

MyFace: Portrait Photography on the Social Web

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1. Introduction

Pictures are nearly obligatory on social network sites. A free minute, a cell phone with a built-in camera, and an Internet connection are all that is required for a private snapshot to adorn a profile page on a friendship-oriented social networking site like Facebook, Netlog, or MySpace. There is no doubt about the function of the profile picture: The user is a visible actor on the Web. This visibility is one of the preconditions of social network sites, which are based on the articulation of their members' personal information like almost nothing else on the Internet. This applies to self-descriptions as well as to profile pictures. Due to the pictorial mode of representation, photographic portraits communicate more precisely the image of a person than nicknames or graphic icons. The portrait image removes anonymity and pseudonymity and the picture functions as a (self-)representation of the actor. But what motif does a user choose? And, most importantly: How does a user present himself or herself? What are the rules, perhaps even the role models, that people follow when creating a profile picture?

In choosing his or her image, those who do not want to leave anything to chance can now have their first pictorially conveyed impression assessed and evaluated by consulting firms (see Welt Online 2008). These »image checks« plan the use of pictures on professional (e.g. Xing) or dating (e.g. Parship) exchanges with the intention of helping the person find the right job or partner. However, whether such streamlining or standardization of self-representation on the Web will bring the desired results is questionable. Who are adolescents trying to impress with their profile picture? What is the orientation of their motif selection with respect to the logic of impression management? These questions arise because current research on the use of social network sites suggests that most young people employ the popular products first and foremost to maintain private contacts and cultivate relationships. Other types of actions, such as idealized self-depiction or play with identity, are only relevant for a minority of young people (see Paus-Hasebrink et al. 2009: 153; OFCOM Study 2008: 28ff.; Pfeffer/Neumann-Braun/Wirz 2010; Waechter/Triebwetter/Jäger 2010). Instead, the networks are primarily used to communicate within existing social circles. This means that school-, friendship-, and acquaintance-based relationships are among the most important social relationships that are cultivated on the portals. Networking along the lines of youth scenes is therefore less relevant because it

pertains to networked groups and not »experience groups« (»Erlebnisgruppen«, Schulze 1992). As a result, the suspicion arises that social stylistics in friendship networks only play a minimal role in social integration. It can be assumed that, if adolescents stylize themselves in a particular way on social network sites, this happens according to the rules of communitarization under conditions of delocalized communication.

In the following research, the focus is on the question of *»Why profile pictures?«* From a hermeneutic and Web-ethnographic perspective, this entails the task of reconstructing the screen on which the users' images are organized. How do young people create their self-representation within a media context characterized by friend relationships? What is the grammar that structures this image world? Based on these questions, the following essay investigates how young people introduce themselves as communicators in social network sites through their profile pictures, i.e. how they use them to position and draw attention to themselves².

- 2 The present text is based on the results of an online-ethnographic product analysis of social network sites in the German-speaking area of Switzerland within the framework of the research project »Images of Youth in the Internet« (for more information about the research project see www.netzbilder.net). A total of 20 different German-language Internet friendship networks and communities were investigated: facebook.com, myspace.com, netlog.com, schüler-/studiVZ.net, jetzt.de, utopia.de, lokalisten.de, tilllate.com, festzeit.ch, lautundspitz.ch, party-zeiger.de, kra.ch, heavy metal communities, neu.de, parship.ch, mytrash.tv, youtube.com, and myvideo.de. All communicative and interactive functions of these portals were descriptively collected in an initial step, which was based on online-ethnographic principals (Marotzki 2003). This assumes membership in the portals, the creation of individual profiles, and interaction with other users. Along with this general (portal) description of the online products on a macro level, the focus of the investigation applies to the users' image communication. We asked what role portrait photography plays in communication by young people on social network sites. Facebook, as the most popular product among Swiss young people, was investigated in this regard as an example for the use of profile pictures. Initially, the object of the analysis was the communicative context in which the profile pictures are embedded. It is obvious that profile pictures are not used in the same way on market-leader Facebook's site as they are on other portals. However, a comparative view of competing products makes it clear that there are fundamental similarities with respect to image use. For example, user profiles and profile pictures are used to represent the identities of the users. Along with images' use contexts, the images themselves were also the object of the investigation. The micro level of the analysis applied to the hermeneutic interpretation of profile pictures that came from users on the social network sites facebook.com, myspace.com, netlog.com, festzeit.ch, and schülervz.net. A total of 327 profile pictures and (in so far as this was possible) their associated profile pages belonging to adolescents and young adults between the ages of 12 and 25 years were selected. The data were collected and evaluated based on the principals of grounded theory (Glaser/Strauss 1998). The images were analyzed based on the methods of hermeneutics of the image (see Astheimer 2010; Neumann-Braun/Astheimer 2010b).

2. *Structure of the Profile Picture as a Communication Act*

2.1 Communication-Theoretical Classification of the Profile Picture in the Interlacing Relationship of Online and Offline Interactions

The profile picture is one of many forms of online communicative expression in the context of social network sites. These sites represent an interactive online media offering that enables multi-directional and multi-modal individual communication in lieu of one-sided mass communication (transmitter/receiver). The portals are therefore used for synchronous (e.g. chat) and asynchronous (e.g. messages) communication among the members, who are usually friends with each another. The framework within which communicative activities, such as (voice) messages, content, friending, evaluations, etc. are portrayed is the users' profile pages (including individual users' pages, fan pages, and group pages) that are distinguished by their »private public« status. An analysis of the employed symbolic means shows that online communication occurs through speech, image, film, and sound. So it is possible to have private text communication through messages, chat, wall posts, and comments and image communication through profile and album images, headers, and background pictures. Wall entries and applications allow the use of image, text, sound media, and film media.

What *function* does the profile image have for the individual actor, as well as the close-knit group of friends, as a specific element within this online communication? As the results of the portal analysis show (see Chapter 2.2), an actor who is represented by the profile picture is necessary for this online interaction. From the perspective of communication theory, the profile picture can be defined as a communicative act. It is the representation of (potential) »presence« in the media space. In addition, a user introduces himself or herself through the profile picture. The gesture of the display with which the user does not reference anything (see Barthes 1989) other than rather himself or herself is specific to the user. This identifies the person using the image as the profile owner. It »says«: »This is me!« or »This is how I am available within this communicative sphere« (identification of a personal entity/self-representation); moreover, it »speaks« in that it shows: »This is who you are dealing with« (surrogate for presence); and finally, it creates a link between a specific communicative sphere or corresponding channel of communication (individual user's profile page) and an individual person, which makes what is communicated personally attributable (»speaker« identification) and creates a communicative territory (paraphrased: »What is communicated here should be attributed to this one«).

What are the structural and functional characteristics of profile pictures in online communication and how can they be characterized, particularly in comparison with (non-mediatized) face-to-face interaction? A neuralgic point of elementary interaction is the human body as a sign of presence and a supporting medium for personal appearance, gesture, or speech (see Geser 1990). In elementary interaction, a person cannot communicate non-corporeally. Sociological action theory points to the body's relevance in the constitution of sociality (see Guggutzer 2004; Meuser 2002). Goffman has shown that the body represents the activity resource of elementary interactions (Goffman 1963: 35). Compared with elementary interaction, the body is absent in online communication. However, an inferential characterization of computer-mediatized network interactions as disembodied is insufficient: In online communication, a social world is constituted that can be investigated for aspects of social interaction and corporeality in a technically generated interaction sphere. Social network sites are distinct from non-mediatized everyday life in that the body of the interaction participant is not physically present and people cannot interact with one another as bodies. Only substitutes for interaction participants are available, including assorted symbolic forms (such as profile pictures). But these substitutes also refer to interactions. For all intents and purposes, they are frozen interactions (between photographs and the photographed) that can be investigated as to the extent in which they reflect offline interaction in their visual interaction elements (see Reichertz 1992; Denzin 2007).

In an elementary interaction, a person is looked at, spoken to, or touched and a bodily reaction is requested. Image communication on the web is different from elementary interaction because the production and reception contexts are disjunctive and gestures cannot be reciprocated. Nonetheless, we understand that the observer is addressed through the corporeal forms of expression shown in the image in view of the fact that this also always implies the representation of an elemental interaction and relationship. In addition to the image representing the depicted person in a specific position and role, this applies to the observer as well. This is because the viewer is fictively placed in the position of a partner, friend, acquaintance, customer, etc., depending on how the portrayed person represents himself or herself. Even if we do not identify with the role in which we are addressed, we still comprehend the message of the addressing because articulating and understanding the social meanings of images arises from the non-verbal communication of social meanings in elementary interactions (see Kress/van Leeuwen 1996: 120f.)³.

- 3 Production and reception situations of images have these factors in common: the image, the knowledge regarding the communicative resources, and the knowledge

»The articulation and understanding of social meanings in images derives from the visual articulation of social meanings in face-to-face interaction, the spatial positions allocated to different kinds of social actors in interaction [...]. In this sense the interactive dimension of images is the ›writing‹ of what is usually called ›non-verbal communication‹, a ›language‹ shared by producers and viewers alike». (Ibid.: 121)

Although visually communicated elements of non-verbal expression or derivative forms of elementary interactions within Web or image communication play an important role, there are significant differences. The particular transformations that elementary interactions experience when they are transposed into the medium of photography or the Internet must be examined in this respect. In on-line communication, what elements of elementary interaction are substituted by visual representations and which are substituted by other channels of communication in the special case of social network sites?

