

Audiences, Aesthetics and Affordances

Analysing Practices of Visual Communication on Social Media

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Abstract

This research investigates how the practices of sharing pictures with specific audiences on social media may be related to aesthetics and affordances. Based on fieldwork (interviews, picture analysis and digital ethnography) with a group of female teenagers in Vienna, Austria, how they visually curate their accounts is mapped and reconstructed. Regarding content and aesthetics, different kinds of pictures are shared using different apps. Snapchat, for example, (for this specific group at the time of the investigation) is the preferred medium for live communication with very close friends using fast, pixelated, “ugly” pictures, while Instagram serves to share polished, conventional, “beautiful” pictures with broader audiences. Based on this case study, three conceptual arguments can be made. First, visual communication is practised in relation to specific social settings or audiences. Social media is part of these practices, and users navigate differences between platforms to manage identities and relationships. Second, the analysis of practices embedded in specific software, therefore, has to be contextualised and related to the structures of these environments. Software co-constructs processes of editing, distribution, sharing and affirmation, and its affordances have to be related to the ways in which users exploit them. Third, as visual communication becomes an intrinsic part of online communication, the exploration of how distinctions between audiences and affordances play out stylistically appears to be of particular interest, which entails calibrated aesthetics; however, this visual layer is seldom investigated closely.

Introduction

In recent years, networked visual communication has become a common everyday practice. Billions of photos and pictures have been shared and shown on a broad variety of apps and platforms in a wide range of contexts. Social media has brought into question the clear distinctions between public and private communi-

cation and between mass-mediated and interpersonal communication (boyd 2011; Wagner 2014). Users exploit and calibrate differences, not only between apps and platforms, but also within platforms (Gershon 2010; Marwick 2013). By navigating these structures, users “exploit differences between media to express emotions and manage mediated relationships” (Madianou 2014: 667).

Communicative practices always take place in relation to specific social settings or audiences (Goffman 1959) and belonging and distinction constitute groups, relationships and all forms of sociality (Bourdieu 1972; Mannheim 1980). However, over the past 20 years, social media has become intrinsic to these practices, and the technical structures of platforms and apps are now integral to networked interpersonal communication. Based on a dialogue of theoretical concepts and empirical data, this contribution is aimed at investigating how photo-sharing practices constitute and maintain social relations. More specifically, the relevance and role of the visual styles and aesthetics of pictures and the technical affordances of apps as intrinsic characteristics of the visual communicative process are discussed.

Audiences

While earlier research on online identities focused on the elements of self-presentation, recent research has shifted to understanding identity as constituted in relation to sociality and thus highlights *practices of interaction and communication* as practices of doing (social) identities (Baym 2015; Marwick 2013; Papacharissi and Easton 2013). Praxeological approaches have become popular in social-constructivist media research on everyday communicative practices as they place embodied, routinized doings and sayings structured by implicit, habitual knowledge in the foreground of analysis (Bräuchler and Postill 2010; Couldry 2004). Within this framework, identities have long been conceptualised as networked, as they are not fixed, but dynamically constituted in relation to specific social contexts and groups (Bourdieu 1972; Goffman 1959). Within networked social media, the contexts we constantly navigate have become more visible and, therefore, potentially more reflexive. For example, we might designate a person as a close friend on Facebook or share a photo with our partner but not with our extended family on WhatsApp. These *networked* or *intimate publics* (boyd, 2011; Baym, 2015; Hjorth et al. 2012) are co-constituted by the software that is used, usually provided by commercial actors (boyd 2011; van Dijck 2013). Their algorithms, codes and interfaces are an intrinsic part of our communicative practices.

Aesthetics

These communicative practices are multimodal (Baym 2015: 58 ff.; Meißner 2015) and the range of modes of expression is continuously being expanded and refined: from texting *kiss*, to sharing a selfie with puckered lips, to sending a GIF of

kissing Minions. Digitally mediated communication has shifted from a primarily text-based practice to a form of multimodal, heavily visual communication – a trend accelerated by the smartphone, its ubiquitous networked camera, and fast, affordable, mobile broadband connections. Identities and socialities are constituted not only by picturing the self(ie)¹ but by communicating in general and by communicating visually through all kinds of images: food pics, memes, business portraits, holiday shots and many more. It is not only language, narratives and discourses, but also visual sense-making and communication that are constitutive elements of sociality. Visual media, therefore, are understood as socially constructed, but at the same time, they co-construct sociality:

It is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals. (Mitchell 2002: 171)

