quote from an interview with a user: »I just don't include my family at all«<sup>38</sup>.

The represented photographic content of picture albums on sns is therefore differentiated with relative clarity depending on the age of the users. While younger users frequently present their own person and pictures of the market, older users predominantly show events that document the positive aspects of their personal lives (parties and travel) and their own crowd of friends.

#### d) *Comparing Examples of Me Albums: Older User vs. Younger User*

Apart from the frequency with which the different album themes are picked up by adolescents and young adults in their online albums, there are also differences in the use of the displayed content. The respective variations in stylistic design will be described based on just two examples of the Me albums.

38 The author conducted numerous interviews with adolescents and young adults about their approach to private photographs on sns. A detailed analysis can be found in Autenrieth 2011.





Figure 13: Me Album Younger User

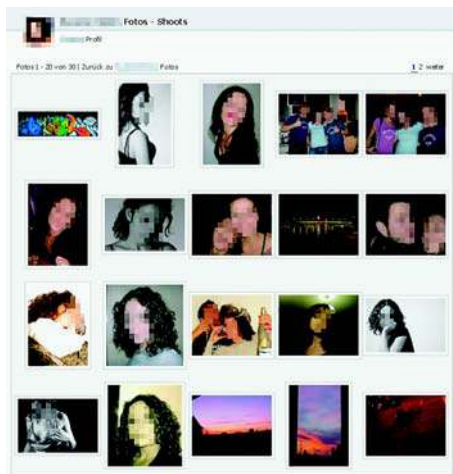


Figure 14: Me Album Older User

Figure 13 comes from the SchülerVZ profile of a female student who is about 14 years old. It contains a total of eleven photographs in which the profile owner is apparently always depicted. In one of the pictures, she is seen with another girl of the same age. A central theme of the pictures in the photo album is therefore the album owner herself, which is again insistently emphasized by the profile owner herself in the album title of Me. In each of the pictures, she is obviously at the center of the activity. The perspective in which the photos were taken gives rise to the suspicion that most of them pictures were taken by the album owner herself with a cell phone or a PC camera. The quality of the pictures – with their rather unprofessional lighting, low resolution, and image details and background – also suggests this technical framework. In almost all of the pictures, the profile owner's head or the face is at the center of the photographic depiction.

By comparison, the Me album in figure 14 is suited to an approx. 24 year-old female Facebook user. It contains a total of 30 photographs with the album owner personally appearing in 23 of them. She is also sometimes with other people, but she is always at the center of the picture activity here as well. On the whole, the pictures show a comparably broad spectrum of her person: The social circle and picture environment vary greatly, as well as the selected details and quality of the pictures. While some of the pictures in this album were evidently photographed by the owner herself, others were apparently shot by a professional. The title of her Shoots album further strengthens this supposition.

Comparing the self-representation of the two album protagonists results in some typical depiction patterns: The thematic boundaries weaken somewhat with increasing age, the profile owner's life becomes more multifaceted, and this is

ultimately documented in her pictures. On the one hand, the people and places displayed become more diverse; yet, at the same time, a certain form of standardization appears in the consistently repeating album styles, which is reflected in the album themes and their design. Moreover, professionalization can now be observed from a two-fold perspective: First, a certain increase in the quality of the pictures themselves becomes apparent, i.e. the setting and editing of the photos ultimately shows improved craftsmanship in the production and editing of the photos. Second, the self-representation competence of the actors increases. Flattering poses, facial expressions, and gestures are assumed more specifically and with more control. As a result, they have a more practiced effect on the observer, as is made clear through the comparison of the two sample albums above. The older user displays almost professional model poses with somewhat extravagant styling and makeup, but in the example of the younger user – although likewise revealing a certain effort – the implementation still turns out to be comparatively unsophisticated. A development from amateur photographer to experienced photo or media professional is documented, which is already discernible in the album title here. This is accompanied by the improved personal resources: Economic capital (material and financial means for good photographs), as well as cultural capital (ability to carry out poses well, see Bourdieu 1983) noticeably increase. So the photo albums on sns illustrate not only the age-specific development tasks of their owners, but also their increasing competency and resources.

## 5. *Functions of Albums on SNS*

Up to this point, content and age-related facets of photo albums on sns have been examined. Now the various functions that photo albums fulfill for young users will be analyzed more closely. The social network site as an online medium and its role in peer communication against a backdrop of the increasing interconnectivity of society is particularly significant in this regard.

Sns and the photo albums found here have a number of entirely different functions for users (see fig. 15). However, five main functions for the use of photo albums on sns can be distinguished<sup>39</sup> as: the management of identity, relationships, information, content, and mood (in the sense of entertainment).