The elementary interaction »comprises the totality of all social relationships that touch on the objective ancillary conditions of a *simultaneous corporeal presence of multiple human persons in the same place*« (emphasis by the author) (Geser 1990: 207). It represents the fundamental sphere of human sociality and is comprised of the structural composition principles of presence, personal appearance, gesture, and speech, which differentiate and individualize in other contexts, but in a diffuse way are mutually imbued in the elementary interaction (see *ibid.*: 207f.). These four corporeal modes of expression offer the co-present participants as »communicative media of expression that are simultaneously available and have a hierarchical relationship to each another« (*ibid.*: 228), which can be differentiated with respect to their structural and functional characteristics (see *ibid.*). On the Web, users find either the same forms of expression as in the elementary interaction or substitutes for them. However, the interaction among the four levels of expression in elementary interaction is impossible on the Web: Presence, personal appearance, gesture, and speech are not mutually imbued but rather differentiated and individualized.

A fundamental precondition for elementary interaction is shared *presence* in one place (see *ibid.*: 207). By contrast, a specific characteristic of Web communication is that it occurs without any type of physical and joint presence. The participant's body is absent. Since this is a condition of corporeal expression, the possibility of interaction through physical appearance, gesture and – to a certain extent – speech is lacking as well. While presence in non-mediatized reality represents a scarce commodity and requires real »presence management«

about the encoding of social interactions and relations in images (see Kress/van Leeuwen 1996: 121).

(ibid.: 201), the actors can be present virtually in multiple interactive spaces on the Web at the same time.

The physical presence of an elementary interaction is symbolically substituted with »virtual presence« (Merten 1998: 224) on the Web. This takes place through a number of symbol forms. A person exists as a participant by registering in the portal (potential presence); this presence is symbolized by an individual profile page, a user name, and possibly an image of the profile owner. However, the actor becomes actively present in the virtual space through his or her activities and activity products, which are represented by writing text reports, uploading images and videos, and entering into friendship and fan relationships: All of these activities and activity products are visible to others and reflect the user's actions within social network sites. So the News Feed page is primarily the place where activities and activity products are represented symbolically. These are displayed as automatically generated reports (»Marie and Louise are now friends«) or as status reports that can include text, image, film, or sound content. This is how online activities constitute virtual presence. Physical presence is additionally symbolized by an illustration of the absent body in the image. The profile picture, which is automatically attached to every online activity and conveys the characteristics of personal appearance and gesture, functions as the actor's representation in online interaction.

In elementary interaction, we are not only jointly present but also communicate through our personal appearance and gestures. The characteristics associated with physical appearance (including skin color, gender, facial features, posture, hairstyle, clothing, and makeup), which convey a »simultaneous image of the personality« (Geser 1990: 208), are what is understood as *personal appearance*. The personal appearance in photographs substitutes for the personal appearance in elementary interactions.

On the other hand, *gesture* indicates the intended and unintended behaviors that function as signs expressing internal emotional states, motivations, abilities, or intentions (see ibid.). Photographs can be examined to this effect as frozen interactions that reflect elements of offline interactions. In the photographs, facial expression, posture/orientation, and significant gestures are among the typical poses of elementary interaction that are reflected in modulated form. Compared with elementary interactions, the gesture in photography is hyper-stylized for the purpose of communication. This is why the person photographed assumes a particular posture. Consequently, body poses are specific forms of pictorially conveyed gestures. Photographs are objects formed by human action (artifacts) that are intended for representation. They are two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional and represent a momentary snapshot in lieu of a stream of perceptual impressions. Personal appearance and gesture (with reservations) are performed through the profile picture.

In elementary interaction, *speech* is defined as the »totality of acoustic expressions that are encoded within the medium of a conventional code of articulation, word formation, and sentence formation« (ibid.). Linguistic expressions appear on various levels in online communication, e.g. in status updates, private messages, or chat messages. On social network sites, speech expressions differ from elementary interaction in that the former are not at all associated with the body or produced orally; instead, they are recorded in written form but still personally attributable through the communicative framework outlined above (profile page, profile pictures, user names, and status updates).

2.2 Profile Pictures' Communicative Contexts in the Example of facebook.com

Although initially identifiable as individual images, the examined profile pictures should always be understood as part of a communication process that they cannot represent in its entirety (see Cohnen 2008: 122). With regard to the image-semiotic context (i.e., the respective visual configuration of the representation containing the image within a website on a screen), they appear either isolated, together with other images, or in combination with other primarily linguistic forms of communication. The latter refers to communicative and interactional processes in particular. This image communication is specifically pre-structured by profile pictures and therefore through the respective image-semiotic embedding, as well as from reconstructible use contexts (in total: communication contexts) in social network sites. Hjorth points to these with regard to photography on the Web: »Context as content, once the mantra of the minimalism, has taken on new dimensions within Web 2.0 social media« (2009: 157). Against such a backdrop, these questions arise: How are profile pictures integrated into a given site and what functional contribution does the profile picture make within the framework of communication in social network sites? The answer can be found by using the facebook.com website as an example.

What are the communicative contexts in which profile pictures are used on facebook.com? The profile picture is apparently the central and most frequently used image type on social network sites due to its repeated representation in different communicative contexts. If a user looks carefully at his or her own profile page and those of others, he or she will find profile pictures in the form of a large display on the profile page, as a thumbnail in the picture galleries, and in notifications, as well as in the profile picture album. The impression of the profile picture as the primary image type on social network sites is confirmed by a descriptive entry of the various communication contexts in which the profile picture is used. This once again confirms its function as a surrogate for presence.

When a user adds a profile picture to his or her own page, an image is loaded onto the Facebook server and automatically saved in the *Profile Pictures album* – a photo album that contains all of the user's profile pictures that have been used and saved to date. If a profile picture already exists, the new profile picture automatically replaces the old one. If the old images are not deleted, the Profile Pictures album displays a chronological collection of the previous profile pictures. The result is an album of profile pictures that usually shows the image of the profile owner in various attitudes⁴. The layout of a so-called »Me album« (see Autenrieth 2011 in this volume) is therefore structurally preset by the software. Users can arrange the image format freely because there is no specification as to a length/width ratio for the profile picture. The basic functions of picture albums are available for interactive adaptation of the album: The profile picture can be provided with a caption, commented upon by third parties, or linked with other Facebook users by a name tag – software functions that make interactive use of the profile picture possible. As an option, the profile picture can also be displayed as News through the Share function, causing it to appear as a current entry in the profile's Wall tab⁵. The image saved in the Profile Pictures album is the primary image for the profile picture displayed in the profile and the thumbnail⁶.

When a profile picture has been set, it is automatically displayed in a central location in the user profile. This displayed profile picture (in short: *display image*) is a standard, software-generated element of the profile page. The display image is identical to the profile picture in the album of the same name and it appears when the Wall or Info tab in the upper left corner of the profile page is selected. The user's name appears to the right of the display image, which is why the profile picture and user name represent a single communicative unit. Both are obligatory design elements of the user profile and are also found on almost every other social networking site, such as MySpace, Netlog, etc., within this structural context.

- 4 The creation of such an album, which occurs when the user adds new pictures, is the norm. The visibility of the Profile Picture album can be individually configured like any other profile information via the Privacy Settings menu.
- 5 Facebook profiles are subdivided into tabs. In the standard setup, a Facebook profile contains the three index elements of Wall, Info, and Photos as sub-pages.
- 6 The same image is displayed for all areas of the profile page, either as the complete image (display image) or as a partial view (thumbnail). It is not possible to differentiate. Likewise, all other Facebook users see the same profile photo. Here as well, no differentiation is possible.



Figure 1: Display Image as side element

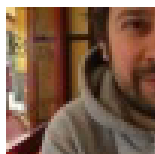


Figure 2: Thumbnail as an Element of Messages and Photo Galleries

A distinction should be made between the *thumbnail*, which shows a section of the profile picture, and the displayed profile picture itself as design elements of the profile page. The small-format variant of the profile picture is square and the length of its sides is pre-defined. The user must select the section of the picture, which usually includes the head and face area. While use of the profile picture is restricted to that of a side element and album image, the thumbnail is automatically displayed in various contexts: It is used either as part of picture galleries or notifications, such as messages and inquiries (private messages, friend requests, and event and group invitations), news feed, and wall entries. The thumbnail is saved at a lower resolution than the display image or album picture and is therefore not as sharp (see fig. 2).

The way that the thumbnail is used in *photo galleries* pictorially summarizes a specific group of people. The profile owner's friends are concentrated into a group on the Info and Wall tabs and their thumbnails are organized into a gallery. This Friends list is not the only picture gallery generated by the software. The thumbnail of anyone who joins a group, becomes a celebrity's fan, receives an event invitation, logs onto a gaming application, or is simply online is likewise displayed with others in a corresponding picture gallery. Galleries represent groups of people whose participants are distinguished by specific common ele-

ments – which may be a single friend in common, a membership, or simply shared activities. This also occurs in a different way for a second group of picture galleries that are generated by algorithms, such as the group of suggested friends. These provide the user with a picture gallery that displays potential aspirants to a friend or fan relationship under the rubric of Suggestions. The Facebook system determines the suggested persons based on information, such as friends in common, school, employer, or interests. Searching by email addresses, which are registered on Facebook, also leads to the searched person being displayed to the searcher as a friend suggestion (see Balduzzi et al. 2010: 11).

