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Teenagers' Selfies: Between Identity Construction and Meeting Hegemonic Norms

An Analysis of Selfies with the Documentary Method of Interpretation

Franziska Schwabl, Paderborn University

Abstract

Taking and sharing selfies is booming amongst teenagers. In this draft paper selfies are treated as a tool of visual self-representation as well as representations of dealing with heterogeneous hegemonic norms. With regard to a social constructive analytical stance, selfies are treated as constructions of individuals and therefore representations of their selves as well as objectifications of reflexive and tacit meaning that is communicatively generalized and documentary meaning. In this draft paper the analysis of selfies with the documentary method of interpretation is illustrated. The purpose of this reconstructive qualitative approach is to gain access to the *modus operandi* or collective patterns of orientations embedded in pictures as implicit knowledge. First empirical results show that teenagers ambivalently deal with anticipated expectations of their social roles, e. g. hegemonic masculinity.

selfies, visual methodology, documentary method of interpretation, hegemonic norms

Introduction

Taking and sharing selfies are ongoing trends and key parts of teenagers' culture and media practices (cf. Gojny 2016). Following Barnard's definition a *selfie* is a portrait taken by oneself with a camera or a camera phone for sharing with your specific social network, e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or via messenger services, e.g. WhatsApp (cf. Barnard 2016). On the one hand, selfies can be criticized as narcissistic, inferior, trivial, and vain. On the other hand, they are considered to be a tool of visual self-representation, an important practice for teenagers' identity formation, and a form of day-to-day communication (cf. Autenrieth 2014; Burns; Lobinger/Brandtner 2015; van Dijk 2008). Other studies found network specific sharing practices (cf. Lobinger 2016; Schreiber 2016; Schreiber/Kramer 2016), selfie-based (self)marketing practices (cf. Abidin 2016), and the representation of hegemonic norms in selfies (cf. Barnard 2016). Autenrieth (2014) considers selfies to be a fragmentary element of role taking, a digital experimental space for identity formation, or a reflection of hybrid identity as well as patchwork-identities. Furthermore, recent studies use selfies to foster embodied reflexivity in a qualitative research context (cf. Kelly et al. 2017).

This draft paper focuses on selfies as teenagers' practices and treats selfies as self-contained, autonomous domains that can be analysed on their own terms. With regard to a social constructive analytical perspective, selfies or in general pictures are as much documents of social or cultural phenomena as all kind of talk or text and contain different kinds of meaning. Selfies are constructed by individuals and therefore are representations of their selves as well as objectifications of reflexive as well as tacit meaning. I consider selfies as visual materials in which their producers' habitus is embedded.

In this paper first results of a research study are presented. Furthermore, it focuses on selfies as documents with specific characteristics in contrast to text. After a short glimpse at the theoretical framework and basic paradigmatic assumptions, the documentary method of interpretation is presented. The practice of the documentary method of interpretation is illustrated by the in-depth analysis of a teenager's selfie. Finally, first empirical results of the research study as well as conclusions are outlined. Please note, the draft paper and presented results are just provisional. Further data analysis will be finalised by End of 2017.

Theoretical framework and paradigmatic assumptions

Prior to a detailed description of the applied *documentary method of interpretation* (cf. Bohnsack 2010), the underlying theoretical framework and paradigmatic assumptions of this research study are presented. Since teenagers' selfies are the data basis of the research, a glimpse at the role of pictures in social science is necessary. In general, pictures have long been used as access to specific fields of research, e. g. for empirical evidence in natural sciences. Recently, the analysis of visual materials is becoming more prevalent in diverse fields of research (cf. Przyborski/Sluneko 2011, 40). In particular, in reconstructive qualitative social research pictures have become the focus of attention only in the

last few years. The increasing interest in pictures and the shift towards visual material in social research is called *iconic or pictorial turn* (cf. Boehm/Mitchell 2009). Before the turn from the linguistic to the visual, pictures played only a marginal role in social scientific research. More to the point, the progress in qualitative social research over the last two decades is almost exclusively linked to interpretation of talk or text (cf. Bohnsack 2010, 267). As much as talk or text, pictures can be understood as methodical options for social science. But, how can we handle pictures as data in a reconstructive qualitative research context? Hence, first of all an understanding of the picture itself as well as its specific characteristics contrary to text has to be demonstrated.