In this regard, new media seem to amplify and utilise certain potentialities of pictures, enabling a “general aesthesia” (Grace 2014: 14). Grace describes this “increased general sensitivity to the audio-visual space of the everyday” (2014: 14), in which pictures become important means of embodied everyday creativity and communication and a new form of mass expression. Just as when we use language, we express ourselves aesthetically when we communicate in and through pictures (Przyborski 2017) – both regarding *what* we show as content and motifs (explicitly and iconographically) and *how* we show content stylistically and aesthetically (implicitly and iconologically). How pictures are framed and cropped (Kanter 2016), which perspectives and compositions are chosen (Przyborski and Haller 2014), and how close or far away the camera is positioned (Schreiber 2017b) co-constitute visual sense-making. What is perceived as beautiful, interesting and worth photographing, showing and sharing is socially and habitually constituted.

We can also code-switch according to the context. For example, while we might use portraits for both our CV and our Facebook profile, these portraits are probably very different as they are embedded in various contexts with different audiences and communicative practices. Pictures, therefore, are conceptualised as aesthetic products and means of communication which allow explicit and implicit visual sense-making (Bourdieu 1990; Panofsky 1975). On social media, in particular, pictures serve as a means of interpersonal communication, and these communicative practices are entangled with the technical structures of the platforms that are used.

1 For research on selfies, see Senft and Baym (2015), Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz (2015) and Warfield, Cambre and Abidin (2016).

Affordances

Digital pictures depend on hardware (e. g. displays and screens) and software (e. g. code, apps and programmes) to become visible and perceived as pictures by the human gaze. The conditions of these mediations are relevant in a range of ways: abstract conditions such as digitality, networked mobility and convergence are as constitutive of materiality as pixels, scrollbars and LEDs. The importance of material and technical affordances as components of communication was widely acknowledged in early media and communication studies and is emphasised in recent research (Hand 2012; Lehmuskallio and Gómez-Cruz 2016; Maynard 1997). However, most empirical research in this field has been “strangely without object” (Zillien 2008, 181, translated from German by the author). The concept of *affordances* has been mainly used in analyses of the human perception of artefacts in the fields of perceptual psychology, Human-Computer-Interaction and Science and Technology Studies (Gibson 1977; Norman 1999; Wright und Parchoma 2011). It only recently became popular as a potential solution to the lack of technical materiality in empirical research in Media and Communication Studies (Bucher and Helmond 2017; Hutchby 2014). The actual implementation and uses of the concept are manifold², ranging from high-level analysis (boyd 2011; Schrock 2015) to the micro-reading (McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015) of material and/or technical characteristics.

Following Hutchby (2001) and McVeigh-Schultz/Baym (2015), affordances are understood as neither deterministic, nor relativistic, but rather as relational. Affordances frame, enable and constrain practices yet are

not things which impose themselves upon humans’ actions with, around, or via that artefact. But they do set limits on what it is possible to do with, around, or via the artefact. [...] What is made of them is accomplished in the interface between human aims and the artefact’s affordances. (Hutchby 2001: 453)

Affordances are understood as potentiality. The different ways they are actually used have to be analysed in practice (ibid) or, as Vyas/Chisalita (2006) state, as “affordance in interaction” (2006: 92). However, if affordances are integrated empirically, a separate analysis of the artefact has proven to be useful for understanding the “material substratum which underpins the very possibility of different courses of action in relation to an artefact” (Hutchby 2001: 450).

Regarding social media, van Dijck proposes five elements that are required to analyse the technological dimension of platforms and apps: “(meta)data, algorithms, protocols, inter-faces, defaults” (2013a: 30 ff.). To those without any tech-

2 This also became clear in a recent online discussion in E-Seminar 60 on “Social Media as Practice” on the popular Media Anthropology Network (<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>).

nical expertise, metadata, algorithms and protocols are hard to access and understand and mostly hidden by the operators and owners. The *interface* and *default settings*, though, are visible and thus analysable by the researcher. Technical features (e.g. the interface, buttons, scroll bars and icons) and regulatory features (e.g. the requirement to register or create a profile to use an app) co-constitute the connections of users with, for example, other users and content. Default settings can be understood as affordances of the app in the sense of habitual characteristics.

These elements have proven to be reliable access points, so this study focuses on exploring what structure and dramaturgy the interface and the upload process of an app have in the practice of sharing pictures. These features of three apps are elaborated on in the empirical case study, in which their interfaces and default settings are understood and analysed as affordances on a micro-level. The overall aim of the case study is to relate these affordances to the ways the participants exploit them: how are they interpreted, used and perceived, and how do they become relevant (or not) in the practices of visual communication and photo-sharing³?