39 In his book *Das neue Netz* (The New Web), Jan Schmidt describes three functions of social web practices (Schmidt 2009: 71ff.).

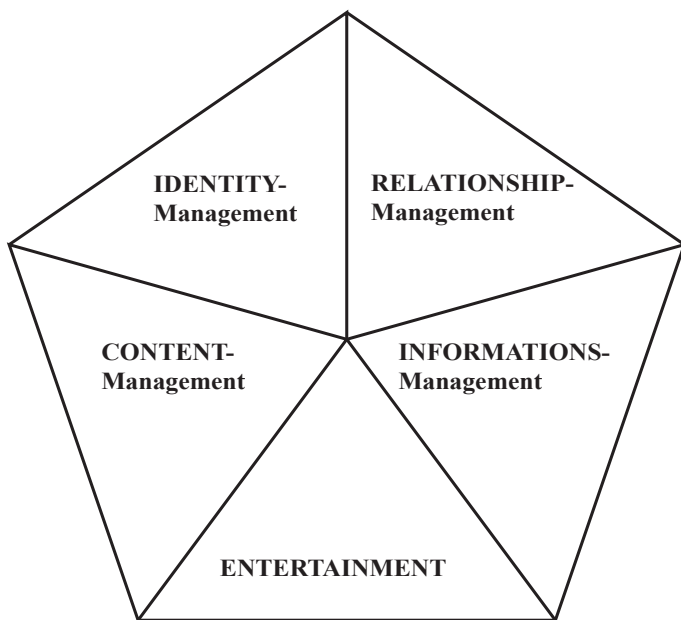


Figure 15: Functions of Albums on SNS

Although the individual usage modes frequently overlap in reality, they are nonetheless distinguishable from each other in the models below and described individually in greater detail, as well as illustrated by quotes from interviews with users.

During the process of individualization in modern societies, individuals are subject to the increasing demands of constructing their own coherent identity (see Schroer 2006: 49). For the individual actors, their position in society is no longer automatically indicated qua birth; instead, they must develop it through constant distinction of their position for positioning the self in the social environment. Within this context, working on one's own self is understood as the identity management through which an individual position can and must be developed within society. Users gain a multifaceted stage for multi-modal negotiation of their identity in the form of photo albums on sns. In the sense of Erving Goffman, each individual receives multifaceted tools for »image cultivation« (1986) and »impression management« (2003 [1959]), through which a (positive) impression of one's own person can be actively conveyed to the personal environment by means of the intentional (somewhat) public presentation of one's own person, the circle of friends, and the respective life situation. In particular, pictorial representations enable users to specifically control their respective ex-

ternal impression and thereby to shape a personal image (in the most literal meaning of the term):

»I only ever really put pictures of myself online if I look alright in them. I'm very vain.«

»Well, you want to put yourself somewhere, you always want to show yourself somewhat. It's just kind of partly public. And, of course, I wouldn't upload a picture of myself if the photo was taken normally. Then I wouldn't use it without all the soft focusing. I certainly wouldn't upload it. Because I'd just have rings under my eyes like crazy and stress pimples and all of that and without any makeup. I probably wouldn't put it online. Because you just want to somehow kind of – yeah, um – look good, however you define that.«

Pictures on sns are just as important for the user's relationship management in the initiation of and, above all, maintenance of contacts. A user's social ties are further solidified through photographic documentation of shared experiences and the subsequent (somewhat) public communicative discussion of the pictures' meaning through comments and links. This becomes particularly clear in photo albums with programmatic titles such as *My Friends*, in which the people who are depicted can be clearly classified – even by outsiders – as having close relationships:

»Then we usually laugh. Or we come back to how fun it was. Or that we had so much fun or how drunk we were or what we won't ever do again under any circumstances. Or what we will repeat at some point or something like that. Yeah. Really different.«

»I think it's cool now that S. was just in England right here a couple of weeks ago and he had all these experiences in England, so he posted them. I think it's cool if I somehow see this because we see each other quite often and like each other and then he's suddenly somewhere in England or something like that. And then you see what he did there. I like that. I mean, just whenever someone is away. So I don't necessarily need party photos right now if someone had a good party on the weekend or something like that, but if someone just went to another country or if my best friend goes around the world now and into the world, and if she puts up photos from the trip – I think that's cool when I can see them then, when she's in South America again or in Thailand or something like that, then I definitely look at them.«