Pictures are, liketext, considered documents for social and cultural phenomena. In addition, and in tradition with a reconstructive social science, this paper treats pictures as self-contained, autonomous domains that can be analysed on their own terms. If pictures are recognised as self-referential systems, there are implications for the ways of understanding pictures. Specifically, we need to differentiate between an understanding *through* pictures and an understanding *about* pictures (cf. Bohnsack 2010). Especially an understanding through pictures is relevant in the following sections. An understanding through pictures does refer to a constructive paradigmatic model of reality that is represented as well as constituted by pictures or images (cf. Barthes 1967; Schutz 1964). With regard to that they provide orientations for our everyday practices and actions on an elementary level of understanding. That means, culturally appropriate social behaviour is acquired through (mental) images that are adopted mimetically and stored as mental images in mind (cf. Gebauer/Wulf 1998). Thus, with regard to a constructive paradigm, social reality is to a large extent based on iconic knowledge that is mostly pre-reflexive or a-theoretical (cf. Mannheim 1993). The differentiation between a-theoretical and literal meaning is in the following based on Mannheim's work on the interpretation of *Weltanschauung* (cf. *ibid.*). Pictures as well as all kinds of text or in general all cultural and social phenomena are considered to be objectifications. In specific, pictures imply theoretical or reflexive knowledge. Furthermore, incorporated or practical knowledge is embedded in pictures; that is, a-theoretical knowledge (cf. *ibid.*). Tacit knowledge is similar to the latter (cf. Polanyi 1985). Other common differentiations of knowledge are procedural knowledge, i. e. know-how, versus propositional knowledge, i. e. knowledge-that.¹

The differentiation between explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge is the main principle of the documentary method of interpretation. The former is linked to communicatively generalized meaning, the latter to tacit or with Mannheim's wording documentary meaning. In data analysis (picture as well as text) this differentiation requires a change of the analytic stance. More precise, it requires a transition from *what is* said or represented to *how* it is produced. Methodological implications for the analysis of pictures by the documentary method of interpretation developed by Bohnsack (cf. e. g. Bohnsack 1989; 2010; 2011; 2014; 2017) are based on Mannheim's social-phenomenological approach (cf. Mannheim 1993) as well as on the art historian works of Panofsky (cf. 1939; 1932) and Imdahl (cf. 1996a; 1996) and in parts on semiotics (cf. Barthes 1961; Eco 2002).

The purpose of the documentary method of interpretation is to gain access to the implicit, precisely to the habitus or *modus operandi* (cf. Bourdieu 1993). Thus, the change of an analytical stance from the immanent to documentary meaning or iconography to iconology is fundamental. Analytically, to the researcher needs to differentiate between the habitus of the producer of a picture, i. e. photographer (behind the camera), and the habitus of persons represented in the photograph (in front of the camera) (cf. Bohnsack 2010, 272). But as selfies are the data basis for this study this differentiation is mostly obsolete: The represented and representing picture producer is the same person. This study focuses on the habitus of the picture producer. That means further represented persons were included only in relation to the person who took the selfie.

On selfies again: First and foremost, selfies are photographs and hence pictures. In general, I follow Barnards' definition of selfies. Precisely, I consider selfies as teenagers' practices and treat them as self-contained, autonomous domains that can be analysed on their own terms, this, in fact, applies for all sorts of pictures. With respect to the reconstructive qualitative research context, selfies are understood as documents and hence as objectification of social and social phenomena. In short, selfies are documents constructed by individuals and therefore representations of their self as well as visualisations of its producers' habitus, communication tools (cf. the differentiation of understanding through versus about pictures) or, in general, documents used in empirical research.

