

# GOING VISIBLE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS: STRATEGIES OF SELF-PRESENTATION IN FACEBOOK PHOTOS

GÜLÜM ŞENER\*

YELDA ÖZKOÇAK\*\*

*“Nobody is as ugly as his/her headshot, nor is s/he as beautiful as his/her Facebook photo.” (Anonymous)*

*“Act like no one else but yourself, you are much more beautiful the way you are” (Tarkan)*

## INTRODUCTION

What inspired this study was a specific kind of headshot (portrait) photo uploaded to the social networking site Facebook. The “flirty” pose with an “I am unique” look, self-taken from above, in which the model slightly tilted his/her head sideways smiling and was both near and far from us pretending to be a star... “Star” poses and “idealized” image of the person copied from popular culture are shared via social networks and re-generate the dominant culture. Aim of this study is to reveal the meaning of social norms and codes in Facebook photos focusing on headshots (portrait photos). Theoretically, it is possible for us to photograph anything when and wherever we want using a mobile phone or digital camera; however, we follow socially established norms while taking photos. We think that these social norms relating to creation, content and sharing of the photo in social networks are formed and shaped by the popular culture of capitalism which sublimates the individual. One of the basic hypotheses of this study is that the idealized image of the individual is re-generated according to the star images shared within popular culture. Although it is a challenging work to classify the photos shared on Facebook, we can suggest that these photos shared thereon contain repeated visual messages. As well as containing habits originating from Kodak and Digital Culture, these norms are also mainly determined by the features of communication medium and communication context within

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\* Istanbul Arel University, Faculty Member, Faculty of Communication

\*\* Istanbul Arel University, Faculty Member, Faculty of Communication

Facebook. In this study, the analysis to identify aforementioned visual codes was based on the descriptive framework – Chalfen’s photo analysis method.

## FUNCTIONS OF PHOTOS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Rise of social networks brings a variety of changes to the practices of taking and sharing photos. Portrait photography having become popular after portrait painting, a tool used to document the social statuses of emerging middle classes in industrializing countries through 18th and 19th centuries, has been replaced, as from the second half of 20th century, by Kodak Culture in which the family is put in the centre, photography was popularised and amateur photography became wide-spread, and as a result of this replacement, personal photos have become nothing but mementos typically kept in photo albums and shared with kit hand kin.

With the emergence of Digital Culture, photograph has been transformed into a means of communication which can display any moment of daily life and be easily doctored, and shared in cyberspace. Digital technologies facilitated generating and networking the images, and on the other hand, they caused a transformation in photography practices as well (Van House, 2009:1084). Photograph was not a memento of public and personal events anymore, instead it was transformed into the practice of daily life describing “common ordinariness” (Larsen & Cruz, 2009: 205).

However, social networks indicate a new turning point: Social Photograph. It is a new period with its specific characteristics as well as containing the features of Portrait, Kodak and Digital photo cultures. Photograph acquires new social functions in social networks first of which is that social networkers use the photo as a means of self-presentation and –expression, thus performing their identities through photos. Each photo shared on social networks gives, just like the person’s other shared contents, a hint about the individual’s identity regardless of the person’s presence or absence on the related photo. Second, the specific group dynamics of social networks (the fact that we communicate within a group typically consisting of acquaintances, or friends we add to our list as our own preference) leads to use of the photo as a means of establishing and maintaining social relationships. Photos on social networks are shared with a semi-public environment in contradistinction to our physical environment restricted to our families, friends and acquaintances. Photo sharing is a limited activity when offline, whereas it becomes an activity we perform more often and with a different group when online. The fact that social networks base on the interaction between users pays the way to comment photos and like a content, thus maintaining social relationships, and new relationships that may not be possible offline may emerge during this interaction. Furthermore, photograph, a means of building identity of a user on social networks, becomes a means of being approved by others (receiving likes for the contents shared and positive comments in general).

Photograph had always been a means of self-presentation; however, as it was shared on social networks, it has become a means of transferring one’s identity to others, communication, and desire of approval. In the fourth place, photograph still keeps on being a memento on social networks as well. Social networking websites provide their

users with profiles that can be personalized, thus enabling them to create their own biographies and visually archive their memories. Photo albums on social networks are a major tool for having a closer look to the lives of one's friends.

In this study, we limited our scope by discussing the photo only as a means of self-presentation and leaving other functions of it aside. The scope of the study was reduced to identity performance of the individual on Facebook profile photos which is one of the most widely used social networks across Turkey.

## **IDENTITY PERFORMANCE AND PHOTOGRAPH ON SOCIAL NETWORKS**

Social networks lead to daily identity performance by individuals. As search for identity rises depending on the increase in uncertainty in global capitalism, social networks on internet are used as tools paving the way for this search for identity (Şener, 2010:255). Ager suggests that individuals create a kind of fiction of self on internet, and that they need this fiction of self more than ever in the figurative, blinking and imaginary world of internet they created electronically (2011:168).