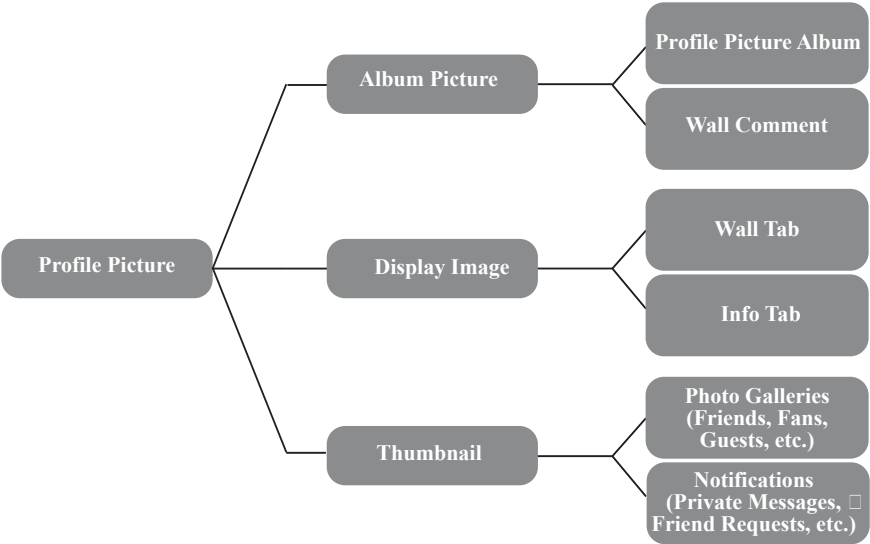


Figure 3: Communication-Contexts Profile Pictures

Another usage context for thumbnails on Facebook is *Notifications*. The portal offers users various options for communication and interaction in the form of explicit notifications. On one hand, these include various forms of *messages and inquiries*, such as private messages, friend requests, event and group invitations, etc. Here as well, the name and image are structurally linked to each another⁷ in as much as the thumbnail is positioned next to the sender's text message and identifies the sender. The second category of notifications is displayed in the

7 The construction of each update corresponds (relationship of picture, name of profile owner, and content) to the construction of the register frame of a profile page.

News Feed field. This includes status updates («What's on your mind?» and «Posting»), as well as portal activities (e.g. establishing friendships, writing comments, joining groups, etc.). Within this context, the thumbnail identifies activities among the users who are linked by friendship, fan status, and group membership. Because messages are sent to the News Feed field from various users (comparable with a news ticker), the small-format picture enables immediate identification of the actors and produces an overview of who said or did what and when. Thumbnails are distinguished by the same usage forms and functions in *status updates*: Whenever someone writes something on his or her own wall («What's on your mind?») or someone else's wall («Write something...»), this is always displayed by thumbnail.

The usage forms of the profile picture and its particular graphic and communicative design are nothing new; instead, they are oriented toward known codes of graphic design and corresponding media or means of communication (see Walser 2010).

2.3 Social Functions of Portraits

In the medial representation of the person, portraits assume an eminently important role. Like any other image, they are embodied in different media. Their medial form requires that portraits are also always used as commodity, which is particularly true in a number of functions ranging from the personal to the social and legal to the commercial. Typical means of using portraits in many social contexts are practiced here. It can be used as an esthetic object, as well as a substitute for the individuals who they represent. Or they may convey an aura of power, values, beauty, or other abstract meanings (see West 2004: 43)⁸. So we use pictures of friends, for example, to awaken memories of them. Consequently, the social reality of the portrait is not in its images (its subjects and motifs), but in its functions (see Sontag 1980: 29). Studies regarding this topic are based on the question of «Why pictures?» (see Bourdieu et al. 1981) and therefore move

- 8 The question of the relationship between public and private also comes into play here. Traditionally, private and public pictures were kept strictly separate from each other in terms of their function (see Reichertz/Marth 2004) – a distinction (see especially Goffman 1981: 49) that can scarcely be maintained in the dispersion of the social web. Many portraits are decidedly produced for public use, such as in churches, public plazas, or newspapers. But portraits that have a primarily private function are also produced to be seen and noticed more by a group of individuals than by one individual (see West 2004:43).

the portrait to the foreground as a document, representative, and visual testimony to a person's biography and individuality.

Portraits are used based on their *documentary* function. This documentary nature lies in the representation of a person in a particular time-space structure – no matter whether people or activity scenes are in the foreground. Claims of documentary authenticity in portraiture certainly have their limits, which arise through imaginations and interpretations. »Portraits can appear to provide documentation or authentication of a person's appearance, age, status, or even biological identity. But the imaginative and interpretative aspects of all portraiture make it resistant to documentary reductionism« (West 2004: 59). Typical characteristics of photographic portraits are formalized and stereotyping forms of the person's representation (see Bourdieu et al. 1981). The claim of a documentary nature exists in tension with dramatical moments of representation (»poses«), which is primarily illustrated in the context of occasion-specific portraits (party, vacation, etc.) (see Neumann-Braun/Astheimer 2010a).

The claim of documentation is also linked to that of *identification*. The possibility of technical reproduction in the 19th century turned photography into the medium for identifying persons (see Daval 1983: 55). Above all, the claim of faithfulness to reality – which was already asserted with respect to the painted portrait of the Renaissance – is potentiated in the photographic portrait (see Cohen 2008: 125). Accounted for solely by its identifying function, the prototypical portrait category is the police identification and passport photo. Identifying recognition therefore assumes physical similarity of the portrait to the person it portrays.

Portraits have always been used to bring to mind someone or something that is absent – a person, animal, or artifact. For human beings, the portrait takes the place of a present actor: The picture replaces the absent body and functions as its *representative*. This function of the image as a substitute or surrogate for an absent person is at the center of Roland Barthes' analysis of photography in *Camera Lucida* (1989). For the observer, the portrait appears as a magical substitute for the individual to be represented while bringing past moments of that person's life into the present (see West 2004: 59). However, the realization of absent persons occurs under different circumstances within the context of private and public photographs (see Kautt 2008: 61): In private portraits, the photographic image can be related to a role model and this is where the picture's appeal in invoking the absent individual lies. The portrait's function is to represent a particular person, which can be meant both superficially and internally if the portrait is also used as a representation of attitude (see Soussloff 2006: 8). However, this definitely cannot be said about public pictures, such as images in the news or advertising: These are not ordinarily connected with an authentic model. An identifi-

cation of the object (e.g. a politician or teen idol) only occurs through the publicly distributed manifestations – through the »images« (Kautt 2008).

As a form of presenting the person, the portrait also functions as part of a *biographical* documentation. It represents a particular period of the person's life. Portraits and written biographies apparently have many things in common. The relationship between the image and text types reached its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries whereby the modes of image and speech supported different functions. The fixing of a particular moment and the paradoxical impression of a timeless, iconic image are disconcerting with respect to the development aspect of characters and actions, which is an attribute of biographical writing (see West 2004: 50). As a fixed image, the portrait is therefore not in a position to demonstrate individual acting or behavior (see Bohnsack 2001; Reichertz 1994). However, there are other differences besides the mode of representation because the portrait only shows a snapshot. If it represents the appearance of an individual at a specific point in time, it can only allude to other aspects of the person's life as a result. Max Kozloff characterizes this micro-description of a person through portraiture as follows: »Portraits, after all, are traditionally confined to the description of individuals during only a microsecond of their lives« (2009: 271). Any portrait can only reflect the basic elements of a biography, whereas the biography does not go as far as the immediate presence of an individual (see West 2004: 52). It is worth distinguishing the practice of photographic portraiture from painted portraits. Sontag points out the difference between these two types of portraits in that »Photographic images are pieces of evidence in an ongoing biography or history. And one photograph, unlike one individual painting, implies that there will be others« (Sontag 1980: 159).

As biographical documentation, portraits link the attention to the time of creation – the appearance of an individual at the moment that the image is produced. Hans-Georg Gadamer describes this characteristic as the *occasionality* of the portrait and refers to the fact that the »content of its meaning is continually determined by the occasion on which it is intended such that it contains more than without this occasion. So (the portrait) includes a relationship to the person represented into which it is not only moved, but is explicitly intended in the representation and characterizes it as a portrait« (1990: 149). Regarded in semiotic terms, the occasional significance of the portrait arises in connection with its creation or within the context of its production (see Schütz 1974: 173f.). Therefore, the occasional significance is not something peripheral but much more essential to the portrait image. Occasionality is part of the »core significance content« (Gadamer 1990: 149) of the portrait, which is apparent in that an unfamiliar observer still recognizes a portrait as such.

The occasional significance is directly connected to the question regarding *evidence of individuality*. According to Gadamer (see *ibid.*), it is the occasionali-

ty of the portrait that fulfills the social function to bring out a person's individuality in lieu of the typology (see Cohnen 2008: 124). The portrait is tied to the personality, which conveys the particular characteristics of an individual. It is characterized by a »personal sense« (ibid.: 125), i.e., »that the person portrayed depicts himself or herself in a portrait and represents himself or herself with a portrait« (ibid.: 151). It is therefore different from a picture that represents a person as a character image or subject. In this respect, the main emphasis of a portrait's message says less about who the represented person is and much more »that it is a particular person (and not a type)« (ibid.: 150).

Contemporary everyday life is characterized by the omnipresence of portraits testifying to individuality in the private and public space. Galle (2000: 47) writes that the portrait »takes over an essential share of contemporary identity attribution, as well as confirmation«. The demands that are linked to the portrait today (primarily that of testifying to individuality) are products of modernity. At its core, the art of portraiture in the medium of (portrait) painting since the 17th century and the medium of (portrait) photography since the 19th century is based on granting individuality and autonomy to the person represented. Gottfried Boehm (1988: 21) shows the peculiarity of the traditionally realized portrait, which established itself over the course of the Renaissance. With it, the person is no longer pictured »ex se«: He or she is not shown as a »proxy for a class, for a spiritual or worldly (sovereign) function but – increasingly – as a bearer of his or her own individuality« (Galle 2000: 47).