On the four sites of meaning of pictures: Before I present a detailed description of the applied methodical approach, there are some preliminary remarks. With regard to interpreting visual material, e. g. pictures, Rose (cf. 2016, 24 ff.) differentiates four sites that contribute to the meaning of pictures: the site of the image itself, the site of its production, the site of its circulation, and the site of the audience. Furthermore, each site consists of three modalities: a technological modality (i. e. its creation, visual effect, circulation, and display), a compositional modality (i. e. its genre, formal composition, modification, and relation to other documents), as well as a social modality (i. e. the meaning of pictures, as well as questions with respect to why, who or how is it produced, interpreted, and spread).

I focus on the picture itself. That is, its genre, formal composition and its iconographical as well as iconological meaning (cf. methodological implications below). Its production, circulation, and audience is recognized only to a rather general extent. At the base of the research context, selfies usually are produced by students participating in the research study with a camera phone. The participants of the study transmitted their selfies via WhatsApp, for them I was the recipient. However, I did respond to the messages only to a perfunctory extent, e. g. thank you, thanks or other

phrases to enquire where the selfie was taken. At the base of the study, predominantly, I was the audience. Occasionally, I shared thoughts or interpretations of selfies for discursive discussions with my research group. Beyond that, there is no further information as to whether the selfies were shared by the students within any social network or messenger service. Thus, indications of the real audience are limited.

Analysing pictures with the documentary method of interpretation

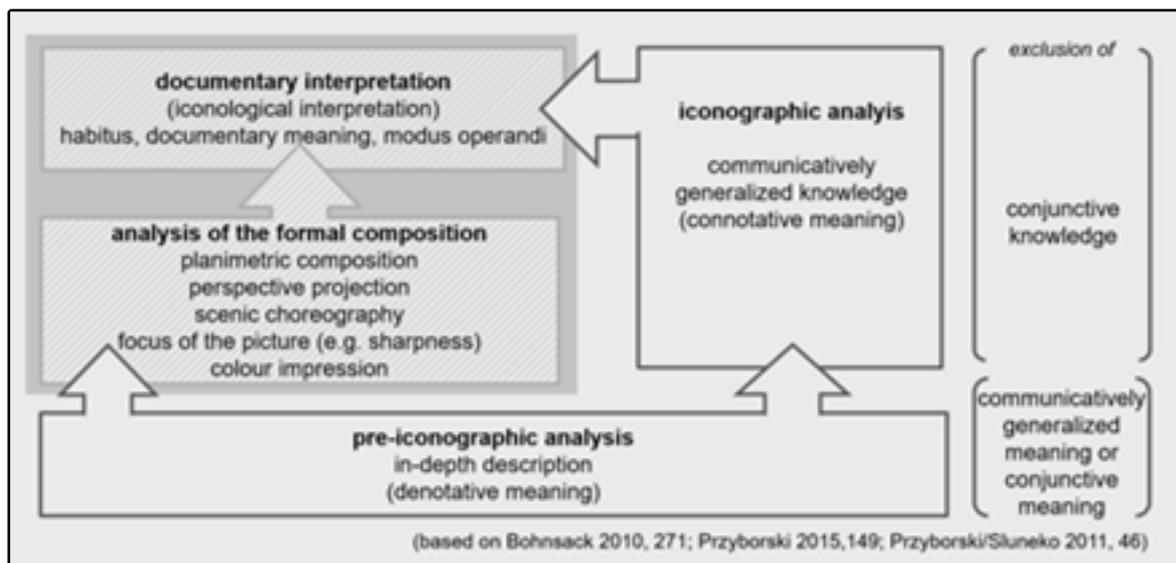
The applied method for analysing teenager's selfies is the documentary method of interpretation, that is a qualitative reconstructive method. The documentary method of interpretation was originally applied to group discussions, qualitative interviews, or in general all kinds of talk or text. The application of the documentary method of interpretation to all kinds of text has been well-elaborated (cf. Bohnsack 2010; 2014). Methodologically, the documentary method of interpretation applied on pictures is based on Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge (cf. Mannheim 1964; 1980) as well as theories of art history (cf. Imdahl 1996a; 1996b; Panofsky 1939; 1932) and semiotics (cf. Barthes 1961; Eco 2002). The main aim of the documentary approach is to reconstruct the *modus operandi*, i. e. habitual orientations, or in general tacit knowledge or documentary meaning.