These theoretical issues are further explored in a qualitative case study of a group of Viennese teenage girls. Visual networked communication can be defined as an interpersonal, mediated communication practice that always takes place in relation to specific audiences through aesthetics and is embedded in the technical affordances of software. The argument that all kinds of picture are filtered – in both the social-cultural and technical senses – is elaborated on based on the case study. First, the research methodology and empirical data are briefly introduced.

Research methodology

The case study is based on materials collected during fieldwork with a group of three teenage girls in Vienna, Austria⁴. The data and materials consist of two in-depth group interviews (conducted in January 2014 and March 2015), several pictures shared by the participants and online ethnographic notes and screenshots of the participants' social media accounts. Based on these materials, their practices of sharing and showing pictures in diverse smartphone apps are mapped and analysed. At the time of the second set of interviews, Anna, Bele and Clara

3 McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) introduce “vernacular affordances” as a specific perspective on the “sense-making involved as people conceptualize the relationship between material structure and practice for the technologies they use” (2015: 10).

4 I conducted the empirical research for my doctoral thesis (Schreiber 2017a). This case study was one of four, and some points discussed in this contribution are published in German articles (Schreiber 2017b; Schreiber and Kramer 2016).

were between 14 and 15 years old. They went to high school together and spent a lot of time with each other outside school.

Framed by a praxeological understanding of media use, the analysis is informed by flexible, adaptable research strategies (Hine 2015; Hirschauer 2008; Markham 2004) and the documentary method, as elaborated by Bohnsack (2008)⁵. This interpretive approach differentiates between, and systematically relates, two levels of meaning: *what* is said or is visible is separated from *how* it is actually conveyed within language (e.g. interview transcripts), practice (e.g. observation notes) and pictures (e.g. screenshots of Instagram accounts). Through reconstructing the *how*, the documentary method is aimed at reconstructing habitual, implicit patterns of practice, which are understood as tacit knowledge embedded in everyday practices of action and perception (Bourdieu 1972). This approach enables the analysis of structures of social life that goes beyond intentional, instrumental, rational action, without claiming any a priori knowledge of these structures. The in-depth analysis of the material that was collected is intended to promote an understanding of the habitual patterns of picture sharing within networked media environments.

The main objects of analysis are practices as narrated in the interviews and observed online. Specific apps become relevant elements in the narrations and observations but, as mentioned above, technical affordances are also analysed independently. Descriptions and interpretations of the uploading process⁶ for WhatsApp, Snapchat and Instagram are briefly summarised in the case study. Pictures are understood as aesthetic documents of visual elements of expression, so they are also analysed according to an iconographic/iconologic approach (Bohnsack 2008), focusing on embodied and aesthetics performances. These different kinds of data provide specific perspectives on the practices of photo sharing and visual communication, which are condensed and related to each other.

The fieldwork was conducted in 2014 and 2015. As in any research on new media, platforms, apps and visual social media seem to be a “moving target” (Hogan and Quan-Haase 2010: 310) for researchers. Technical environments are continuously being changed and transformed, and software is invented and updated over a very short time. Nevertheless, the case study allows for a detailed account of the specific entanglements of audiences, aesthetics and affordances at a specific point in time. This account forms the basis for the subsequent theoretical exploration of the interrelations of these dimensions.

5 Based on Mannheim (1980) and Bourdieu (1972).

6 Referring to the versions of the apps available in autumn 2016 for Android phones and analysed on the researcher’s smartphone, a Samsung Galaxy S4.

Case study: Anna, Bele and Clara

Beyond photographic practices: “cool stuff? that you see on your phone”

Picture sharing is part of Anna, Bele and Clara’s common everyday communicative practices. They take photos with their smartphone cameras and collect pictures and screenshots online. Their sharing practices have a broad range of contexts. For school purposes, for example, taking and sharing pictures is described as highly practical by Anna: *“you do not need to carry books around. You can just take a picture”* to share book pages, blackboard notes and workbooks with peers. In this context, the use of the smartphone camera is more similar to the practices of scanning than personal photography (Lehmuskallio 2016). However, taking photos of things and sharing photos with each other also continue to be crucial components of the girls’ practices: friends, faces, toenails, books, mountains and more might become motifs, but also *“cool stuff? that you see on your phone”*. With the same ease, the girls move through the offline and online worlds, collecting and capturing pictures of what they see and like – *“for example, there was something with strawberries that looked so cool, so I made a screenshot and installed it as background picture”*.