Another important function of pictures on sns is forwarding news that is relevant for one's own social environment and therefore allowing others to experience it; for example, documentation of important events such as a wedding, the birth of a child, or moving into a new apartment. Through this form of visualized information transmission, especially existing contacts that are not very close or are separated by great distances can be kept up to date and maintained:

»The area where I sometimes show a little of whatever is happening to me is my work. That's really all. A lot of people thought it was really cool, for instance, to see our newly renovated building. Or special occasions like weddings or parties or that kind of thing. If I go on some kind of trip on the weekend or something like that and it is something really nice. So vacations, weekend trips, and, of course, birthday parties... actually vacations, shopping trips, and various other things. Yes, and vacation, yes, vacation, yes.«

»I posted it there for people to simply see that I was here while on vacation. I don't feel like stopping by to see everyone with a laptop and I don't think that many people want to see 400 pictures. If you start showing pictures, then you remember yourself in each separate picture that they weren't in and they probably think that's totally boring. So anyone can see them on their own. After six months, it's enough and then they can be removed again.«

»I think that it's practical that you can also share them whenever you want, but I obviously also have some [pictures] on my computer that I don't post. I don't upload them all, definitely not. And what that means to other people, I don't think it's really relevant. If they weren't there, then they weren't there. But I think it's a little of what makes it so appealing is possibly seeing how someone develops or how someone lives or how someone looks in the meantime, for instance.«

Moreover, photo albums on sns are important for managing and distributing pictures, i.e. content management. For example, pictures are placed online to make them available to others for personal download so that they can save them in their own albums or on their own PC. Users' own online albums become a distribution and management medium for the shared body of pictures within a circle of friends. Apart from their distribution function, picture albums are also used on sns as a form of photo archive. Pictures can be conveniently saved online and kept available – with the convenience that ubiquitous access is possible from any computer:

»But now it's kind of like you have seen the photos and then you can see for yourself. What I mean is that there are certain photos by S. (name of friend) that I'm in where I say, ›Yeah, that was a nice evening and we also look good there‹, or ›That's a really nice memory‹. So I downloaded it to my computer.«

»I think that if they look like that on Facebook, I honestly don't know for sure if anyone has viewed the photos. I believe that the pictures are important to me because I think it's really nice when I know where I was maybe or if I somehow have photos of me. And – right now the party pics brought this up – you can always download them, so I also have folders at home where I just stick them in. I just have a couple of photos of myself because I don't have a camera of my own, so I don't actually take pictures myself. Anyway, I also wouldn't even go somewhere and think, ›Oh, I should take my camera equipment with me so that I can take photos and show how great we look‹. I wouldn't do that now. But just recently, for example, I was with my sister in Hamburg and we took some photos there. Then she also put them on Facebook.«

Yet, this free access to one's own photographic works (depending on the album owner's privacy settings) is still problematic at the same time. Since the pictures are often accessible to a large number of other users, it is practically impossible to maintain complete control over their distribution. Photographs can be copied, transferred, and received without the owner's knowledge or consent. These risks can have particularly negative results for the owners of the albums (see Eck 2008) and therefore repeatedly lead to critical discussions about the use of photo albums on sns.

Surfing the Web, and particularly sns, also has great entertainment and leisure value – especially for young people. In many cases, looking at online photo albums (both alone and with others) serves to improve the mood in the form of an amusing pastime:

»It's actually great, just for parties and so cool, to take pictures or download and put them on any party portal. That's really cool because we like looking at the photo albums, especially those of my close friends, and we like to look at each other's pictures. We like to look at a lot of pictures, even together.«

## 6. *Photo Albums on SNS – The Communication Situation in the Reflection of Modern Societies*

The unparalleled success of sns, their use, and particularly the photo functions will now be placed in a larger social context. Friendships or contacts on sns are usually already familiar people in the real world and are therefore often cultivated through other communication channels, particularly through direct face-to-face communication (see Autenrieth et al. 2010; Neumann-Braun/Wirz 2009; Schmidt/Paus-Hasebrink/Hasebrink 2009). This implies interactions between the online and offline spheres because what happens in the real world is depicted online and photos that have been placed on the Web are further discussed in offline communication. Strict boundaries between virtual and real spaces can therefore no longer be maintained with respect to sns. False (in the sense of inauthentic) self-depictions are quickly exposed and have repercussions in offline life. Yet, it is important to keep in mind the general implications of online communication, such as persistence or the capacity to save, copy, and search and their far-reaching consequences (see boyd 2007). Successful identity and relationship management places high demands on the individual and requires elaborate abilities. Becker (see Becker 2004: 419) defines four requirements as essential preconditions for implementation of a practical everyday esthetic. First is the fundamental esthetic design and use of the culturally available repertoire for signs of self-staging – those corresponding to the use of media platforms such as sns and local, image-based representation options.