“Studies on self did not begin with Internet. However, they gained speed with it. When it gets integrated with Internet and other electronic media such as mobile phones and chat rooms, the self becomes cyberself. Identity is achieved through these electronic tools. These tools enable or require the individuals to generate, change or reveal their own selves against others.” (Ager, 2011: 181).

Social networks accelerated the identity performance even more and made it sustainable. During the first period of Internet (Web 1.0), websites undertook the self-presentation and identity construction through bricolage of areas of interest, images and links; however, with the development of personal blogs and social networks, today's users constantly perform their identities both personally and collectively (Lister et al., 2009: 269).

Self-presentation of users on social networks is explained based particularly on Erving Goffman's views relating to face-to-face interaction (Tüfekçi, 2008, Kolektif Üretim, 2009). Goffman suggests that the social actor always plays a role in the eyes of the audience and performs various activities in order to leave a positive impression on them. During a performance witnessed by any group, the individual tends to socialize in accordance with the expectations of the society and leave an idealized impression about himself/herself (Goffman, 2004:45). Having adapted Goffman's arguments into Facebook, Zhao et al. suggest that users try to create an ideal identity desired by others rather than revealing their true or hidden selves since they are nonymous (non-anonymous) and know each other personally (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008: 1817-1818). According to this argument, each activity we carry out on Facebook gives a hint about our identity, likes, worldview etc. to our audience. Safety settings of Facebook enable its users to manage their identities, determine which information to share and hide with and from whom to what extent.

Photo sharing is a kind of identity performance for social networkers. It may be suggested that when compared to other written and audio-visual components of social networks, photograph is an image giving consistent information about the individual. It follows that, social network profiles are identity construction and presentation sites based on “showing” rather than “telling” (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008, transferred by Morgan, Snelson & Elison-Bowers, 2010: 1405).

Many researchers studying the role of photograph in social media addressed the photo together with such concepts as identity construction and self-presentation (Morgan Snelson & Elison-Bowers, 2010; Lasen-Cruz, 2009), impression management (Wang et al. 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2010) and narcissism (Sessions, 2009; Mendelson, 2010). From this point of view, each photo uploaded by us to social networks leads us to construct our identities and present idealized images about us. Identity performance is not restricted to how the photo represents itself and us. Creating a photo (having photos taken to share on Facebook or Twitter, and posing in consideration thereof), selecting a photo (selecting and sharing not any photo, but the most appropriate one among lots of photos), sharing a photo (how often and with whom a photo is shared) and commenting a photo are different steps of self-presentation process during which the users adopt certain strategies.

Photograph on social networks is initially the evidence of one’s presence. First of all, a photograph is shared as an evidence of personal experience and moments of life. The individual goes visible on social networks through photographs. Sharing images belonging to him/her is the evidence that s/he exists (Gomez & Larsen, 2009:215). A person mostly takes a photo to share on social networks with the aim of leaving a mark indicating s/he is alive. “Shall we upload this to Facebook?” shows that photo taking has taken place for social networks from the beginning.

Photos tell more than words and substitute for the human body during interactions via Internet. Physical presence is symbolized in images through illustration of non-existing body (Astheimer, Neumann-Braun and Schmidt, 2011:20). Social networks are designed to privilege such visual hints as images and videos (Wang, 2010:228). Social networkers follow certain strategies through photograph while carrying out identity performance. Few photos on social networks have randomly been taken and uploaded. Typically, these photos comprise photographic components and activities designed deliberately and carried out as a result of a number of preferences by the model and photographer.

Identity performance is not a unilateral process, and it takes the audience into consideration as well. The users would share not any photos or images of him/her, but pre-designed planned and selected images through which s/he hopes to leave a positive impression on the receiving parties. Mostly, the photo would display a doctored body and an idealized image of the person. Components of identity strategies comprise such activities as the person’s contemplation about his/her own body, highlighting the aspects s/he likes, determining what to display to which extent etc. Desire to be approved by others in interpersonal communication is a means of being dependent on others which is one of the features of identity construction (Larsen and Gomez,

2009:211). The users search for the ideal image of themselves, and at the same time, they crave for social approval. Therefore, messages carried by photos shared on social networks are mostly in accordance with social norms.

Photograph displays a time-specific and stable image of a person's identity. Personal photos shared on social networks are fragments of one's identity. Despite giving consistent information about the person, they are time-specific which means there is no past or future. Integration of social networks and digital imaging technologies enables the users to display different faces of them (McKay, 2010:481). The users try to construct a consistent identity using these fragments. Nusselder argues that technological images may create a sensation of personal identity as we find ourselves in these images. We identify with the image on the screen as if we were looking in the mirror. Thrill of a child seeing his/her reflection in the mirror is, indeed, the celebration of being able to control his/her own body (Nusselder, 2007). Taking and sharing one's own photos leads to having a sensation of control over one's own body just like the child looking in the mirror.