Its main principle is the analytical differentiation between explicit and tacit knowledge that is in respect to immanent meaning and documentary meaning. While the first is communicatively generalized meaning and can be easily expressed, the second is a-theoretical meaning and mostly pre-reflexive. With regard to the interpretation of pictures, the transition from explicit to tacit knowledge requires a change of the analytic stance, specifically, a change from the question of *what* is represented in the picture to the question of *how* the presentation is produced. This is, according to Panofsky, the transition from iconographic to iconological analysis (cf. Panofsky 1939).

The documentary method of interpretation of pictures distinguishes four steps of analysis. Three of them are based on Panofsky's art-historical method of picture analysis. Within the *pre-iconographic analysis*, the denotative message of the picture is described, that is, pictured objects, phenomena, movements, facial expressions, or gestures. It aims at anything that can be identified regardless of one's cultural or social background. On this level communicatively generalized meaning is excluded as well as attributions based on socio-cultural knowledge. In general, the pre-iconographic analysis is an in-depth description of *what is* on the picture. For example: The picture shows a middle-aged man, holding a small cup in his right hand and wearing a black suit.

The *iconographic analysis* focuses on the picture's subject. i. e. it is the analysis of the connotative meaning of the represented scene of the picture. On this analysis level communicatively generalized meaning is included. However, the ascription of in-order-to motives or speculations based on introspection should be avoided. The iconographic analysis is the identification of the picture's topic or, in short, it shows *what is represented* in the picture. For example: The picture is a Nespresso advertisement showing George Clooney in an Armani suit holding a cup of espresso.

Finally, the *iconological analysis* is to reveal the characteristic or documentary meaning embedded in the picture. The iconological analysis is meant to reconstruct the picture's producer's habitus. With regard to the analytic stance, the iconological analysis aims at revealing *how* the represented is produced and the embedded tacit knowledge, i. e. documentary meaning.



As he pointed out on various occasions, Panofsky was only peripherally interested in a picture's genuinely aspects or formal composition (cf. Bohnsack 2010, 274; Imdahl 1996a; 1996b). This was criticized by Max Imdahl and led him to the method he called 'the iconic' that is predominantly based on the so-called seeing seeing (Imdahl 1988, 92; Przyborski/Sluneko 2012, 2). Imdahl's iconic concentrates on questions of a picture's (i) formal construction in-plane, that is the *planimetric composition* of the picture, (ii) its *perspective projection* as symbol of the *Weltanschauung* of the person who took the picture, and (iii) the arrangement of persons or objects represented in the picture, that is called *scenic choreography*. In recent works (cf. Przyborski 2015) (iv) the analysis of the photographic focus (e. g. image sharpness) is added to the analysis of the formal composition of pictures. I enhance the illustrated steps of the formal composition by (v) the analysis of the colour impression, in addition.

In short, the documentary method of interpretation is a four-step analysis. I start with the analysis of a picture's formal composition (cf. Przyborski/Sluneko 2011, 46; Bohnsack 2011, 40; Bohnsack 2010, 280). However, the dissemination of results is presented chronologically for dialectic reasons. It starts with a detailed description of the picture (pre-iconographic analysis) followed by the presentation of the identified topic of the picture (iconographic analysis). The picture's formal composition is presented in third place. Finally, the findings of the (pre-)iconographic and iconological analysis are merged in the iconological interpretation.

Data

About 90 selfies are the data at the base of the study. The selfies were collected within the project 'selfieme' in which 15 students of the vocational school-based transition system in Germany participated. The students were asked to send a selfie seven days in a row. For the first results presented in this draft, only 4 selfies are taken into account. Hence, I demonstrate an in-depth analysis of one teenager's selfie as well as a comparative analysis of all selfies of this particular case to illustrate the practice of the documentary method of interpretation.