The modification of self-depiction depending on the interaction partner's reactions is also significant: The picture comments and links to photo albums on sns give the users feedback on their activities and allow adjustment of the photographic content, where applicable, within the scope of a peer-reviewed discussion process. Moreover, the ability to bind attentiveness within the contact network through the selection of correspondingly effective modes of depiction is pivotal, particularly against the backdrop of a fast-moving flow of information. Finally, the ability to be reflexive as a kind of running self-reference is also significant.

Overall high demands are made on the individual for communication in online environments, the non-fulfillment of which results in far-reaching risks and consequences. The question therefore arises about the users' intention or the expected added value from their online presence.

In modern societies, traditional ties such as family, church, and political parties are increasingly losing their significance. The individual actor is therefore more free in his or her life decisions, although simultaneously more socially isolated as an individual. The emotional gap that is left due to the declining social ties of traditional societies is compensated through the growing importance in new forms of relationships. Individuals experience such a reconnection and positioning in the social sphere through self-selected friendship and acquaintance relationships.

The number of potential and actual contacts is growing for the individual due to increasing globalization and improved mobility. In order to maintain them, people depend on efficient methods of relationship maintenance. In particular, the importance of so-called weak ties for the modern individual has already been explained by Granovetter (1973). Informal networks with a large number of weak ties have positive effects. Even in times of great social challenges, such as in the form of high unemployment rates, it can be assumed that their significance will tend to increase. Due to their structure, social network sites are a virtually ideal medium for adequately maintaining these weaker contacts. Due to their large number of communicative and interactive possibilities, they create great potential for both direct exchange within a close social environment (strong ties), as well as maintaining less intensive contacts (weak ties) and additionally ensuring flexible transitions:

»And I think it's also interesting from vacation or whenever someone is studying a language abroad. And then there are always new photos. I knew someone who was in Australia, and then someone else, and it's really cool when I saw her time and again and how things were going for her.«

»So I think I also posted my apartment, but not to show that ›hey, we have this fabulous apartment‹, but just as a kind of explanation since Jenny lives really far away from here.«

It is not necessary to explicitly contact individual persons of reference; instead, they can be kept up to date »passively«, such as in the form of general comments on the wall and, above all, photographs. At the same time, it is possible to differentiate relationships communicatively into categories such as close friends and good acquaintances who are directly connected in interactions, e.g. in the form of links and picture comments. This strengthens them in their friendship position.

Moreover, sociological temporal diagnoses establish a »successive marketization« (Bode/Brose 1999: 179) of all social spheres in modern societies. This describes the development into a success-oriented society (see Neckel 2008). While achievement is mostly based on realization in a concrete field, success is under-

stood by contrast as realization in a social context or as an act of »self-assertion« (Mannheim 1964: 634f.) vis-à-vis others. Consequently, Sighard Neckel no longer bases the earning of social status on achievement but on success (2008: 49). This is predominantly measured on the basis of material success and is transferred in turn into the most important resource: the social capital of »knowing others and being acknowledged« (Bourdieu 1983: 190). This can be seen in the social prestige of successful actors. If this logic is followed, one's own friendship network is understood as social capital that is on public display and the work on one's own image that is accomplished there as a contribution to its maintenance and expansion.

In such a society, the »impression management« described by Erving Goffman (2003 [1959]) represents the central key qualification and task in order to lead a life that is perceived as successful since »to a large extent, the markets of this catwalk economy establish revenue and employment while waiving achievement categories because individual characteristics and ascribed attributes are more important than acquired qualifications« (Neckel 2008: 59). Particularly in the media, status is assigned primarily through the function mechanisms of prominence and attention (see Neckel 2008: 60). In lieu of an economy of achievement, an "economy of attention" arises (Franck 1998), illustrated in the phenomenon of the »casting society« (Pörksen/Krischke 2010).