### **PHOTO SHARING AND IDENTITY PERFORMANCE ON FACEBOOK**

*“People have two lives. The one that wakes up in the morning with bad breath and eye boogers. And the other one, which is the photoshopped version we save expressly for Facebook.”*<sup>1</sup>

Being the most widely used social networking website, Facebook is also the largest photo sharing site. Above 250 million photos in average are shared daily on Facebook.

With which opportunities does Facebook provide the users? Users can upload photos from mobile instant communication tools, photos uploaded pop up under newsfeed and become visible to friends, the users can create a visual archive about his/her own life by creating albums, socialize by commenting and tagging photos, claim a face for themselves with profile photos in non-physical setting of the Internet, and perform their identities by doctoring photos using various applications. By providing new ways to display and edit online images, Facebook encourages the users to *become visible*. The website enables displaying the digital images in new ways, and on the other hand, the very images become actors and generate new modes of interaction (McKay, 2010:496). “Websites such as Facebook enhance and compliance even more the opportunities attributing different meanings to photographic images, such as exchanging, displaying, using semantically contradicting elements together so as to create irony, commenting, cultural production and selfformation” (McKay, 2010:481).

Facebookers are amateur photographers. Taking photos is a cheap leisure time activity for amateurs, and they train themselves by improving and sharpening their techniques while taking photos (Astheimer, 2011:105). They do not need any kind of technical information about photo taking. Thus, they view themselves, their friends and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/valley-girl-brain/201112/how-quit-facebook>  
Accessed on 1st July 2012.

lives with only a mobile phone, digital camera or webcam which can take photos. While doing that, they do not need to have professional knowledge such as photo resolution, frame rate, use of light and lens properties. That is because, unlike other social networks on which more professional and artistic photos are shared, Facebook users take photos for only themselves as an extension and proof of their daily lives and lifestyles, and share these relatively selected photos on their profiles.

Facebookers usually share their personal photos. A photo contains messages specific to one's own world, regardless of his/her presence on the photo. The individual aims to tell the audience about himself/herself and his/her life through the photos. Having family photos at home, hanging them on the walls, or displaying them in cupboards or on piano is a ritual re-constructing/solidifying the "family solidarity"/familial belonging every day, just as sharing "self" photos on Facebook is a ritual re-constructing/approving/affirming the self/individual. The fact that there are persons on Facebook the individual knows in person creates a sort of community pressure, thus determining which photos to be shared or not to be shared. The users must determine what to and no to display. Displaying personal photos physically is usually restricted to one's close relatives and friends, whereas sharing photos on social networks such as Facebook is like holding a "life exhibition". When your friends who have not seen your child in person yet say that "We are following it on Facebook, your kid has grown really well!", means that they have an idea about your life, even though about a part of it. Or, peeping into first the photo album of someone you have just met and added on Facebook may give you a quick idea about his/her lifestyle. Facebook photo albums may be considered a sort of personal documentary representing the certain parts of our lives chosen by us.

How does Facebook change the habits of taking, sharing and commenting photos? A survey by Şener and Özkoçak including 694 users reveals that when having their photos taken, 78% of the users consider the possibility that the photo taken may be uploaded to Facebook (Şener and Özkoçak, 2012:264). People begin posing for Facebook and share the photos with a micro audience group comprising their acquaintances on Facebook. It is observed that the themes of photos shared on Facebook are similar. These photos consist of the images supporting the individual in leaving a positive impression on the small community comprising his/her acquaintances. Users become highly selective while uploading photos to Facebook (57% upload only 5% - 10% of the photos they take), and most of the users share on Facebook not any photo of them, but repeated messages: "look how sociable I am!", "How beautiful/handsome I am!", "How attractive I am!", and "How happy I am!". The study shows that the most widely shared images on Facebook are under the category of following events: celebrations such as birthdays, parties, concerts and weddings (70.6%), fun with friends (69.3%), trip to a new country or city (67.8%), and vacations (60%). Commenting, liking and tagging photos intensify the relationship between the users as well.

Facebook also changes the values regarding what can be photographed, and causes new photograph codes depending on social norms to emerge. Personal photography is a culturally and socially situated activity (Van House, 2009:1074). This study

addresses the photograph as a means of mass communication. Bourdieu postulates that the photo is not taken randomly as a result of personal imagination, but rather it is taken as a result of internalizing the objective and common regulations under the collective rules of the group, i.e. through an ethos (1998). Bourdieu suggests that norms relating to the photo belong not to the individual, but to the collectivity, and accepts that the “obvious tendencies of the photographer” represented by photos actually indicate “the system of perception, thinking and evaluation schemes pertaining to the whole group” (transferred by Pink, 2011:94). Similarly, Sontag (2008:19) states as well that photos always reveal what is worth photographing and create a sort of viewing tradition. Having studied Kodak Culture, Chalfen considers the photograph a means of communication and argues that homemade photos and videos, and snapshots are culturally-structured artefacts. “By studying Kodak Culture, we want to learn how people have organized themselves socially to produce personalized versions of their own life experiences.” (Chalfen, 2008:10). As a social ritual and group practice, social media users base on social norms taking the social context of social media into consideration. Accordingly, it may be suggested that Facebook creates its own viewing tradition as well. Users take photos for Facebook and share them with a semi-public environment. Photos shared thereon are created and presented in accordance with the norms originating from the structure of the social networks, and mode and context of communication thereon. Contents of these photos generally highlight the same themes such as sociability, physical attractiveness, desire of being liked and approved, and accordance with social norms. Van House suggests that creating, sharing, viewing and commenting images not only show how we represent ourselves, but also reveal in which ways we display ourselves both individually and collectively, and that we regenerate social norms and forms (2011:131). We regenerate social norms with the photos we share on Facebook.