In the girls’ practices, it does not really matter if a picture is a photo in the sense of an indexical “surface marking created with light” (Maynard 1997: 34) or an accumulation of pixels on a screen. As a digital, networked device, the smartphone allows a range of practices of picture production that goes beyond photographic practices. What is relevant to the girls is not so much who took a picture and how it came to be displayed, but that it appeals to their aesthetic sense. Potential pictures are out there, not only in the world, where they are directly visible to the human eye, but also on the Internet, visible to the eye through screens. Both pictures that are made and pictures that are found can be stored, used, edited and shared as, technically, both consist of code that can appear as pictures on screens through software (Meier 2012). These practices of aesthetic production and curation are closely entangled with what is habitually anchored as “takeable” pictures⁷. Moreover, pictures become a means of interpersonal communication once they are authorised and selected to be shown to and shared with persons in specific contexts and media.

7 “[T]he range of that which suggests itself as really photographable for a given social class (that is, the range of ‘takeable’ photographs or photographs ‘to be taken’, as opposed to the universe of realities which are objectively photographable given the technical possibilities of the camera) is defined by implicit models which may be understood via photographic practice and its product [...]” (Bourdieu 1990: 6)

**Groups as social, technical and conversational structures:
“and one with just the three of us”**

At the time of enquiry, the girls are mostly using three apps to share pictures: WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat. Their politics of showing and sharing pictures are entangled with the functions and settings of these apps. The girls use WhatsApp for a broad variety of different publics that are differentiated very clearly:

Anna: And then, another group with us and Tom, Bele’s brother.

Bele: And Lea.

Anna: Yes, and Lea. And Ina. And then another one without Ina. And [laughing] then another one for French? And one with just the three of us. And one for homework and another one with Sarah, Lara and me and a silly group? And then the one where we all are.

The groups on WhatsApp demarcate the social structures that the girls navigate. Each girl has an individual set of groups, and all three girls belong to several groups. Some groups only differ by one person who is included or excluded. WhatsApp allows an elaborate separation of different intimate publics, so the participants view it as a secure, intimate space for communication. It also serves as a backstage space to negotiate which photos are suitable to be uploaded on more frontstage platforms (Goffman 1959). One girl proudly complains that people send her different versions of the same picture and ask her which photo they should post on Instagram. Like offline socialities, WhatsApp groups are dynamic and have different time spans:

Anna: And then you name the group, and you say just for this purpose. And then at some point, you realise it is totally unnecessary, and then everyone leaves.

In these practices of establishing, maintaining and communicating with intimate publics, the differentiation between offline and online spheres dissolves and becomes irrelevant (Markham 2013; Marwick 2013). Physical absence and presence and online and offline communication interlock seamlessly, as shown in the following extract:

Anna: Well, we have a group; we are all in there. And on Thursdays, we watch *Top model* together, and then we meet at someone’s place, and then we text to –

Bele: At your place actually always.

Clara: Yes, watching *Top model* at your place.

Anna: Yes: [altering her voice] “Can we come on Thursday? Yes, OK, you can come. I am leaving now. I am already here. Open the door”.

[everybody laughing]

Interviewer: Ok, so to meeting up –

Clara: Or, “Guys, entertain me. I’m bored, and the bus hasn’t arrived”.

Here, the girls enact a typical conversation on WhatsApp that takes place in their “group”. The group is not only a social but also a technical and conversational structure embedded within the app’s interface – and they are “all in there”. The app enables them to establish an ambient intimacy (Hjorth et al. 2012) and presence and to switch from a mediated presence (“entertain me”) to a physical presence (“open the door”).

As mentioned, the apps’ interfaces and default settings are understood as affordances that co-constitute the practices of picture sharing. A close reading of these technical affordances on a micro-level, therefore, can help to more deeply understand the relationship between these affordances and the girls’ sharing practices.

Analysing affordances: interfaces and defaults

WhatsApp, Snapchat and Instagram are the apps that are most commonly used by the girls and they are therefore included in the following brief comparative analysis.