The photographic portrait arose under particular initial socio-cultural circumstances, causing it to be molded in specific ways. Primarily as a representative portrait, it enabled a broad swath of the bourgeoisie to gain access to an individual representation in the 19th century. Historically regarded, the portrait photo was *the* »medium for constituting bourgeois individuality« (Vogt 1992: 167) in this period. Even today, a representative form is identified with the portrait photo in private photography. Its individual characteristics usually represent people who are known to us (extremely functionalized in the mug shot). While the painted portrait was traditionally the privilege of the aristocracy and prosperous classes of society, the introduction of photography caused the image medium to become democratized. From the beginning, photography was linked to the ways of displaying of portrait painting, bringing the methods and procedures of aristocratic glorification to the bourgeoisie with it (see Lavani 1996: 44) and developing an internal coherence in portrait art from the Renaissance into the 19th century (see Galle 2000: 48). Consequently, the competition kindled by the bourgeoisie for aristocratic representation privileges became a central process of modernity in the form of expanding an individualized self-conception.

2.4 Methods of Production and Use of Portrait Images

The portrait as a small-format commodity image has a long tradition of social *image use*; as explained above, the origins of this use are in the Renaissance. Early portrait types, which already showed characteristics of the representative function, were miniatures and pastel portraits that were already used between the 16th and 18th centuries. The former were small-format portrait images, held in the hand or kept in medallions, and only showed a person's face. The image had the function of strengthening the relationship with the portrayed person⁹. The pastel portraits that were customary in the 18th century were characterized by a similar intimacy. For both portrait styles, the similarity to the person displayed was equally eminent in its importance. The allure of the use was found in the fact that the persons were shown realistic and tangibly, which is why the portraits had erotic and fetishistic qualities ascribed to them and became the objects of obsessive collecting fervor (see West 2004: 59f.; Böhme 1999: 79)¹⁰.

Both portrait styles were objects of utility, which meant that they were also objects of social exchange. The types of actions carried out through the image encompassed both caring for relationships and initiating them. The experience of the small-format portrait was particularly popular among young adults. Portrait miniatures and pastel portraits were used within the context of marriage initiation and functioned as proof of the age, attractiveness, and health of the person represented (see West 2004: 60). Within this utility form, they were instruments of identification and, in turn, it was necessary to appear identical to this (ideal) self-image (see Böhme 2004: 79). Likewise, typical forms of caring for relationships, such as collection and exchange practices, became common activities: Since portraits were used as representatives, they were also exchanged as gifts. In the 15th and 16th centuries, portraits were primarily exchanged among young men to confirm their friendship. It was customary at British colleges to collect miniatures of graduating students (see West 2004: 61).

Miniature formats were available to the populace in the form of *carte de visite* portraits. In 1854, the French photographer Disderi invented a process that reduced a negative to a series of images in a 9 x 6 format and allowed the portrait to reach an initial peak as a photographic mass product in the second half of the

9 Miniatures are still an important part of image consumption by young people and are collected and exchanged as collective images (sports or pop stars) or private friendship photos (photo-booth photos) (see Walser 2010).

10 With the invention of photography in the 19th century, the practice of the portrait as a daily companion did not diminish. Small-format images, now called wallet photos, are stored in *wallets* and show the face of a friend or relative as a passport photo or picture details from a larger photograph.

19th century¹¹. The pictures were taken enthusiastically because the public enjoyed the associated duplication and possibility of selecting images (see Daval 1983: 54). The currently customary forms of use and canon of motifs in private photography were predetermined by the practices of exchanging and distributing *carte de visite* portraits (see Guschker 2002: 126). In the second half of the 20th century, photo-booth photos from vending machines for passport photos assumed the same function as earlier portrait types for young people. As a result, the photo-booth portrait became the most important medium of friendship photography (see Mathys 2006; Pilarczyk/Mietzner 2005).

A look at present-day methods of image production by young people reveals that many portraits seem to be produced »by their own direction«. The image culture of the Internet is characterized by the independent performance of photographic production techniques, which is a do-it-yourself (D.I.Y) expression. Such a photo practice would have been utterly impossible in the past. Since the Renaissance, the privileged social classes had engaged professional portraitists – first painters and then photographers. This led to individual interpretations by the portraitists, who realized an external view of the represented subject. In the early days of photography, the treatment of portraiture was initially also just reserved for professional photographers. However, their monopoly came to an end with the introduction of camera technologies that contributed to a privatization of the photographic medium and made it possible for amateur photographers (see Neumann-Braun/Astheimer 2010b) to produce pictures outside of professional photo studios. One of the preconditions for this occurrence was the standardization of film development, which was introduced with the Kodak systems in 1888. The complete photo apparatus was brought into a studio for film processing (see Gautrand 1998: 238). Photography achieved the mobility that we know today through the invention of portable photo equipment, which took over the photo market in the 1890s. The Kodak Folding Pocket from 1897, which became the prototype for later small formats and was specifically oriented toward amateurs and snapshooters (see *ibid.*: 240), deserves particular attention here. The company took over the new medium in the form of mobile, easy-to-use equipment. Standardization of film development and simplification of camera technology made specialized (professional) knowledge obsolete.

The broader history of analog photography shows a progressive refinement of camera technology and the automation of its functions. In the field of compact cameras, this was accompanied by a systematic reduction of the technical op-

11 Between 300 and 400 million *cartes de visite* portraits were produced annually in England between 1861 and 1867 (see Daval 1983: 54).

tions and operational decisions that was realized through the standardization of camera settings (see King 2003: 206), for example. Another step in the automation of private image production was carried out through the invention of instant cameras with integral print film (e.g. the Polaroid SX-70) and automated cameras (photo booth). The integration of film development is characteristic of both procedures, which makes the immediate use of photographs possible. With photo booth, an additional step from picture-taking by third parties (professional or amateur) led to self-production and the creation of self-portraits. The history of photographic media technology therefore can be seen as a process of the portrait's democratization and privatization. The previous camera technology developments have been bundled together in the digital mode. At the same time, the digital camera equally serves image production and examination and is equivalent to the classic instant picture apparatuses. In the form of mobile media (such as a mobile phone), photographic technology is available at any time and portraiture has become routinized.

The self-portrait is the main form of creating portrait images for today's young people. Based on the simple execution of digital image production, it is not necessary to have a portraying actor in digital photography. The person portrayed assumes the activity in which the subject photographs himself or herself and interactive creation is relinquished. The interpreting actor, with his or her own ideas and (professional or amateur) expectations about portraiture, disappears from the photographic situation. The photographic act occurs in a non-interactive, self-determined, and self-controlled way in the self-portrait. In this constellation, the ego can no longer directly orient itself upon the other; yet, this still occurs through processes of role adoption. This means that the digital image culture of young people is a culture of self-creation and do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.), which occurs from image production (creation and display control) up to image editing and distribution to the hands of other young people (also see Brunazzi/Willenegger/Raab in this volume).

3. Classification of Profile Pictures

As explained above, an actor is necessary for online interaction on social network sites. The first impression of the opponent is visual: This occurs through the profile picture, primarily in the form of the large-format, prominently placed display image. But this is not all. With every additional act of communication, the actors are represented by the profile picture and volunteer themselves as specific communicators. On social network sites, countless different forms of self-representation are possible by profile pictures; however, only specific, recurring models exist within them.

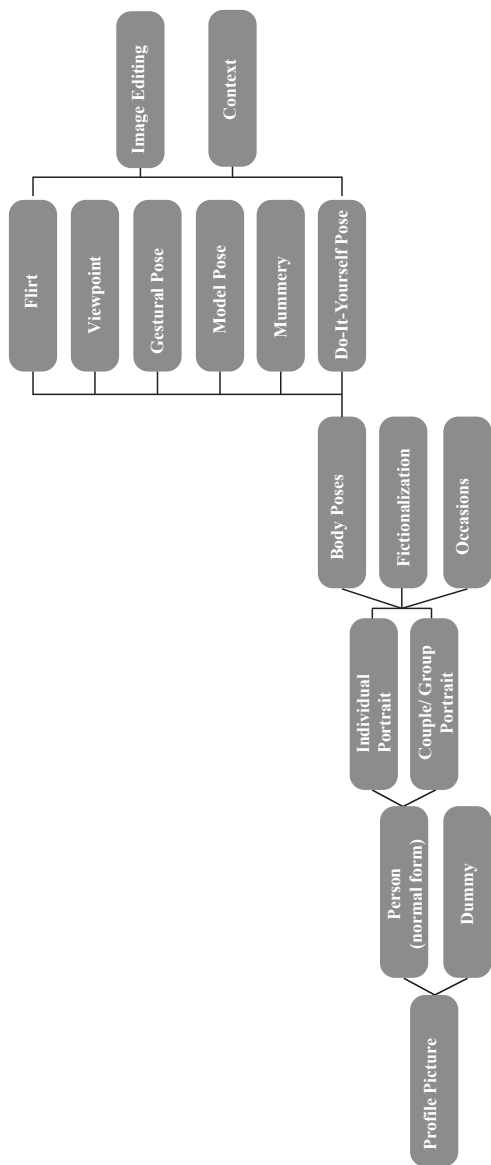


Figure 4: Types of Profile Pictures

What structural organizational models can be detected in such self-representation as a communicator? How are these organizational models applied to different image types? On one hand, the distinguishing criteria of the different image types are the activity in front of the camera as a particular form of subject or motif (see Reichertz 1994)¹²; on the other hand, this involves how the camera is used (see Peters 1980; Opl 1990)¹³.