Chalfen states that since the emergence of Kodak Culture, we have been photographing each activity, place and event through which we hope to be socially approved. “Kodak Culture promotes the visual display of proper and expected behaviour, of participation in socially approved activities, according to culturally approved value schemes.” (Chalfen, 2008:139). This is applicable for Facebook as well. Considering Facebook a small society, it is possible to suggest that communication-originated norms thereon affect taking, content and sharing of photos. Users take this into consideration while determining what to and no to share. Sharing the moments of happy, successful and new experiences intensifies the social belonging as well. Users both expect comments and to be liked. Chalfen argues that people show, with the photos they take and share, their knowledge, competency and skill indicating they do things “right”. “Thus, a sense of belonging and security is developed and maintained.” (Chalfen, 2008:139).

Photo-specific indicators of accordance with social norms on Facebook may be enlisted as 1- looking “trendy” by imitating the poses of popular culture stars, 2- stressing out friendship and sociability, and giving the message that one has a funny personality, and 3- likes and comments received for each photo.

Considering all these, where do these social norms originate from? It is possible to suggest that the photos shared on Facebook are a synthesis of visual codes belonging to Kodak Culture, personal and amateur photography, digital photography, and popular culture. As in Kodak Culture, the users share the images and views of happy moments and climax points in their lives; however, the individual and his/her friends are highlighted in these photos, whereas the subject of photos is family in Kodak Culture. That is because Facebook is a platform in which personal emotions and thoughts, as well as friends, become important. The users take the photos using digital tools and have the option of taking lots of photos at any time, and doctoring these photos as desired. Thus, photograph becomes a daily means of identity construction. Poses, however, we strike particularly when having our photos taken are affected by the global popular cultural of our time. Facebook contains lots of “star” poses.

### **PROFILE PICTURE: SEARCH FOR THE IDEAL SELF**

Desire to idealize oneself on social networks is probably at the highest level in profile pictures. One distinction between profile pictures and other photos is that profile pictures are expected to reflect the person’s identity more<sup>2</sup>. Portrait pictures contain much more certain information about an individual’s image, and they resolve anonymity, thus helping the individual re-represent himself/herself (Astheimer, Neumann-Braun and Schmidt, 2011:15). Profile picture is the first image we come across while search for someone on Facebook, and they give us the first impression about a person unknown to us.

Profile pictures date back to the tradition of portraiture. Tradition of portraiture, a means of proving its social status for aristocracy in Europe, has been popularized with the invention of photography. In the early periods of photography, i.e. circa 1830 – 1890, portrait photography becomes widespread depending on the rise of middle-class in Europe. Members of the emerging middle class aim to visually prove their new social statuses by having portrait photographs taken which cost less than portrait pictures (Frohlih, 2011:23). In portrait photographs, middle-class members represent themselves not as the people they actually are, but as the successful members of a certain stratum of the society (Frohlih, 2011:35). At the end of the 20th century, with digitalization and the popularization of particularly the cell phones and Internet Culture, self-portrait photos emerge as a preferred type of photography (Lasen, 2005:65, transferred by Schwarz, 2010:206).

Portrait photos have many functions: being a piece of evidence for documentary, identification, body representation, and biography (Astheimer, Neumann-Braun and Schmidt, 2001:28-29). Barthes notes the following for portrait: “In front of the camera, I am both the one I believe in and the one I want others to believe in, as well as being both the one the photographer believes in and the one s/he uses to display his/her art” (Barthes, 1980:29).

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<sup>2</sup> 67% of the profile pictures show only the individual (Şener and Özkoçak, 2012:265).



Tisseron states that today “a culture based on disclosure of privacy” has emerged and “desire to be oneself” has become widespread. “The Cult of the Self” having emerged in the USA in 1950s and become widespread across Europe since 1980s is based on the principle of the superiority of individual which intensifies and strengthens the individual’s acquisition of an idealized and inaccessible image of himself/ herself. Apart from being a disorder, narcissism gets a function to feed and maintain interpersonal relationships (Tisseron, 2001:145-147). On social networks as well which are the outputs of a culture featuring individualism, sharing a photo and desiring it to be liked may be regarded as a narcissistic activity. The individual wants to look beautiful/handsome/well-groomed/star-like in his/her profile picture. Sessions states that profile pictures on MySpace are used to show the user more attractive than s/he is, deliberately hide the body, and have narcissistic characteristics (2009).