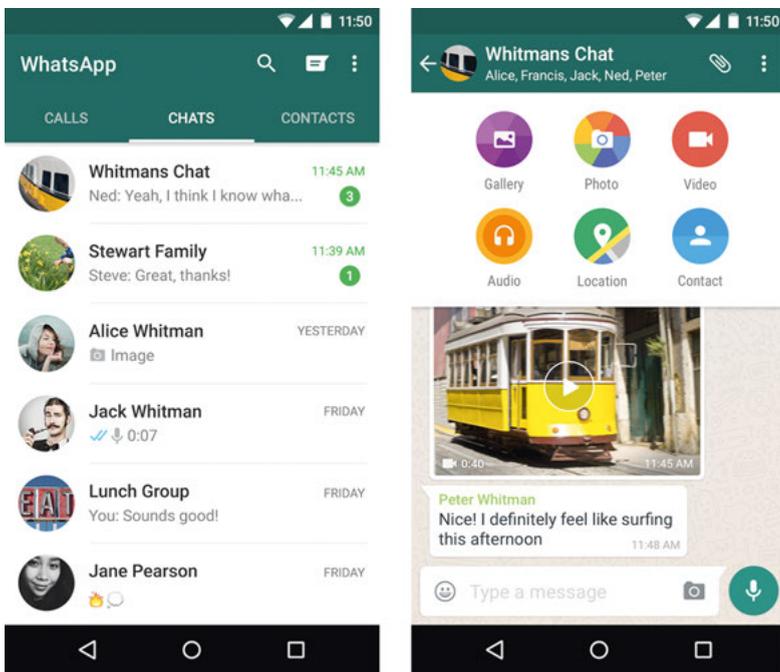


Figure 1: WhatsApp screenshots: chat menu and chat conversation (whatsappbrand.com).

WhatsApp shows all recent conversations in chronological order on the start screen, with the most recent conversation on top. Within a conversation thread, the most recent messages appear at the bottom, similar to an Internet relay-chat

interface. Users can send text, images, emojis, voice messages and more. When online, users can converse in real time. In 2014, WhatsApp introduced blue ticks to indicate whether conversation partners had received and read messages. Importantly, the picture-sharing upload dynamics require users to choose with whom they want to share content – which is not mandatory for Instagram, but is for Snapchat.

Once Snapchat is started, the first interface is the camera display of the front camera, which, in default mode, shows the users' face, encouraging them to immediately take selfies. After taking a photo or video through the app, users can choose to whom they want to send it. Unlike most apps, Snapchat's main navigation mode is swiping horizontally from one menu interface to the next. Photos taken with the camera are called Snaps and serve as the canvas for short texts, drawings and a nearly endless choice of emojis – recalling sticker albums or scrapbook aesthetics (Good 2013). In 2015, Snapchat added selfie filters, allowing users to decorate and distort their faces with various masks. A crucial affordance of this app is that shared pictures vanish after a set time, a maximum of 10 seconds, unless they are stored as stories, which stay online for 24 hours and are visible to all of the users' followers. This affordance has been interpreted as an indicator of the emerging visual culture of ephemerality (Chun 2008; Jurgenson 2013; Velez 2014).

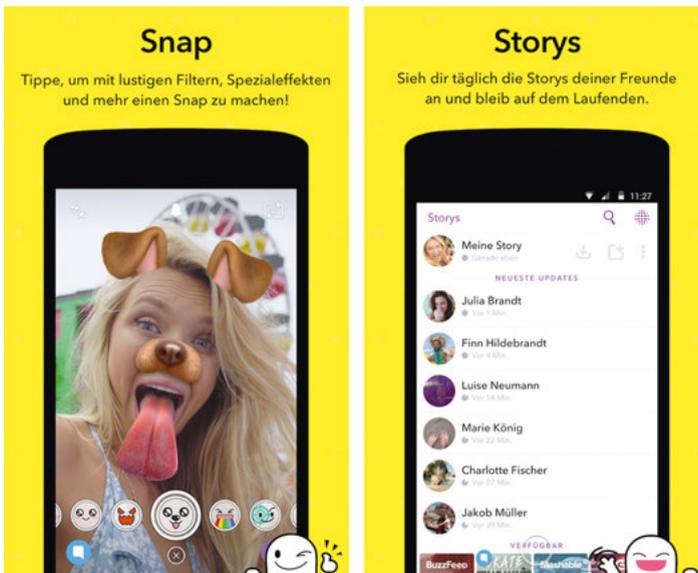


Figure 2: Snapchat interfaces: camera display and list of stories (Android Play Store).

Unlike this fleeting visual communication, Instagram remediates characteristics of classic websites. In Instagram's default sharing settings, uploaded pictures are shared with all the followers of users' feeds. Like WhatsApp, Instagram was origi-

nally programmed as a mobile app and optimised for use on smartphones. Users need to register with a username and an email address. The user profile is very basic and consists of a profile pic, a short description and the numbers of posts, followers and accounts followed. Earlier versions of Instagram only allowed users to upload pictures. More recently, the app permits sharing videos, stories and more than one picture at a time. The main feed focuses on a vertical, scrollable stream of static pictures.

