



Autenrieth | Neumann-Braun [eds.]

# The Visual Worlds of Social Network Sites

Images and image-based communication on Facebook and Co.



**Nomos**  
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edited by

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Axel Schmidt and Henry Keazor

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Ulla P. Autenrieth | Klaus Neumann-Braun [eds.]

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Images and image-based communication on  
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For more Information about the research project “Images of Youth in the Internet” please see our blog ([www.netzbilder.net](http://www.netzbilder.net)).

Basel, July 2011

ULLA P. AUTENRIETH & KLAUS NEUMANN-BRAUN

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

ULLA P. AUTENRIETH, KLAUS NEUMANN-BRAUN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2.2 ULLA P. AUTENRIETH

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

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

## 2.3 JÖRG ASTHEIMER

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

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

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

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

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

## MyFace: Portrait Photography on the Social Web

JÖRG ASTHEIMER, KLAUS NEUMANN-BRAUN, AXEL SCHMIDT

### *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 themselves<sup>2</sup>.

- 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](http://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 Gutzter 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.)<sup>3</sup>.

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-mediatised 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 attitudes<sup>4</sup>. 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 tab<sup>5</sup>. The image saved in the Profile Pictures album is the primary image for the profile picture displayed in the profile and the thumbnail<sup>6</sup>.

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).

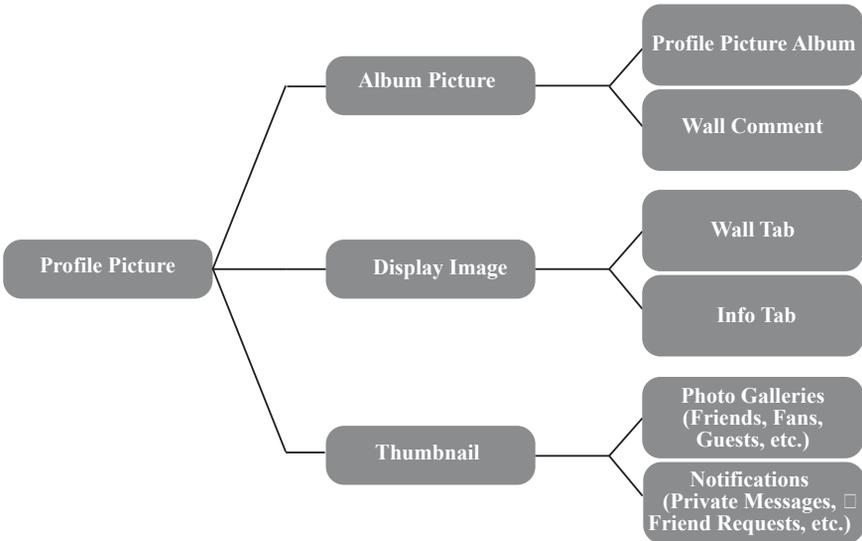


Figure 3: Communication-Contexts Profile Pictures

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 another<sup>7</sup> 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)<sup>8</sup>. 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> 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 occasional-

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 17<sup>th</sup> century and the medium of (portrait) photography since the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.