The individual displays the ideal self with Facebook photos. This ideal self is generally created depending on the positive values within the society, such as beauty, attractiveness and naturalness. Illouz argues that beauty and body have always existed on Internet, a photograph is a fixed and stable image freezing the body in its own endlessness, and is in a competitive market comprising similar photos (2011:120). On Internet, “people expressing themselves through their photos” are virtually regarded as models in beauty and care business or actors/ actresses, in other words they are put in a place or position in which (1) they are over-aware of their physical appearance, (2) body becomes the original source of social and economic value, (3) they are forced to compete with others over their bodies, and finally (4) their bodies and physical appearances are explicitly displayed (Illouz, 2011:120-121). Schwarz, however, suggests that highlighting one’s beauty in the photos on social networks determines, at the same time, the value of the person within that social network (2010:170). Photos on social networks are the representations of multiple and fragmented postmodern self (Schwarz, 2010:166), and are a special kind of body capital carrier. They contain innate physical characteristics, changes to the body, and distorted versions of corporal representation. Thus, different representations of the body function as a social value (Schwarz, 2010:171).

## **LEARNED STAR POSES**

Strategies used in Facebook photos are affected not only by the individual’s perception of his/her own body, but also by some social factors. Lee (2005) and Hjort (2007) suggest that self-portraits usually copy the stereotyped norms within mass communication tools (transferred by Schwarz, 2010). Poses on profile pictures are “learned” poses. They are the adaptations of the stars who are the products of global popular culture. Poses struck by the celebrities in advertisements, video clips, TV series etc. are modelled on. People learn how to strike a pose from mass communication tools showcasing the performances by social elites, media stars or models (Astheimer, 2011:101). Niedzviecki notes that we support the system instead of opposing and resisting devaluation of culture by the capitalist system, and that a new conformist individualism emerges. Being famous is spread to each moment of life.

Today, use of performance as a means of drawing attention has spread to the daily life from the lives of artists and actors. Popular culture plays a crucial role in creating this new conformism: "Popular culture has a message very similar to the ideology of new conformism: This is your story"... With the philosophy of life "I am Special", we desire not only to live in luxury houses and drive cars like those of pop stars, but also to have the validity of being the one they reveal and exhibit their strong characters" (Niedzviecki, 2011:90-98). Men and women with their attentive and diligent outfits and stances in their profile pictures come right out of the fashion magazines. The dream to be attractive shared by many users is "discovered" as a model (Schwarz, 2010:168). Facebook users experience being famous through their photos. Attractiveness, the lifestyle emerging with the rise of consumer culture, and the culture of attractiveness cause new norms to emerge in the field of photography. "Attractiveness, as a lifestyle, is based on physical appeal blended with such values as fashion awareness of consumer culture, cheapness and fame... Attractiveness is related with the body and contains social information. Physical appeal alone does not qualify as attractiveness. Displaying an attractive body integrates consumer products with eroticism and sex" (Astheimer, 2011:106).

While striking poses like celebrities, the individual tries to transcend his/her class as well. Public images of celebrities have significant effects on visual codes of profile pictures (Frohlih and Sarvas, 2011: 37). Profile pictures regenerate the codes of tabloid culture and obscures the individual's class belonging. Having stated that social networkers are impressed by global stars while creating photos, Astheimer established in his study he examined nightlife photos shared on social networks that codes of attractiveness were used and beauty, dynamism, richness and sex appeal were highlighted (Astheimer, 2011:101). Attractiveness and beauty promise social rise for lower classes and function as an upward social motility (Astheimer, 2011: 106).

## **SELF-PORTRAIT**

One of the popular kinds of photos across social networks is self-portrait. Walker considers self-portrait a kind of self-exploration activity in which the digital eye turns inside and functions as a mirror. Furthermore, sharing the photo on Internet intensifies the feeling that the individual has the control over his/her own life (Schwarz, 2011:164). Similarly, Gomez and Larsen also point out that self-portraits play a role in individual's self-exploration and -formation in reference to his/her perception of his/her own body: "Being both the photographer and the model at the same time, uploading these images to Internet or cell phones, receiving comments and evaluations of others and ongoing learning how to do it are the aspects indicating how much self-portraits contribute to the formation of bodies and subjectivities" (2009:206). Through self-portraits, the individual sees his/her own body from different angles, and puts himself/herself in the shoes of the ones to look at her/him. In this context, self-portraits contribute to re-formation of our bodies and selves (Gomez and Larsen, 2009:212-213). For self-portraits, photo taking takes place without interaction as a spontaneously

determined and controlled activity. Ego does not directly turn itself toward alter-ego for the role adaptation still keeps on (Astheimer, Neumann-Braun, Schmidt, 2011: 31).

### **ON-CAMERA PERFORMANCE**

Posing develops based on a certain strategy in which the model has control over his/her appearance. While having profile pictures taken, the model virtually flirts with the camera. The model tries the poses that will make him/her look better, hides defects and highlights fancier points. Photo taking continues until the best pose is caught. Popula-rization of digital cameras turns photo taking into a daily activity, and on the other hand, forces the individual to think about his/her body more.