Example: A teenager's selfies analysed with the documentary method of interpretation

Now, a full analysis of one teenager's selfie with the documentary method of interpretation presented above is demonstrated. As outlined before, the particular levels of interpretation are presented in the above-mentioned order, even if the analysis practice starts with reconstructing the selfies' formal composition.

Pre-iconographic analysis: The foreground of the selfie shows a young man. He wears black tracksuit trousers and a black t-shirt. A mostly black tracksuit top hangs down at his left shoulder. Its sleeves and other parts of the tracksuit top are patterned in light blue and white. The cuffs and the lower section of the top are striped in black, white, and blue. The tracksuit top is draped over the young man's shoulder. The sleeve hangs down to the knee. The young man's skin is pale. He wears a short beard above his upper lip as well as on the chin and cheeks. His hair and beard are light brown. The sites of the hair are shorter than the top hair. Except for a silver wristband, he wears no jewellery or other accessories. He holds a camera phone with its back to the viewer in his left hand. This indicates that the young man is standing in front of a mirror. The legs are hip width. His feet are not visible. The right arm is bent at the level of middle his stomach (upper and lower arm form an angle of 90 degree). Its muscles are tensed, so that different muscles of upper and lower arm are visible. The man's right hand is hidden under the tracksuit top hanging over the left shoulder. His head is slightly inclined downwards. He looks at the front screen of the camera phone. The young man's facial expression is serious and concentrated. The corners of his' mouth are slightly pulled down. There are slight wrinkles on his forehead as well as between his eyebrows and the root of his nose. The picture's background is dominated by bright areas. The selfie was taken in front of a white wall. There is a light border at the upper end of the wall. The young man is standing in front of a wardrobe that is covering the background to a large extent and is likely made of birch wood. The wardrobe is shut. There are silver hooks on the right side of the wardrobe. On the hooks hangs a turquoise bag with white handles. The floor is tiled white. The door and doorframe are also white. The door to the adjacent room is open and the floor of that room is made of pale wood.

Iconographic analysis: The picture represents a young man who stands in front of a mirror to take a selfie. More specifically, he stands between the mirror and a wardrobe. The straight body posture highlights his muscular physique. The sporty and bodily aspect of the selfie is emphasised by the tracksuit and his muscles. The young man dressed in black stands out clearly against the light background. Furthermore, the style of beard is a short boxed beard and his hairstyle is called undercut.

Analysis of the formal composition: (i) This analysis level starts with reconstructing the planimetric composition of the picture. At this level it is all about lines (cf. Imdahl 1996a; Bohnsack 2010, 278; Przyborski 2015, 49 ff.). The most noteworthy lines (A) go along the young man's lower and upper body. They start at the bottom picture border and go along the tracksuit top hanging over his shoulder and along his legs. Combined, these lines are funnel-shaped. In con-

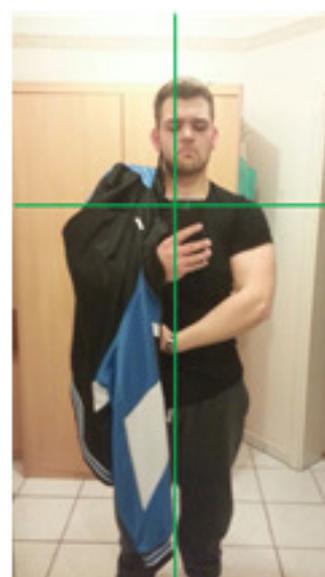
trast, the lines along the inner sides of his legs (dashed lines) are less significant. Furthermore, the upper arm forms another significant line (B). Above the lines intrinsic to the picture further (propositional) lines are consciousness-expanding (bewusstseinsöffnend). The perpendicular bisector illustrates the young man's central position. He is the focal point of the selfie. The horizontal line of the golden ratio emphasises the muscular shoulders of the young man. These two crossing lines (C) almost meet the camera eye of the smartphone. In sum, the planimetric composition of the picture draws attention to the body in the centre of the selfie. The lines are funnel-shaped and run out of the plane at the top picture border, as such they emphasise the young man's muscular torso and broad shoulders. The tensed upper arm interrupts this structuring. As the young man's feet are not visible the picture seems imperfect and uncertain. (ii) The selfie shows the young man from a front-on perspective. The camera eye marks the vanishing point of the selfie. The selfie's viewpoint is slightly lower eye level. By lowering the viewpoint, represented persons or objects appear elevated and mighty. The smartphone is slightly tilted and thus has an impact on the young man's physical appearance. By tilting the phone his torso and shoulders appear broader. That emphasises his muscular physical appearance. This effect evokes parallels to the physical appearance of Popey, the Sailor Man. In sum, the vanishing point as well as the emphasised physical appearance imply that the young man stands above it all. (iii) With regard to the scenic choreography, the young man is focused on himself. This effect is emphasised as a result of his position in front of a mirror. The young man looks into the front screen of the camera phone for taking the selfie. This way of taking the selfie reveals the aspect of being able to control the situation (see below). (iv) The picture background is slightly blurred. The young man in the foreground is clearly recognisable. (v) The picture is dominated by the colours black and white. Despite the light wooden colour shades in the background the picture appears only slightly cosy or homely, but rather clean or distant.