In turn, such a society requires implementation of the so-called »marketing character« (Fromm 1980: 47ff.), which is understood as an expert in an immaterial economy that is aimed at generating external influences, internal atmosphere, and the attribution of positive characteristics. An individual's own personality is perceived as a commodity and the self as the seller (see Fromm 1980: 49):

»And I think that no one deliberately shows their worst side if they have a profile. Everyone probably wants present themselves in the best possible light and show how great they are.«

The demands on the modern individual require continuous work on one's self and therefore the attendant increase in personal employability in order to maintain one's own chances on an increasingly constricted, globalized labor market. The work on a person's own profile (the production of so-called unique selling points) is therefore particularly part of the "Internship Generation" (Stolz 2005), which makes up the main sns user group, already in the repertoire of everyday life (or survival) activity. Phenomena such as optimizing one's personality profile, targeted self-marketing through production of positive personality characteristics, and a positive representation of one's own life (or CV) are not new developments due to the emergence of social network sites. The latter have only given users a function-applicable medium to integrate corresponding tendencies of modern societies into their everyday activity. So in the form of online profiles,



and primarily in the photo albums presented there, the users have gained a structuring field that allows them to continually sharpen their own profile. Esthetic preferences can be tested in the form of feedback from the virtualized social environment, directly evaluated and, where applicable, revised. For this purpose, the pictures on sns especially serve the act of self-depiction and the construction – as well as conveyance – of an image for one's own person as a brand.

Communication tools such as comments, links, and Like buttons on Facebook assume the function of direct feedback channels that immediately make the work on the »self« subject to positive, as well as negative, assessment or sanctions. In the course of an attention economy, the non-appearance of reactions is therefore equivalent to negative sanctions. A link to an unflattering photo or ill-considered comment is equally risky because the image that is created through hard work is fragile and worth protecting. The laborious »facework« (see Goffman 1986) is quickly damaged or enduringly endangered through the implications of the Internet as a medium (persistence, visibility, and ability to be copied, saved, and distributed). The individual actor must anticipate the consequences: in the circle of friends due to negative reactions and a loss of credibility or in the professional environment through damage to his or her employability (see Eck 2008). For example, exhortations warning against the consequences of party and beach photos for one's life and career opportunities have now become commonplace (see Bleck et al. 2009; Hutt 2009).

Although drastic isolated cases in which users become victims of abuse due to their more or less freely available representation have been repeatedly publicized, the overall tendency is the appearance of moderate pictorial content that hardly corresponds to the frequently invoked preconception of omnipresent nudity and excessive alcohol consumption (see Pscheida/Trültzsch 2010). Many users have recognized the signs of the times: Although publicly effective self-portrayal and self-visualization in the sense of personal PR may be advantageous, users must be careful not to damage or destroy a reputation that is created in this way through imprudent activity. This is why primarily favorable aspects of their lives are represented: experiences, vacation travel, parties, a large circle of friends, as well as media and market products with an associated image that will have a positive effect on the user's prestige:

»What I'm linked to is important. So it's clear that this shouldn't be an unflattering picture. You actually always just see my face because my hands are always out of the picture. If I am holding something to drink in my hands, it gets cut from the photo because I don't want it to just potentially show up somewhere. Even a glass of Prosecco or something like that because people will still see in any case that it's simply alcohol. No, I just don't want this. Period.«

## 7. *Conclusion – Photo Albums on SNS as a Balancing Act between Self-Promotion and Self-Protection*

The phenomenon of photo albums on sns is complex and multifaceted. Today's adolescents and young adults have obtained an ideal platform for their communicative needs in the form of sns. Although friendship networks – particularly Facebook – are not photo communities in the narrow sense (like Flickr, as a comparative example), the involvement with homemade photographic productions of the personal social environment is a central element of the interactions that occur there.

However, the esthetic and artistic form of the photographs is less relevant in this context: Their relationship to the personal network is much more important. Consequently, photo albums on sns tend to be communicative space for the expanded peer group instead of exhibition spaces for high-quality homemade productions with claims of artistry.

A picture does not necessarily get noticed if it is rated as successful from an esthetic perspective; instead, the communicative significance and connectivity within the circle of friends are much more important. Within this context, connectivity is understood as meaning that other users pay attention to the picture in the form of links and comments. A picture's relevance is therefore revealed primarily in its communicative framework. Consequently, photographs that do not meet with resonance are essentially worthless to the album owner.

Yet, the motivation is not attention at any price or just receiving large amounts of feedback, but rather facework and impression management (see Goffman 1986). This is desired in the sense of a positive representation of one's own person with the primary purpose of being perceived by one's social environment as »real«, i.e. authentic, and to correspondingly receive positive feedback. Particularly for adolescents and young adults, this results in the possibility of testing their self-image and negotiating it together with their expanded peer group in a low-threshold way.

The greatest challenge is the continuous balancing act between the desire to gain attention, receive reactions from friends and acquaintances, and stay in the communicative flow while simultaneously protecting one's private life and personal environment. This occurs in ongoing communicative negotiation processes. The photo albums on sns are therefore much more than the self-portrayal and party excesses often decried as quasi-pornographic in the media: They are places for young people to negotiate their identity and communicate with friends.

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