Hayri explains this as follows: “In the past, photos taken were kept in photo albums and people did not talk about their poses that much. However, today they can take photos any time they want and develop ideas as to how they could look better” (20.03.2012). With the help of posing, use of light and shadow, and Photoshop effects, people develop various strategies for both taking and displaying the images, and determining which images to be shared on social networks (Gomez and Larsen, 2009:212).

Technical strategies adopted while having profile photos taken can be summarized as follows: The individual is highlighted by lacking contextual information, setting the shot scale as medium shot or close-up and being aware of the camera, thus displaying certain behaviours created specifically for the camera (Mendelson, 2010:29). Images taken by the individual holding the cell phone or camera above the head level, thus making the person look better than s/he is, which began especially on MySpace and became widespread with Facebook had once been a trend on social Networks<sup>3</sup>

### **DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK PHOTOS**

#### **Method:**

Facebook profile photos were analyzed based on Chalfen’s descriptive photo analysis method (1987). The study included latest uploaded (20.09.2011) 30 photos (15 females and 15 males) to two public groups with the highest number of members created to determine the most beautiful girl and/or the most handsome boy of Facebook in Turkey. One of the main reasons why these groups were chosen was the aim of revealing the “ideal Facebook photo” in the minds of Facebookers.

Chalfen calls the descriptive analysis “communicative activities-framework of components” and studies communicative activities in terms of:

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<sup>3</sup> Astheimer et al. classify the poses on Facebook profile pictures as follows: flirting, point of view, posing with gestures, model pose, clowning, do-it-yourself (DIY) pose (Astheimer, Neumann-Braun and Schmidt, 2011: 32).

Planning: Actions covering any formal or informal decision relating to creation of the photographic image.

On-camera shooting: Any action/actions somehow structuring the persons or objects whose photos are taken with the camera.

Behind- (off-) camera shooting: Any action/actions structuring the use and operation of camera even though not being in front of the camera.

Editing: Any action/actions changing, collecting, choosing, electing, editing and re-editing the images.

Exhibition: Any post-shooting action/actions displaying the photo-graphic image in a public setting.

He analyzes the components in terms of:

Participants: Identifying the ones taking the photo, appearing in the photo and viewing the photo.

Topic: Identifying the content of the image within the framework of the topics, activities, events and themes contained in the photos.

Setting: When and where the interaction takes place.

Message form: Physical form, “figure” or a kind of picture.

Code: Focuses on the norms identifying the nature of photographic images, and contains the features identifying a specific message form or style of image construction and composition.

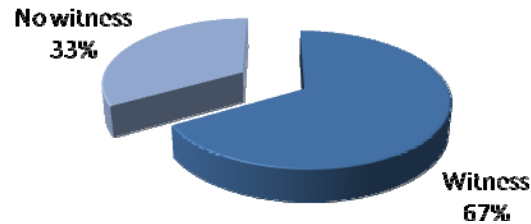
(Transferred from Chalfen by Mendelson, 2010: 10-12)

Relationship between each interaction and component indicates the behavioural and action patterns of a certain type of visual interaction, which are specific to a certain group. Since it is not possible for us to collect data relating to production and distribution steps of the photos, in our study we took the photo text as a basis and focused on the relationship the shooting activities established with other components. For shooting activities, on-camera shooting was considered. On-camera shooting is any action/actions structuring the persons or objects filmed with a camera-on-record (Chalfen, s.21-22).

### **1. Shooting – The component of Participant**

Participant(s) are photographers, subjects and viewers (Chalfen, 1987:27).

## In Picture-taking



**Graph 1:** Photographer

Considering the photos sent to the beauty contest on Facebook, the individuals are the only subjects in the photos. These photos usually belong to young users. The reason why the young users are highly interested in this contest may be that consumer culture and individualism are more common among this generation, and that the young generation use the photo as a means of communication more frequently. As the related Facebook group is a public group, viewers may be any Facebook users. Models posed for the people unknown to them. Thus, it may be postulated that they struck the Facebook poses which seemed most suitable to them. 10 out of 30 photos evaluated were self-taken photos. 3 of these 10 photos (2 females and 1 male) were taken using a mirror. In the photos taken in front of a mirror it is realized that the individual does not care being lonely and, if anything, has a high level of self-confidence. Berger (1995) argues that the ones watching his/her own reflection in the mirror joins the viewer group.



**Photo 1:** Self-portrait

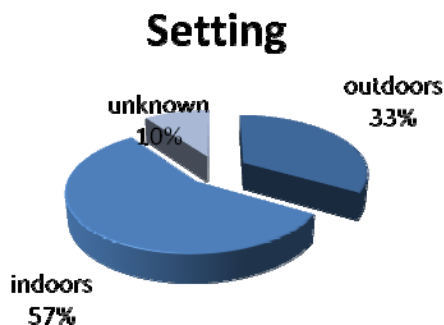
It is hard to tell the social classes of the users from just their photos. Particularly in self-taken photos, the setting and background may not be totally clear since the scale is dependent on the arm length. However, the setting chosen gives hints about the class,

whereas a tailored body, outfits selected attentively and standard postures obscure the class differences.