The purpose of the following image classification is to determine different types of actions (in the sense of motifs and esthetics) based on the profile pictures. Such identification occurs initially on the level of descriptive image characteristics (content/form). At the same time, the characteristic combinations that constitute particular (photographic) types of profile pictures are investigated. If we focus on the product of the profile picture as the interplay of specific actions in the picture and specific ways of handling a camera, then the concept of the pose becomes relevant because it is frequently present; in addition, it represents an intermediate scenario form because it is addressed in the image (action in front of the camera), as well as for the image (use of the camera). However, not all poses are alike: For example, a rigid (formal) portrait pose is different from a friendly hug or a posed love scene. Particularly in the case of portrait poses, representation goes through a process of condensation because not only do the model (body) and subject (person/personality) coincide here (the body that is represented shows the person who is represented), but the action in the picture (the pose) is simultaneously a photographic act of representation that shows how it »looks« corporeally when I »see« myself through the eyes of other people. The *types of action* that distinguish the photographs are introduced in the following section:

About the System: What are the expectations of normality for the profile picture? One basic rule of portrait pictures is that they should show a person. The typical form for a formal, photographically realized representation of a person is

- 12 For more on the narrowing of activity in the image and subject, see Reichertz (1994) on the example of the Pietà motif.
- 13 The descriptive recording and classification of activities and scenes in the image (action in front of the camera) and uses of the camera for a particular and central image type (namely, profile pictures) is the first and decisive step toward determining the central means of presenting instances for communication/persons (MyFace) within the communication framework that is not mediated by the body. When focused on an application that is central due to its technical inevitability (namely, display images), the communicative use of the pictures is initially removed (and only reinstated for reasons that the image subject suggests). This step will be reviewed/supplemented in the course of the research – through analysis of the use contexts outlined above (image-semiotic [website] and interactional [messages, galleries, status updates, etc.]) with regard to the communicative processes.

the passport photo. We expect that the body's styling and movement in it will just be enhanced with a low level of lifestyle codes. So the passport photo or identification motif represents a typical profile picture variant on online networks. However, it is not the only motif that falls within the usual framework for profile pictures. An additional form is that of the dummy – a category that does not show the actual person and whose function it is to mark his or her identity through deviation from the usual form (passport photo).

Apart from the normality of the passport photo motif and the dummy counter-motif, other profile picture types are distinguished by differences in their form and content. These are stylization variants that modify the format of the passport photo through interactive poses, the number of people, or image editing. »Relationship« pictures represent an initial class of such stylistic variants in young people's profile pictures: This image is no longer just the lone individual but also his or her friendship or love relationship represented by the profile picture.

Different forms of strongly »gestural« poses represent another class. In comparison with the passport photo action and attitude, these are interactively and symbolically connotated to a high degree. Information about the frequency of these individual forms can be found in Chapter 4.

Another stylization variant is »fictionalization«, in which the do-it-yourself principle is at the core of the image editing. Images of this type are individual productions or »self-constructions« by young people. Pictures can be edited or raw with respect to image technology; in addition, they may be classified as photographed internally (privately) or externally (publicly) with respect to the context represented. The significant photographic occasions will be distinguished in one final step.

a) *Identification/Passport Photo*

The passport photo shows an identity linked to a head and a face. As such, it is most similar to the image of an identification card – i.e. a portrait type that is functionally structured for identification. From a formal perspective, the passport photo motif is primarily characterized by its specific setting size and perspective: It shows a close-up of the subject's head, face, and upper body (»head and shoulder close-up«)¹⁴. The shot ordinarily presents a frontal view from eye level, which is why the entire face can be seen in the picture.

14 See Hickethier (1996: 58ff.) for classification of the size of frame.

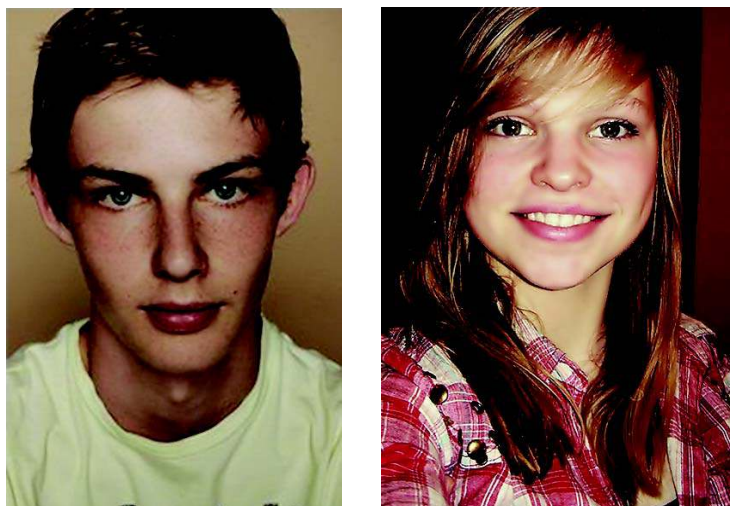


Figure 5 to 6: Identification/Passport Photo

Based on its basic formal characteristics, the person shown in the passport photo can be more accurately identified due to the facial features and expression than in any other size of frame and perspective.

No (portrait) image is the same as any other in the way that a person is represented. However, there are certain esthetic image modalities that make recognition and identification of a person's picture easier or more difficult. For example, color and black-and-white shots are different in the precision of their representation. Passport photo motifs are primarily color representations, which means that they are distinguished by greater realism. In terms of the camera settings, the lighting conditions, as well as the focus and depth of field, contribute to the realistic or naturalistic representation of the picture (see Harper 2000; Kress/van Leuwen 1996). There is a clear separation between background and body, the picture is sharp and high-contrast, the lighting is even, and the skin tones are represented naturally – esthetic image characteristics that are the customary conditions of formal ID cards. In this respect, particular value is placed on the impression of documentary authenticity. In addition, the objectivity and formal precision of the image design can be identified as a structural characteristic of the image esthetic. This applies to the setting size and perspective, as well as to the selection of the camera settings.

How do young people present their bodies in the motifs of the passport picture? In the person's physical representation in the mode of the passport picture, a distinction should be made between two structurally different areas of corporeal signification. First, a field of body presentation is structured for identifica-

tion of continual corporeal characteristics. In this case, the physiognomy of the person serves as his or her identification for recognizing typical corporeal patterns. His or her identity can be formally examined qua rule comparison in which a *pattern recognition* is carried out by facial recognition. Prototypical photographic media, which are fundamentally structured for such a mode of identification, are police identification photos and passport pictures for official identification. A known physical pattern is therefore identified because – as a habitual body of identity – the body bears signs of gender, age, ethnicity, attractiveness, illness, and lifestyle (see Willems 1998: 44). In general, the face is the person's identifying body part in both its non-mediatised and mediatised manifestation and we recognize other people based on their body type, eye color, or body hair. This identification of continued styles is oriented upon the person in his or her »fundamental continuity« (Goffman 1977: 319) and restricted to a minimum of social meanings.

Secondly, apart from such an identification of constant personality characteristics, self-representation of the identification card type is aimed at (self-)stylization of a *social identity* in its aspects, i.e. individual and personal characteristics¹⁵. Based on the »inevitability of self-dramatization« (Hitzler 1998: 98), the arrangement of the body should also fundamentally be understood as (indicating) communication (see Schmidt/Neumann-Braun 2004: 15) regardless of whether this occurs intentionally or unintentionally. Body movement (here: facial expression) and body styling belong to the class of symbolic forms of expression. The passport portrait presents the effort expended to stylize the head, face, and upper body in visual terms. This allows the determination of whether this type of motif represents a strong form of individuality, which arises on the level of symbolic expression through the interplay of physiognomy, facial expression, and body composition (grooming, makeup, jewelry, hairstyle, etc.). Therefore, the face always permits equal recognition of the individual personality and the social identity (see Goffman 1969; Gombrich 1984)¹⁶.

- 15 Such willful self-stylization occurs in a »relationship of co-existence« (Willems/Kautt 2003: 25) with habitual unconscious styles.
- 16 The neutral expression of the face shows the (socially mediated) individual physiognomy as a symbolic expression of life history and therefore the individuality of the individual (see Gugutzer 2004: 32). It also shows socially acceptable forms of facial expression (the position of the head, the gaze, and the smile) and the body composition. Every portrait transmits the illusion of seeing the face behind a mask (see Gombrich 1984: 132f.). According to Simmel, the face causes »the person to be understood through the first impression of his or her look instead of just the respective actions« (Simmel 1992: 725).

The impression of documentary authenticity remains systematically restricted to the presentation of the head and face in that neither the action context nor the picture context present. No particular moment (of action) is represented, but a particular period of a life is signified by the picture¹⁷. With respect to the *proxy* function, it is therefore not a particular mode of action that is typical of the person but the individuality that is recalled. Support is provided for such symbolization because the image's interactive dimension in a passport photo is characterized to the least degree (and it remains systematically restricted to the field of facial expression and head posture). In terms of the proxy function, it should also be mentioned that the close-up suggests a personal relationship to the person who is represented (see Kress/van Leeuwen 1996; Hall 1966).

What expressive power does the representation mode of the passport motif have? What does a person project of himself or herself into the ring of web communication? The passport portrait exists in a factual and a stylized variant: In its factual form, the depiction is restricted to the presentation of the physical characteristics necessary for identification qua pattern recognition. The stylized variation shows an interactant who is presented in a socially expected way. The concrete example (see fig. 7) illustrates the impression of a cultivated normality and open-mindedness. Essentially nothing is predetermined for particular role, relationship, or life patterns. At best, the cultural origin is clearly based on (self-) stylization¹⁸. Instead, a high level of normativity and simultaneously an openness to contact is indicated. A person presents himself or herself as attractive and distinctive (idealization, »all done up«).

b) *Dummy*

A person who would like to remain unrecognized uses a picture in which he or she cannot be seen. If a user does not select his or her own motif, then a type of placeholder is displayed by the portal. On Facebook and the german SchülerVZ, these are graphics that represent a shadow image or a person with a mask (see fig. 7).

- 17 There are usually no professionals at work on the social network sites but young amateurs who orient themselves upon professional standards. However, typical forms of expression in snapshot photography, such as out of square or blurred images, can also be found there.
- 18 Since the entire body is not shown due to the size of frame and a frontal perspective is chosen, passport portraits do not produce depictions of stereotypical poses.