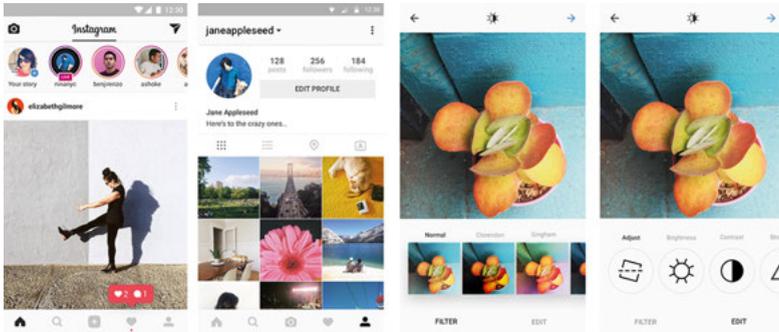


Figure 3: Instagram screenshots: feed, account, filter and tools (<https://en.instagram-brand.com/assets/screenshots>).

Based on this comparative analysis, two main modes of picture sharing practices can be categorised following Villi (2013, 2015): *messaging* and *publishing*. These two modes touch upon the various layers of visual networked communication: is the mediation reciprocal and intimate, or is it more one-way and public? How do the platforms afford these modes (or not)? Which kinds of publics are anticipated?

In the interviews, the girls linguistically mark these two modes by using different language to describe what they are doing. They talk about “sending” pictures on WhatsApp and Snapchat but “uploading” or “posting” pictures to Instagram⁸. At the time of investigation, the girls use Instagram for publishing practices and WhatsApp and Snapchat for messaging. These apps’ technical affordances and associated communicative modes are closely related to the ways in which the girls establish and maintain different kinds of relationships and audiences. WhatsApp allows the setting up of an unlimited number of groups⁹, so a

8 Both apps have since been changed and their interfaces now incorporate stories very similar to those that stay online for 24 hours, as originally introduced by Snapchat. For its part, Snapchat has introduced memories to allow long-term storage of specific pictures. Apps seem to become increasingly similar over time and it will be interesting to track how these trends evolve.

9 A group can contain a maximum of 256 conversation partners (<https://www.whatsapp.com/faq/en/general/21073373>).

broad spectrum of different forms of socialities can be generated and thus also a large variety of picture sharing practices. The girls participate in groups for sharing school materials, those for exchanging memes and funny pictures, large groups that resemble Internet relay chats, groups that also allow meta-communication in relation to other groups or public platforms and much more, as already mentioned above. Just as is the case in the offline world, forms of sociality are mainly constituted through inclusion and exclusion (Bourdieu 1972; Goffman 1959). Moreover, the content and tone of visual communication are calibrated for specific platforms and audiences. What has been elaborated on in regard to online communication in general (Gershon 2010; Madianou 2014; Marwick 2013) holds true for practices of visual communication. This is entered into further in the next section.

Calibrated aesthetics: “Bele is the queen of ugly pictures”

Images that the group share on Instagram are rather diffusely textually framed as “beautiful”. Looking at Anna’s and Bele’s accounts, what this might mean (for this group, in this specific context) becomes visible: the pictures they share on this rather public platform are iconographically quite conventional. They are relatable and easy to understand for a broader (Western European, female and teenaged) audience, oriented towards a generalised sense of beauty and established visual repertoires, motifs and styles (portraits, flowers and feet)¹⁰.

The pictures and, especially, the photos that the girls share on WhatsApp and Snapchat have more intimate content and are specifically addressed to more intimate contacts.

Clara: To Bele, I can send anything, any kind of nonsense [laughing]. It wouldn’t matter.

As elaborated on by others (Hjorth and Pink 2013; Jurgenson 2013; Velez 2014; Villi 2015), a specific sense of nowness is crucial for real-time pictorial conversations.

Clara: For example, you sit on the toilet and take a picture [laughing] of your feet and write [laughing], “I am on the toilet right now”.

Pictures shared in these spaces might be intimate in a sense that they do not necessarily correspond to the general sense of beauty, but to *the girls’* shared sense of what is cool and authentic. The girls themselves textually frame some of these pictures as ugly. When analysing some examples they also shared with me, ugliness seems to imply that the content and/or the aesthetic are rather idiosyncratic or make sense only to them. Nevertheless, one can be more or less fluent

10 A style or aesthetic identified by some as typical for this platform (Tifentale and Manovich 2016).

within this specific style, as Clara states: *“Bele is the queen of ugly pictures”*. Rather than beautiful/public or ugly/intimate, these two notions can be understood as extreme polarities on a scale, with many possible combinations and modes in between.