People appearing in the photos usually look well-groomed. Regardless of the setting and background, they appear with well-groomed hair and attentive outfits. It was found that individuals pay special attention to their hair even if they posed in their casual or sportswear. Additionally, the individuals' being alone in all of the photos evaluated shows that they trust their physical appearance.

## 2. Shooting – The component of Setting

During the early period of the art of photography, people had their photos taken in the settings suitable for their social statuses. Professional and rich people were typically photographed indoors and in front of a plain background while people with low income, such as workers, were usually photographed in front of a background attributable to them and outdoors (Sontag,1999:81). Today, however, such a distinction has nearly vanished. With the fall in the prices of digital cameras and camera phones and their popularization, photographs have also been personalized and personal moments and places began to be photographed.



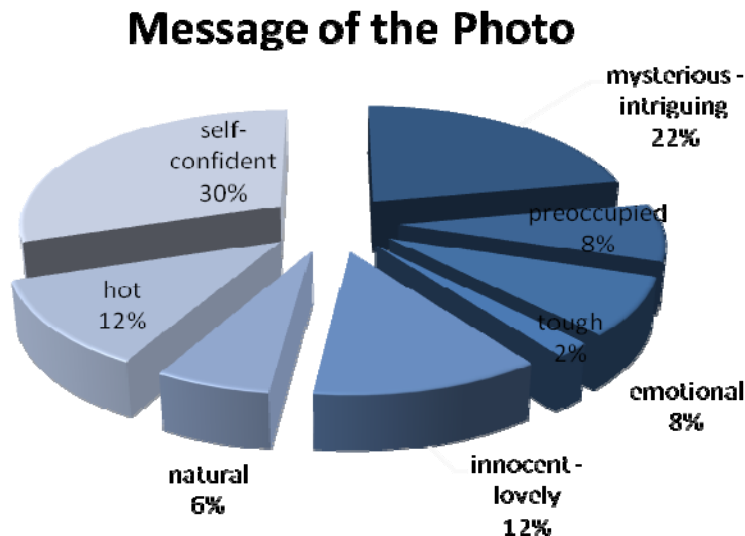
**Graph 2:** Setting in the photograph

In some photos outdoors was preferred and the individuals were photographed alone and immobile with such backgrounds as sea, seaside, rural areas, natural scenery, parka and apartment buildings. Rest of the photos were taken indoors, particularly at home. In homemade photos, the individuals usually draw the attention of the audience to only themselves by choosing an empty wall as the background or having a minimum amount of furniture or appliances in the photo. These photos point out home-comfort as well. It did not matter if the model was in the living room which is a common place or in bedroom which is a private area; s/he posed comfortably regardless of the setting. Two of the photos leave an impression that they were taken in a studio because only a black background was used. In one of the photos, a wavy sea was put in the background. Two photos were taken in the bathroom in front of the mirror. Wherever the individual was, s/he was always in the centre of the photo; thus setting became

irrelevant. The model highlights his/her body capital. Obscuring or minimizing the setting and background in most of the photos prevent the model from giving a hint about his/her social environment and background, thus making class difference invisible.

### 3. Shooting – The component of Topic

“The Topic component describes image content in terms of the subject matter, activities, events, and themes that are represented in pictures.” (Chalfen, 2008:29). It is hard to find a certain event in Facebook photos. In general, the person having his/her photo taken represents himself/herself and strikes a stable pose. However, several themes may be realized in the photos analyzed in our study. As there was a beauty (physical appeal) contest on Facebook, the highlighted basic messages were beauty, handsomeness and attractiveness. Nearly all of the models were well-groomed people paying special attention to their outfit and hair. Although the preference of outfit was mixed since some of them were wearing casual clothes while some others chose to wear more formally (some of the boys preferred to wear a black suit and white t-shirt, and one young girl was wearing a white shirt and a thin necklace), it was observed that all the models was paying attention to what they wore, and that they got dressed especially for photo-taking. Complementary accessories such as sunglasses, leather jackets, watches, jewellery, tattoos etc. were seen in the photos as the symbols of status as well as showing that these individuals were following the fashion.



**Graph 3:** Basic message of the photo

Beauty/attractiveness is probably one of the most prominent themes of Facebook photos. Persons having their photos taken so as to look more beautiful or handsome than they are follow certain strategies. Hayri notes that an individual having his/her

photo taken is usually aware of the defects of his/her body, and develops various strategies to implement while posing in order to hide these defects and look better (20.03.2012). Star postures borrowed from popular culture are one of the easiest ways of achieving beauty/attractiveness.