Figure 7 to 9: Dummy

In lieu of the placeholder that is standard for the portal, many young people select their own motif and use images that are available on the Web (see fig. 8-9) or that they have made themselves. The life is portrayed *with* a quotation and *behind* a quotation. Placeholders and quotations are distinguished by their masking function. At the same time, the selection of the motif also shows the quotation behind which a user conceals himself or herself. In lieu of identifying with the person, the identification is with something else. Although the objects of identification are versatile, they arise from symbolic orders that are typical for young people.

On the one hand, living creatures are depicted. People, animals, and plants are frequently among the motivic repertoire of young people. Where human beings are represented, it is primarily public persons – especially media stars – who are among their typical image repertoire. Young people use the images of their role models (such as stars of sports, music, gaming, entertainment, etc.) and position themselves through them within the system of the media market. Animals, which are employed by users in their function as »transitional objects« (Winnicott 2006), prove to be a motif that is no less well-liked. Objects from inanimate nature include flower and beach motifs, which are quite popular in online networks. Real or fictional living creatures can be symbolized; in the fictional mode, this primarily means cartoons.

No less common are motifs from the world of *artifacts*, which primarily reflect favorite consumer goods, such as technical artifacts or fashion/sports items. For instance, there are automotive objects (motorcycles, cars) that function as objects of power or fashion artifacts that function as cult objects. Here, navigation offers the young people a consumer product market whose brands (or branded articles) pass on an extensive repertoire of *logos and lettering*. This brand symbolism functions as a sign that shows the interactant that a person is »in«.

c) *Relationships (Friendships and Romances)*

Many depictions of the young profile owners break out of the narrow confines of the (individual) portrait in that they show not only the individual subject (the profile owner) but pairs or groups. Any portrait that shows more than one person within the image portrays social relations in addition to the individual. Such profile pictures are therefore always also *relationship portraits*, which illustrate partner, family, acquaintance, and (primarily) friendship relationships. Their central pictorial object is the (symbolic) interaction between the persons represented in the image (as an example, figure 12 shows an interaction between two friends).

In relationship portraits as well, the expression of body language is the most important bearer of meaningful and signifying content in the portrait. We are accustomed to transmitting relationship qualities in images through physical closeness and distance, as well as the sameness and difference of the corporeal expression. We value the depiction of a personal or intimate social relationship and express this by representing the ritualized corporeal proximity (see Goffman 1981). The depiction of bodily intimacy is in the foreground of most relationship motif. In group representations, participants often pay attention to the symmetry of the representation. Boys who pose as buddies assemble themselves non-hierarchically, keep some distance from each another, and embrace. The »cheek-to-cheek« motif, which is primarily used by close female friends to symbolically emphasize their relationship, is characterized by greater intimacy (see fig. 12). The kiss motif, which most clearly expresses the intimacy of the relationship, is very popular among couples (see fig. 10). As the examples show, stereotyped poses are used to represent various relationships qualities. If we raise the question of representational traditions, subjects and motifs from the canon of analogous private photography would provide excellent role models (see Bourdieu 1981; Chalfen 1987).



Figure 10 to 12: Relationship

With respect to the practice of creating images, photobooth photography by young people also serves as a reference value. Since relationship images show not only the profile owner but other persons as well, identification occurs through the friendships and romantic relationships. The relationship to others is more important than the depiction of personal individuality. In lieu of elevating the subject, there is a stronger emphasis on the depicted relationship and the relationship picture becomes the symbol and means of social integration (see Bourdieu 1981). At the same time, this means that friendship and closeness are elevated as symbolic values for the representation of the individual person. From a biographical perspective, the picture reflects a particular moment in life: It represents a specific, sometimes brief segment of time in adolescence during which the other person(s) in the picture play(s) a central role. This is because the selection of a particular subject always documents personal relevance. Among the many »friends« in the online network, individuals are distinguished as significant for the user.

d) *Body Poses*

Flirt – With the Flirt and the Viewpoint types (see below), the common sense use of the portrait is maintained with respect to social distance. The close-up is constitutive for both portrait types. However, they are distinct, from the passport picture in that the body's posture and orientation are different. The term »flirt« represents an erotically motivated encounter between two persons: the observer and his or her object. The pictorial representation of this type of action also conveys the symbolic expression of eroticism mediatized by body language and proximity. The Flirt portrait is supported by the following formal image characteristics: Comparable to the passport portrait, the close-up is selected as a setting size (the head and upper body are visible as a rule) so that the represented distance between the depicted person and the observer is rated as ranging from personal to even intimate, which symbolizes a personal/intimate social relationship. The camera is positioned at or higher than eye level (subject is viewed slightly from above). The camera position generates a side view, which causes the imagined interaction between the represented person and the observer to occur literally side-by-side.

The depiction shows a body in motion. Movements of the head and face are immediately related to the observer and promote interaction in this regard. The head is turned toward the observer and the facial expression – conveyed by the eyes and mouth – is also oriented in this way. As a result, the motif shows a face that is interacting. Not the personality at rest (i.e. passport photo image type), but social interaction is in the foreground – which is why the picture documents a performed situation.



Figure 13 to 16: Flirt

If we observe this type from the perspective of an (imagined) interaction participant, the actor's pose reads as an act of paying attention to or encountering the observer¹⁹. This also means that the attention is directed at the observer, who is addressed as a parasocial interaction participant²⁰. The action represented can therefore also be identified as typical role play (see Goffman 1981): the role of the actor, which is conveyed through the expressive action of the upper body, head, and face, is oriented toward the values of openness and broad-mindedness. Likewise, part of this role is an orientation toward the ideal of physical attractiveness. Stereotyped forms of body composition correspond to posture through makeup, hair style, clothing, and jewelry. The overall body-language expression of the pose is oriented toward social ideals and identifies the actor as attentive, open-minded, and attractive. What additional observer role is anticipated within the context of profile picture communication? The Flirt pose is not clearly addressed to existing or new acquaintances; instead, both types of relationships are represented through it.

The action depicted only achieves its full significance in conjunction with the context of its creation. Most of the pictures that are seen are professional but amateur shots that are frequently taken in a home environment. From a picture design perspective, the environment is ordinarily only referenced but still plays an important role in that it highlights the personal-to-intimate staging mode of the Flirt motif.

19 See Kress/van Leeuwen (1996: 47) on the interpersonal function of portraits.

20 The intensity of the attention is increased or decreased by the expression of the eyes in that they are visible and wide open or hidden behind strands of hair.

Viewpoint – The profile aspect represents a classic portrait (body) posture in which the person in the picture is typically shown in profile (90 degrees) or half-profile (45 degrees). Indicative characteristics of body performance are head posture and facial expression. Based on how the head is held and the perspective, the face of the person shown is not seen in its entirety. Its shape is only seen from one side – a partial view of the person that becomes the person's representative. Moreover, the body is turned away from the observer, and this is conveyed by the way that the head is held. The gaze is also not directed at the observer but at a point outside of the frame and does not address an observer. No personal proximity to the observer arises on the basis of the gaze or perspective. Consequently, the representative in the picture only shows a partial view of the familiar person, which is further stylized through a black-and-white modality (see fig. 17)²¹. For many black-and-white motifs of this portrait type, the represented pose conveys less an individual person than that person's idealization²². Such pictures have a less realistic effect based on the color modality: Their coloring deviates from the »natural« visual perception and has a symbolizing effect (see Goffman 1981: 81ff.).



Figure 17 to 19: Viewpoint

A comparison with the flirt type on the level of expression and symbolic meaning appears to be worthwhile: While the flirt motif is based on a corporeally manifested close contact and a naturalistic representation, corporeal avoidance and

- 21 The larger the setting size, the more it seems like the gaze is turned away from the observer.
- 22 With respect to the depiction of individuality, black-and-white pictures are different from color pictures in that color shots primarily allow a greater degree of individuality to be detected. By contrast, black-and-white images are subject-oriented because they emphasize the universal more strongly than the special qualities of a person (see Goffman 1981: 55ff.).

(black and white) stylization are typical forms of expression in the viewpoint type. A person who is flirting gives his or her attention to the observer. By contrast, a person who is shown in profile is not represented as attentive, but rather as lost in thought. So the emphasis for the Flirt is on the level of the physical, but the mental for the Viewpoint. The latter are bodily poses that symbolize thoughtfulness and (should) create an aura, such as the »Thinker« pose – which is a common variant in which the chin is held in the hand.

Mummery – The term *mummery* means a presentation that serves to prevent the establishment of an identity. The object of mummery is the face, which is entirely or partially hidden to ensure anonymity in public situations. The mummery motif is the antipode of the passport picture. A person who chooses the passport motif as a profile picture literally shows his or her face, whereas users who choose the mummery motif remain »faceless«. Such a polarity on the level of expression likewise corresponds to opposite portrait functions because the purpose of mummery is precisely the non-identification of the individual. The tension between self-exposure and self-hiding is constitutive for this type. Due to a hidden presentation, the view of the subject is not revealed. Although it is visible, it cannot be identified²³.



Figure 20 to 23: Mummery

Typical forms of expression are concealment of the eyes (sunglasses or black censor bars), as well as fashionable stylistic mummery with baseball caps, bandanas, and hoodies. Masking represents a fictionalized form of mummery.

The Mummery type clearly shows that young people use individual, generation-specific symbolic forms of expression in profile pictures. In many cases, the

23 The usual context would provoke an asymmetry between the actor in the image (mummery), who cannot be identified, and the observer, who can be identified (non-mummery). Moreover, as a particular form of self-disguise, mummery refers to contexts of political protests and subcultural resistance (keyword: ban on wearing face coverings).

chosen form of presentation can be seen in relation to commonplace action contexts. Standard presentations by hooligans, graffiti artists, or protestors, for example, function as exemplary models of non-mediatized action contexts. These arise from situations in which the young people withhold their view from others²⁴.