(A)



(B)



(C)

Iconological or documentary interpretation: With regard to the icon

ological interpretation the following is essential: The represented young man is in the centre of the selfie (cf. planimetric composition). He is in strong contrast to the bright background. The bright colours of the background on the other hand adjust the picture's mood. It appears clean, cold, or distant. However, or precisely for that reason, it seems to be blank. The young man's posture is accentuating his (muscular) physique. This posture appears rigid, stiff, and self-conscious. His upper arm is spirally winded around his waist suggesting reticence or shyness. The tracksuit top casually hanging down his shoulder is a contradiction in that on the one hand, the top is hiding one half of the young man's body, on the other hand, the casually draped tracksuit top implies nonchalance and an open-minded, casual, or easy-going manner. The way the tracksuit top is hanging down the shoulder on the one hand seems laid-back or casual, while at the same time it seems accurately draped at the shoulder. It looks like a matador's muleta; that is the epitome of masculine virtues such as courage and strength. Furthermore, the hand of the young man is covered of the tracksuit top. In sum, his physical appearance reveals an ambivalence of hiding and exhibition. On the one hand, the selfie reveals the offensive exhibition of the muscular physique and therefore broaches typically masculine stereotypes. On the other hand, it reveals reticence and shyness. Remarkable is the fact that the young man is in strong contrast to the bright background. This reveals the self-centredness (to understand in its literal sense).

In addition, there are some indications concerning the matter of control. The young man is looking at the front screen of his smartphone instead of looking directly into the mirror. The screen shows the same scene that is displayed in the final picture: a young man standing in front of a mirror taking a selfie. The young man positioned himself in front of

the mirror, hereby he can easily control his posture as well as his entire appearance. By the look on the front screen of the smartphone the impression of control is intensified. As a result, the selfie reveals an increased need of control. This eventually becomes apparent in the slightly tilted camera phone, which makes his shoulders and his upper body seem to be way broader than in reality. This was called in the analysis of the formal composition the Popeye, the Sailor Man-effect.

By the demonstrated aspects – positioning in front of the mirror, looking at the front screen of the smartphone, and tilting the smartphone – command and control over the young man's public image as well as power and strength are symbolized. In sum, these are by tendency rather masculine stereotypes. Hence, the selfie seems to display the young man in dealing with hegemonic masculinity. However, it is less offensive than his physical appearance indicates. On the contrary it is a habitually insecure picture. More precisely the selfie reveals that the young man insecurely deals with anticipated expectations concerning his hegemonic masculinity. That is represented by (i) the ambivalence of the offensive presentation of the muscular body and shyness, (ii) the self-centeredness as well as (iii) the ambivalence of hiding body parts and exhibiting his muscular body. The selfie simultaneously reveals an offensive exhibition of masculine stereotypes as well as shyness, reticence, or a young man withdrawn into himself. As demonstrated, the iconological interpretation of the selfie indicates the *modus operandi* of the young man is insecure regarding his dealing with hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, the interpretation suggests that he is in need of command and control (over his life in general or his body appearance in special).