Moreover, specific aesthetics emerge that are entangled with the apps’ particular technical affordances. For example, Instagram offers various possibilities for editing and modifying pictures after they are taken or uploaded (similar to professional software, see Figure 3), but WhatsApp has only recently integrated some editing features. Furthermore, WhatsApp has long had a function for forwarding pictures to other conversations, but Instagram did not have a save or forwarding feature for years.

In the following final section of the case study, a picture (Figure 4a and 4b) that was visible on Bele’s Instagram account and the girls framed as beautiful is analysed to further explore how visual communication with and through photographs is entangled with embodiment.

Photo-sharing as embodied visual communication



Figures 4a and 4b: Pictures shared on Instagram by Bele: faces pixelated by the author; compositional structure sketched by the author.

The picture in Figure 4a shows a group of girls sitting on a wooden structure not originally built to provide seating space. Climbing on trees and buildings is usually perceived as a childlike practice, but hanging around on structures can also be seen an activity of young people, often in connection with first heterosexual encounters and experimentation with cigarettes and alcohol. This group is clearly not playing on a playground in a childlike manner but is also not (yet) engaging in typical teenager practices; they hang out, but in broad daylight and without boys. Two developmental phases seem to overlap in this picture: childlike playfulness and teenager hanging out. The group members are both children and teenagers at the same time, and the picture makes visible both phases, as well as the processuality and in-between-ness of this practice.

This ambivalence also becomes visible in the colours of the picture, which can be seen as girly, candy colours or as a youthful vintage look, especially given the Polaroid-like square format of the grainy picture (Jurgenson 2011). The picture's compositional structure (marked in Figure 4b) clearly shows the group as a collective arrangement; thus, being together and growing together are strongly anchored in the peer group. This important social structure can be protective but also precarious (Autenrieth 2014; boyd 2014; Thiel-Stern 2012). Collective identity is constituted in the picture and amplified through sharing it on Instagram.

Taking a closer look, a certain internal structure of the group also becomes visible, with Bele occupying a clear, central position. In the interview, she also describes the picture similarly:

Bele: This is me with my best friends.

Interviewer: Where are you sitting?

Bele: Well, except for Anna. She took the picture. That's in a park on some kind of roof. We got up there, and Anna took the picture. Or about a thousand.

In this brief quote, another point becomes visible: in digital photography, the human body becomes an easily configurable motif, formed both in front of the screen and on the screen. First, the body is configured by posing and gesturing in a specific way in front of the camera. The girls might have a series of very similar pictures from which to choose ("about a thousand"). Digitalisation has introduced this possibility of selection, as well as the ability to store large amounts of data and to look at pictures on the display, both while and after taking them. The possibilities of playing with identities, poses and gestures through visual media have multiplied and have been simplified through digitalisation (Walker-Rettberg 2014).

Second, once a picture has been authorised as suitable and relevant, it can be further edited, for example, cropped and filtered:

Anna: You can brighten it up, and, and then effects and sometimes retouch something.

The ease of editing is conceptualised as the malleability or the plasticity of the digital picture, when compared to the analogue picture (Hand 2012; Reißmann 2014). If pictures (or media in general) are perceived as more malleable, transformable and processual, are identities and bodies also perceived as more malleable and transformable? The participants clearly develop competences in shaping and modifying their pictures, and cultivating a semi-public persona on Instagram or Facebook is understood as a curating practice.

Yet what they find beautiful, likeable or cool, is subject to change – which could also be typical for the teenage life phase.

Anna: Also when I post ugly – well not ugly but retrospectively ugly pictures [laughing] – super-old pictures that I don't find beautiful anymore, I delete them.

For example, Anna deleted picture in her Instagram feed one year after the first interview. These forms of curating are practised both individually and collaboratively, for example, by asking others for their opinion about various versions of a picture.

Conclusions

Well-established dynamics of interpersonal communication and practices of social inclusion and exclusion are still at play in networked visual communication. Nevertheless, they are remediated (Grusin and Bolter 2000) and “amped up by [the] immediacy and [the] hyper-social nature of digital media” (Thiel-Stern 2012: 100); the practices of making photo albums, creating websites, scanning, messaging, texting, scrapbooking and exhibiting converge in the practices of photo sharing on social media. Networked environments expand and differentiate the ways identity can be performed. While early online research found the lack of social and individual cues to be both liberating and dangerous, the rise of visual communication in social media seems to indicate a (re)embodiment and aestheticisation of networked interpersonal communication.