The Mummery and Dummy motifs apparently share the same function: They are intended to preserve anonymity. However, since these approaches reveal different things with respect to the profile owner, they differ from each another regarding the question of visibility: While the masked person is visible, the individual hiding behind a dummy is invisible. Apart from this, mummery represents a symbolically stylized presentation of anonymity in that the people involved are often still recognizable on the basis of their name and manage a publicly accessible profile. It is therefore a stylized anonymization, the symbolic content of which is occasionally aimed at a self-stigmatization of an illegal lifestyle (see above).

Model Pose – Model poses are structurally different from the previously described postures that are assumed when a person allows his or her photograph to be taken. Their style is typically distinguished by exaggerated representation actions. Behavioral styles based on non-mediatized interactions are assumed and theatrically exaggerated (see Goffman 1981). Examples include touching one's own body, tilted head angles, kissing lips, and dramatic eyes – stylized elements of bodily expression that indicate specific moods or interactive rituals of seduction, playfulness, coolness, or melancholy²⁵. The body is used as a medium of expression and remains in a stereotyped pose that indicates an interactive scene of seduction, for example.

Unlike the previously introduced motifs, these are characterized by the showing of the body. Professional advertising photography, whose motifs and body presentation can be traced back to Renaissance painting (see Berger et al. 1974), exerts the primary role-model function here. The Model pose differs from the usual form of the passport picture through its size of frame.

24 As a historically traditional pose, this refers to the corporeal presentation in the American western films that show cowboys hiding their head and face with a hat and bandana.

25 Goffman (1981: 120ff.) summarizes typical female forms of expression.



Figure 24 to 27: Model Pose

If the close-up is typical for the passport picture, then the medium and long shots are standard for the model pose. This means that the observer position is designed for a certain distance. Due to such a camera setting, the details of the face are hardly recognizable and the gaze is often not directed at the camera. As a result, the observer is presented as a distance observer (see Crary 1992) and the image of the person as impersonal.

What cultural models of individuality are symbolized by the Model poses? The body language of the pose is connected with stereotyped normative role models of femininity and masculinity. The posed nature of the depiction shifts the personality of the young person in the image into the background. Consequently, the content of the depiction is less the person in his or her individual characteristics (as ideally conveyed through the motif of the passport picture) than the person as a de-subjectivized player of a role (see Goffman 1969; Reichertz 1992). When considering the relationship of the situation and *biography*, we notice that the quality of the self-representation with regard to the autobiography is minimal. The motif of the Model pose is not suited for the idiosyncratic representation of a person's life. This is because playing a role implies that other personality aspects are currently or have been/will be hidden.

The Model pose image is the documentation of a performance. It documents a specific photographic situation in which the actors step out of their real lives – the shoot. This can occur within real life contexts or under studio-like conditions in which real-world performing within one's own four walls is typical for social network sites and a particular tension between theatrical enactment and documented personal life background is conveyed. The question of the person's identification based on constant physical characteristics is shifted to the background in comparison with the role play of the pose and the masquerade. Young people present themselves as fashion models in their profile pictures and therefore become re-presentatives of a particular fashionable lifestyle. As a result, the body's composition and posture are also systematically related to each other in the

Model poses: The posed nature on the level of body use corresponds with the fashion-conscious stylization on the level of body styling. A subject not only moves like a model, but also flaunts the corresponding cosmetic and clothing styles as elements for expressing a (media-based) lifestyle (as for example conveyed by »America's Next Top Model«). And it is precisely this lifestyle that becomes the object of identification. The visible masks and poses that are publicly worn for show can be identified (in extreme cases, identification moves in the direction of a specific fashion brand when names and/or logos of (fashion) labels are included in the pictures or even in the nickname, for example). Therefore, a young person who poses on social network sites and »dresses« ensures a piece of personal identity and privacy for himself or herself. This is because non-identification as protection against autonomy and authenticity (which is the primary effect when using the pose in a self-reflexive manner) is an important function of Model poses (see Reichertz 1992: 163).

Gestural Pose – Gestural poses refer to an explicit communication with the observer. They include gestures that are not merely evidential but symbolic and therefore have a more clearly outlined meaning (see Schütz/Luckmann 2003). In comparison with the passport picture setting, in which bodily expression is restricted to facial expression, the Gesture-Oriented pose motif breaks out of this picture frame and shows the entire body in a gestural expression. The interplay of upper body, arms, and hands forms a significant gesture by which gestures made with fingers (hand signs) are particularly common.



Figure 28 to 30: Gestural Pose

These gestures are rooted either in the understanding of the youth culture or the culture at large or they are emblematic, (youth) scene-specific symbols (see Soeffner 2004). Typical examples of significant gestures are greetings (peace sign), blown kisses, drinking gestures, threatening gestures, and vulgar provocations (middle finger), scene symbols (gang signs, devil horns, and »think-about-it«), shooting gestures, or pointing gestures.

The person to whom the gesture is addressed is an imaginary observer. By assuming such a pose and gesture, a position is taken opposite this observer. The pragmatic meaning of the signs range from an invitation (blown kiss) to acceptance (greeting) to provocation (grimace), and rejection (vulgar gestures). The motif therefore also documents a performed act of (gestural) communication. As such, the relationship of non-mediatized representation to mediatized representation proves to be significant in that the photographically manifested gestures immediately refer to non-mediatized everyday life. In (non-mediatized) everyday life, we also greet other people by using hand signs, blow them a kiss, or »flip them off«.

The common sense use of these signs – which are public and assume a certain spatial distance between the participants in the in-teraction – is conspicuous. This is no different in their photographic (re-)enactment. It reflects the socio-spatial circumstances of the action and, unlike the previously described motifs in close-up, represents a certain spatial distance between the camera and the action in front of the camera. Gestural poses therefore occur in the mode of distant body-language communication.

One of the most frequently used gestures is the greeting gesture, which is carried out in the form of a so-called peace sign. One hand is stretched forward with the arm held horizontally and the index and middle fingers spread (see fig. 31)²⁶.



Figure 31 to 33: Gestural Pose

The resulting gesture is *the* standard gesture on social network sites: It is youth-specific and not used by adults. What are media models can be found for it? The gestural communication by means of hand signs exists at the intersection of professional celebrity photography and snapshot photography. »Making a sign« has always been relevant in snapshot photography. That is how the victory sign of earlier times came to be used synonymously as the peace gesture in friendship

26 Reversal of the symbol around the vertical orientation of the sign: In this form, the sign is used synonymously with the middle finger in the United Kingdom.

photography²⁷. However, the peace sign used today is oriented toward mass-media models (namely, American hip-hop artists) who made the gesture popular (primarily within the scope of public presentations). Due to its universal proliferation, the gesture can be understood by most young people today.

Against the background of the portrait's social functions, this form of self-representation can be interpreted as follows: The greeting sign is addressed directly at the interactant. Compared with the fundamentally ambiguous and implicit communication of physical expression, this is an act of explicit communication. The direct, appellative demand serves to gain the attention of the observer, calling to mind functionally similar gestures, such as pointing at the observer («I want you»). Someone who wants to draw more attention to the relationship represented than to himself or herself would use the peace sign. This depicts a standard greeting among persons of equal status and illustrates their encounter at an equal eye-to-eye level. While other gestures indicate rejection or provocation, the greeting gesture creates a marking of equality and commonality. The peace sign as a representative symbol for the user illustrates a relationship of like-minded people – others are not encountered as strangers but as »brothers in spirit« with the desire to be remembered in this form (i.e. as a buddy). Therefore, a general attitude and commonality with the observer is *identified* through the gesture rather than a personal characteristic.

Do-It-Yourself Pose – Self-portraits also display a typical gesture by young amateur photographers that distinguishes their photographic activity from that of adults. Many young people create their own portraits, but not every self-portrait is recognizable as such. There are two different forms of portrait images that are identifiable as self-portraits: One shows a young person with an outstretched arm (fig. 34) and the other shows a young person in front of a mirror (figs. 35-36). Both are recognizable self-portraits because the way that the camera is used becomes part of the action in front of the camera. Mirror portraits illustrate the self-representation of young people in all possible domestic contexts in which a mirror is available (such as in bathrooms or hallways). In comparison, self-portraits with outstretched arms occur both inside and outside of enclosed spaces. Only these two motivic variations should be understood below as of the Do-It-Yourself type because both of them pictorially represent the photographic act of the self-portraying individual, which then becomes an essential part of the image content (see Dubois 1998).

27 Earlier generations of private snapshots also used the same or similar gestures.



Figure 34 to 36: Do-It-Yourself Pose

Through self-portrayal, people document themselves (in the act of portrayal) and thereby intentionally assimilate themselves not only in a way with which they would like to be identified, but rather in a way that actually shows the action process as a motif. The photographic illusion of the person's image is broken by the double role (photographer/photographed) that is represented in the picture because the individual is seen not only as a person but also while portraying themselves. In brief: The person who is seen reveals the process through which he or she is seen. This places the gesture of the self-portraying person in the foreground, and generally further expressions of the body through gestures and poses are not performed (as in the above-mentioned Gestural poses, for example). The parasocial relationship initiation through portrait images that is typical for social network sites (such as in the Flirt motif) moves to the background because the process of the creating the image is the focal point.