Further analysis with respect to this particular case:

The young man has sent another five selfies. Due to theoretical saturation (cf. Glaser & Strauss) only four of them were analysed via the documentary method of interpretation. The following paragraph demonstrates the main results of the analysis.ⁱⁱ

With regard to the chronological order in which the selfies were sent to me, it is noticeable that the young man's manner of clothing as well as his representation of his public image becomes increasingly unconcealed and hence accessible. The young man shows the viewer little by little his physicality. On the first selfie he is wearing a warm winter jacket, whilst the subsequent selfies show more of the (muscular) physique of the young man. The final selfie unveils nearly completely the marked chest and shoulder muscles of the young man. Thus, the selfies implicate increasingly closeness as well as openness. All selfies refer to the young man himself (e. g. his appearance). Everything else (e. g. background) remains vague, thus the focus is on the young man. Noticeable is that this structure is exactly the same in all selfies. The background is simple, clean, and unspecific, whilst warm colours predominate in the foreground. There is one exceptional selfie. However, even this selfie focuses on the young man himself and specifically his body appearance. Thus, all selfies expel the young man's self-centredness, to be understood in the word's literal sense.

Furthermore, the analysis of the selfies reveals that and how the young man deals with (anticipated expectations on) his identity and self-concept. All selfies show him dealing with hegemonic masculinity. Hence, masculine body appearance is essential in the analysed pictures. Masculine stereotypes are directed offensively, e. g. the tracksuit top that looks like a muleta. They as well as links to the muscular physique indicate an active engagement with masculinity. In addition, all selfies implicate that the young man deals by tendency insecurely with anticipated hegemonic masculinity as well as other norms or expectations.

In sum, the pictures are ambivalent. On the one hand, they indicate typical masculine stereotypes as strength, power, or dominance. On the other hand, they reveal different aspects such as shyness or reticence. There is a lot of evidence that the young man is orientated towards (hegemonic) expectations of expectations and that there is a tension between hegemonic norms and his *modus operandi*. Thus, the selfies show the process of negotiating one's identity and various normative expectations.

First empirical results and conclusions

This draft paper focused on teenagers' selfies as a day-to-day practice and treats them as cultural or social documents that imply tacit knowledge and therefore can be used for reconstructing the *modus operandi* of the person that took the picture. Visual methodologies are becoming more prevalent in social scientific research. That is not least because they are options for reconstructing the implicit or incorporated meaning. Visual methodologies are an innovative way to gain access to subjects' lived-in worlds and to their ways of dealing with anticipated expectations of social roles. Furthermore, the tension between norms and habitus can be studied. This was illustrated above by the analysis of one teenager's selfie and the comparative analysis of further selfies.

First empirical results show that teenagers ambivalently deal with anticipated expectations of their social roles, e. g. hegemonic masculinity/femininity. Furthermore, key elements of teenagers' identity construction are different ways of dealing with their body as well as their cultural or social background. This was demonstrated by the detailed analysis of one teenager's selfie in the paragraphs above as well as the comparative analysis of the teenager's selfies. Although this analysis focuses on just one case, the results are obvious. Certainly, further analysis will produce a more nuanced image on how teenagers deal with hegemonic masculinity/femininity or other expectations of expectations.

Further steps of the research process are: As the analysis of the selfies is finished by end of 2017, all pictures of a particular case will need to be analysed in contrast. This is a pre-stage to generate detailed types of habitus, modus operandi, or collective patterns of orientations embedded in selfies.

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Franziska Schwabl is a research associate and PhD student at the Department Business and Human Resource Education of the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics (Paderborn University). Her research effort focus on reconstructive qualitative methods, pictures, youth culture, and the German educational and vocational training system.

ⁱ The differentiation between procedural and propositional knowledge is a general epistemological position that are common in social science. For further information, see the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy/Epistemology: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/epistemo/#H1> (2017-06-06)

ⁱⁱ The illustration is extremely shortened, if required feel free to ask the author for a full version.