This implies specific possibilities of aesthetic expression and visual communication, both while producing a picture (e.g. through posing and framing) and while editing a picture (e.g. through filters and cropping). We can quickly tell whether we find a picture beautiful, impressive or authentic, but might experience difficulty verbalising why (Mitchell 2010). We share certain collective aesthetic preferences as taste and (dis)like are socially constituted (Bourdieu 1972). Visual media and aesthetic value and taste, therefore, become means of understanding and affirmation.

Aesthetic differentiation can become even more calibrated in interpersonal visual communication. What is shareable and showable varies by audience and context. These practices of selective sharing have been researched as curation, assemblage and self-presentation (Good 2013; Walker-Rettberg 2014; Whitlock and Poletti 2008). However, how different styles and aesthetics might be means of calibrated visual communication has not been a focus of research. In school, we learn how to use and adapt spoken and written language to be understood in various contexts, but competencies in visual communication are often framed as artsy or unnecessary. Consequently, the elements by which we communicate visually are less reflectively transparent to us, yet are deeply ingrained in our practices of perception and visualisation (Prinz 2014; Przyborski 2017).

With digital photography and networked visual communication, the number of pictures we make and see multiplied, and the range of visual conventions and repertoires we use have become more complex and differentiated. At the same time, digital pictures have developed as common everyday means of communication, elements of aesthetic expression and thus essential parts of the fabric of

social life. Whether this democratisation of visual communication and the malleability of the picture open up new possibilities for vision/power regimes (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz 2015: 10), or reproduce normative (beauty) standards and conventional visual cultures, has to be empirically investigated in specific contexts (Müller 2011; Senft and Baym 2015).

Visual communication has become more popular and integrated into all kinds of online communication, so it is especially interesting to investigate how distinction and inclusion play out aesthetically. This visual layer is seldom investigated closely. The separation of mass communication and interpersonal communication is not helpful in these contexts, as briefly mentioned in the introduction. In a canonical work, boyd introduces the concept of *context collapse* as a challenge for communication in networked publics, defined as “the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts” (2011: 49). This challenge seems to have transformed as new boundaries have developed: the range of platforms and apps used for networked communication have grown quickly, and the privacy settings on many platforms have become more complex, advanced and/or annoying. Contexts seem to be dynamically constituted in concrete practices in close collaboration with the possibilities and constraints of the respective technical affordances.

Regarding the participants in the case study, it seems that how they practise privacy and visibility is rarely subjected to a strategic decision and reflection but, rather, is entangled with habitual patterns – which are always constituted in relation to specific audiences and affordances. Again, the apps’ affordances are essential to this calibrated visual communication. For example, in Snapchat, the girls can select with whom they share pictures, which vanish after a few seconds. Instagram, in contrast, offers a range of standardised filters to enhance pictures with well-established, faux-vintage aesthetics (Jurgenson 2011). Moreover, the different possibilities of the apps’ visibility settings show that the technical artefacts afford specific modes of communication – publishing and messaging – that are strongly related to specific levels of privacy or publicness. Whereas the mode of publishing pictures is aimed at a rather more public audience, messaging pictures is practised with different intimate publics.

This fine-grained differentiation of audiences implicitly structures the participants’ sharing practices. The girls apparently perceive a certain context collapse in more publicly oriented platforms, such as Instagram, but it does not necessarily have dangerous or negative connotations. They are aware of the public nature and the possible decontextualisation of their pictures, so they use Instagram for “beautiful” pictures which appeal to a general, standardised sense of aesthetics. They do not post pictures there very frequently, but when they do, they carefully select and edit them first. Within this more public (online) sphere, peers continuously affirm each other, for example, through likes and comments (Schreiber and Kramer 2016; Thiel-Stern 2012), and these practices of affirmation are visible to others as well. In contrast, the communicative practices and the established group on

WhatsApp and Snapchat are perceived as clearly contextualised and demarcated. “Ugly” pictures with an idiosyncratic aesthetic are intimate media of communication and trust amongst the girls. These ugly pictures might be dark, full of weird stickers, or blurred, grimacing faces, yet exactly this style indicates an easy playfulness and mutual trust in this sphere of pictorial conversation. Again, a specific *aesthetic* is entangled with both the technical and iconographic *affordances* of the app and also with a specific *audience*. The interrelation of these three dimensions has to be taken into account to understand personal practices of networked visual communication.

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