In the motifs of the Do-It-Yourself pose, the question of individuality is explained in such a way that the photographic act of self-portrayal emphasizes the autonomy (of action) of the person portrayed. On one hand, additional control options are gained through self-portraiture because the young people are actors, directors, and photographers all in one person and perform each action in the production process independently. On the other hand, this gain in autonomy is counteracted by a loss of external vision, which is ordinarily produced by the (camera) eye of another. This means that the standard message of the profile picture – self-definition – is intensified by the act of self-portraiture. Analogous to the written self-description through the Info tab (see Chapter 2.2), the Do-It-Yourself motif represents a pictorial self-description. Self-portraiture has its own role models. Apart from self-portraiture in painting, media prototypes can be seen in both art photography and private photography; above all, the act of pho-

tobooth photography primarily represents (or represented) one of the most popular forms of analogous self-portraiture from the field of private photography among young people (see Mathys 2006; Walser 2010).

e) *Fictionalization/Artification*

With respect to their profile pictures, many of the (post-)adolescent actors on social network sites do not allow the results produced by their digital camera to remain as they are; instead, they specifically create an additional scene around them through creative acts of picture editing that we call »fictionalization«. This means forms of self-representation that mix fiction and reality together based on the mode of representation (see Pietrass 2002: 48). These include not only pictures in which the photographed subject is modulated (such as through changes to color or contrast), but new meanings are constructed. Among the common forms of expression are cross-faded, montaged, or collaged personal portrayals utilizing digital editing techniques that are made possible through image editing software (e.g. Photoshop) and online applications (e.g. picnik.com).

Fictionalization-type images deconstruct the clearly recognizable relationship to reality and show the individual in an alienated form as a result. The actors and their actions are obscured through the dissolution of a recognizable space and/or discernable figurations through which a representable reality is displaced and fictionalized. The act of picture design is the main carrier of the meaning. This represents a creative process of reconstruction (bricolage) through which the real person is only recognizable as a model (in the sense of a material resource) behind the subject, which is central (see Goffman 1981).



Figure 37 to 39: Fictionalization/Artification

In this respect, such pictures are actually documents of a construction. The person shown is therefore less authentic with respect to his or her documentary dimension than to his or her creative manner. The self is »shown« and simulta-

neously exaggerated (hyper-individualization) in and through the creative act. In additionally, the act of picture editing is moved to the foreground with respect to the act of being portrayed in the symbolic meaning of the image.

The photographed actor plays a role within a fictional action context. The depiction refers not to the moment of production but rather to a specific zeitgeist in that the style creates a specific time reference. Young people allow contemporary symbols and esthetics to influence their images. Media cultural models originate in art photography and graphic design. Above all, popular culture offers a frequently cited referential frame with models from pop art, fashion design, or comics. Typical approaches to design are picked up from them and »recreated« by the simple means of picture editing. Fictionalized self-representations show artistically ambitious bricoleurs who create their self-images according to the principles of D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself). They are not professionals but amateurs who take charge by editing their own pictures.

f) *Occasions*

Social occasions form an important shared background for profile pictures. Travel, day trips, parties, sports, and entertainment events represent typical autobiographical occasions for young people's photographs. With this emphasis on leisure events, the digital images on the Internet are linked to traditional photographic practices and access familiar iconographies of analog photography.



Figure 40 to 42: Occasions

For example, these include the travel portrait in front of a historical backdrop, the party portrait, or the sports portrait – which may either show the person in action or with sports equipment. The images usually show the person in a long shot and thereby ensure insight into the larger setting and context of the action.

In occasion photography, the person's likeness is used to document highlights in his or her life. Instead of the mundane, it recalls moments that have a special

biographical significance (see Goffman 1981: 46f.). The individual is therefore identified (more strongly than in the other categories) with particular, occasion-specific events. With the event, the person's actions are brought to the fore and the individual (physical) stylization, as well as the characteristic facial expression, move to the background. In occasion photography, individuality is linked to an act that primarily represents a question of emphasized leisure activities among young people. Through stylized or real activity situations loaded with social symbolism, they express their individuality as successful and skilled athletes, globe-trotting travelers, or gregarious party guests.

The enactment gains plausibility in that it is linked to an event and the image represents the documentation of an act – even if it is staged. The occasion-specific profile picture is therefore always an advertisement of personal interests and preferences. Users expose something about themselves with these acts and offer others the opportunity to identify with or disassociate from them.

4. Summary

Although it appears to be complex and chaotic at first glance, the motivic repertoire on social network sites proves to be orderly and structured. As the previous explanations show, a canonization of profile-picture types has occurred in the image world of young people on the Web. Dominant and less dominant style types can be distinguished within the scope of this order, which is why a concluding look at the *frequency* of the image types presented is warranted. This process will also include a comparison of the different approaches to *self-positioning* through the various profile-picture types, i.e. how the actors on social network sites represent themselves as communicators.

The classic formal photo portrait, the *Passport Photo*, is only minimally accepted by the members of the online networks. Professional or even amateur staging of passport image photography is only rarely found on the social network sites that we investigated. When they exist at all, then only in stylized rather than objective variants. Minimal positioning with a formal portrait and showing a presence as a communicator while remaining nondescript obviously does not represent a relevant option for most young people. The passport photo motif tends to leave them looking like a »blank page«, which is not the case for the *Dummy* type. For a surprisingly large number of young people, concealment behind a pictorial image quotation is an attractive alternative for revealing themselves to the online community. This allows them to not position themselves through their own appearance, but instead join in the conversation by means of a quote that presents an object or topic (with which they usually identify or would like to be identified). According to our observations, about ten percent of the

members select an anonymous image mode through which they reveal nothing personal and remain nondescript as actors. Many users employ the mask of a stranger in order to acquire their first experiences on social network sites under the protection of visual anonymity. This is because a particularly large number of newly registered and/or adolescent members – who change to a personal-portrait motif at a later time – are among the young people who use the dummy category.

»Strike a pose«, the dictum of theatrically performed portrait photography, is the guide to action for the majority of profile pictures that we analyzed. This is because many young people prefer stylized variants that are dominated by the code of *posing*. They orient themselves upon youth-specific *and* role-creating personality typing, which they perform through specific (body) poses. Masking the personality is a standardized process in which the actor appears in a particular role. With each pose (a term that literally means »posture«), the actors position themselves. The Self-Portrait pose – which is highly accepted by both genders and used with corresponding frequency – is the most common. Due to its strong prevalence on social network sites, this is the prototypical form of contemporary (Web-)portraiture and reflects the relevance of cell phones as a medium of personal image production. However, the message of the self-portrait is also important because young people manifest their own perspective (of themselves) through the photographic act of the self-portrait. In so doing, they show how they see themselves. Unlike the poses that follow, they do not present themselves as an interactive actor through the Self-Portrait pose.

In second place among pose-oriented forms of self-representation are the Flirt, the Model, the Thinker, or Greeting poses (see Flirt, Model Pose, Viewpoint, and Gestural Pose). With these poses, both genders oriented themselves toward a heteronormative basic order in which girls present themselves more in Flirt or Model poses and boys more in Thinker or Greeting poses. These typify the actor as open, broad-minded, and/or friendly which – in light of the relationship communication that occurs on social network sites – represents a plausible form of self-representation. The stereotyped models that are shown correspond to familiar models of celebrity and advertising communication. The similarity to advertising subjects can be seen in that the actors on the Web represent themselves in the mode of self-idealization and pursue self-promotion (Neumann-Braun 2002). Self-positioning also occurs in the mode of self-marketing.

In third place and therefore less frequent, but still within the framework of the normative canon, are poses of concealment, rejection, and provocation. A person is shown masked or rejects the interactant with vulgar gestures (see Mummery and Gestural Pose). These are more frequently used by young males than females. All of these poses also have the effect that they always represent a type-casting of social relationships. The pose not only conveys an attitude toward oneself but also toward others; the body language expresses concepts of relation-

ships, circumstances of closeness/distance, acceptance, and rejection. They are based on interactive action situations.

The *Fictionalization* type constitutes about ten percent of the profile pictures and is used more by young females than males. The self is represented as alienated: The subjects appear more fictional than real. The self is always brought into the conversation, but in an alienated or artificial variant. Unlike the Dummy, the representation is still linked to the actor. And unlike the body pose, a fictional self-image does not determine the pictured person on a specific role. Fictionalizations therefore also represent leeway for the identity.

Young people break out of the individual portrait's narrow framework with the *relationship representation*. However, the relationship representation is among the standard forms of profile pictures even though our observations show that it is less common and has a frequency of about five percent. These show same- or mixed-gender couple and group portraits in which the depiction of two persons dominates. Through the relationship representation, a person is identified with other persons or represents himself or herself as integrated into a friendship relationship.

Due to the sheer vastness of the picture volume on the Web, a complexity-reducing method was chosen for the present essay: We focused on profile pictures in the form of display images as structural (placement within the profile) and functional (pictorial identification of the profile owner) guidelines of the corresponding Web platforms (social network sites). We were able to show that these guidelines are reinterpreted, subverted, and played with for the purpose of demonstrating individuality. So the mode of the simple identity card (conveyed in co-presence via one's personal appearance and face) already becomes a basic design option for one's own person based on the structural and pictorial constitution of the interactive space; personal appearance becomes the image in the truest sense of the word. Consequently, what is primarily relevant is not a person's appearance but how he or she handles the predetermined appearance option: Whether to use it functionally (Passport Photo) or (visibly) dysfunctionally (Dummy); whether to simply reveal one's identity, cover up (Mummery), or prepare for relationships (Flirt). In the second place, the motifs and aesthetics described above play a role in providing evidence that the actual function – which is specifically the same as for the Passport Photo – is broken through its implementation: As shown above, the identity card slot is used (or exploited) for the purpose of differentiated identity presentations. This demonstrates that self-representation has already begun in a certain sense before a person has proved himself or herself as an identifiable self. On this level (namely, self-stylization within the structural framework of a simple identity card), the image products of young people became manageable and are »canonized«. The chosen forms of self-representation (displayed by the various image types) prove to be youth-

specific in that their communication is oriented toward or refers to the symbolic codes of the market, youth, and consumer culture, the advertising and celebrity systems, and the peer-group environment.

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