**Photo 2:** Self-portrait



**Photo 3:** Star pose

In both of the above photos, female models chose bathroom as the setting in which they had prepared their bodies for photo-taking. They highlight their attractiveness by wearing low-cut clothes or clothes outlining their genitals, striking inviting poses, and smiling at and sending kisses to the ones looking at her. The model is in an interaction with the viewer. The female model in Photo 2 put a distance between herself and the viewer by looking at not the viewer, but the camera while the female model in Photo 3 puts this distance by wearing sunglasses.

In the photos below, male models copied the outfits and postured of pop stars. In Photo 4, the way the male model sits and looks whose black suit and white t-shirt reflect his both formal and sportive style, and watch is highlighted as a symbol of social status resembles the poses in album covers of Turkish folk singers. He is in contact with the viewer. However, the male model in Photo 5 in leather jacket and white t-shirt tries to put a distance between him and viewer and create a “cool” image by wearing sunglasses and not smiling. In both photos, the models tried to draw the whole attention of the viewer to themselves and their bodies by using a plain background.



**Photo 4:** Folk singer posture**Posture 5:** Pop star

Another prominent theme in the photos is comfort. Some of the subjects posed in comfortable and casual clothes, and a majority of them sat or lay comfortably on a sofa at home. They gave the message “I am casual now” There were no one photographed in a studio except a few.

#### **4. Shooting – The component of Message Form**

Chalfen suggests that message form may be the physical form, “figure” or type of the photo as well as being central to all the other components (Chalfen, 2008:31). Album photos, profile pictures or mobile uploads on Facebook can be considered the message forms. Additionally, various filters used and technical interventions made can also change the message form. In the photos analyzed portrait form was the generally preferred form. In these photos, typically, a part of or the whole body is displayed in a framework together with the face. At this point, the main topic slides from the real person to the environment as the scale is widened and the focus of the photo shifts from the person to the setting. However, in the photos evaluated it was seen that the scale called close-up was preferred in most of them as a result of the habit originating from headshot practice. 23 of the photos analyzed were taken right from the front, thus providing the viewer with an objective point of view. Accordingly, in addition to grant the viewer an objective point of view, the models tried to reflect their emotions, thoughts and inner worlds using the mostly (57%) preferred close-up, medium close-up and mid shot scales. When such scales are used, the expression in the face and of the eyes of the subject become clearer because the viewer and the subject face each other just as in a real-life dialogue, and the viewer gets a feeling that the subject is near, thus being able to understand the subject’s mood.

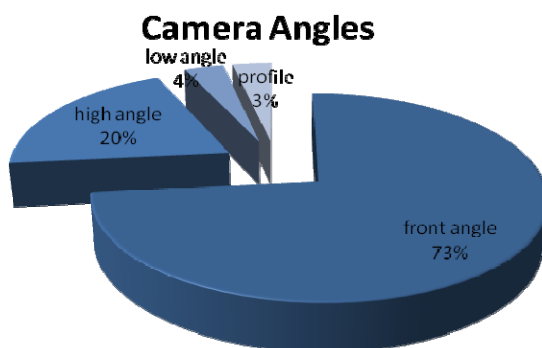
The users tried to create a retro atmosphere by sharing two of the photos in black and white font and one in sepia (a brownish colour). Therefore, an emotional point of view is created by aging the photo, and furthermore, technical defects of the photo as well as aesthetic defects of the model are eliminated.

## 5. Shooting – The component of Code

“The last component, Code, includes the characteristics that define a particular message form or “style” of image construction and composition. Description of code includes information on habits, conventions and/or routines that have structured shooting and/or editing events to give a certain “look” to images.” (Chalfen, 2008:32).

### 5.1 Use of Camera

Semiotically, codes which are components of structural analysis of the narrative, i.e. elements except for the subject, such as shot scales, camera angles, lighting, framing, image editing, point of view, setting, outfit, make-up and accessories contribute to structural formation of the image as well. Within this framework, as stated before, a photo has its own reality as well as having effects on virtual reality.



**Graph 4:** Camera angles

As photo-taking does not require education, except for art activities, individuals photograph themselves directly fronting the camera. However, since centre of the objective is the weakest point of the photo, this results in a static image (Akbaş and İkizler, 2010:79). When viewed from above, the individual looks shorter, tinier and weaker than s/he is. Therefore, reality fades away for the viewer in these kinds of shots. In a high-angle photo, the subject may reflect losing, weakness, defeat and desperation as well as revealing passive thoughts. 6 of the photos analyzed used this shooting technique 4 of which were self-taken. 2 individuals using high-angle, however, looked directly in the lens, thus leaving an impression that they were actually self-confident individuals in contrast to the narrative of this technique. Contrary to this narrative, low-angle technique was used when size, power, greatness, happiness and enthusiasm were aimed for. As a result of the technique preferred by only 1 person, the individual looks taller and bigger than s/he is. In short, high- and low-angles have emotional and psychological narrative functions.

In contrast to conventional photography rules, sometimes photos are taken tilting the camera. Oblique (or canted) angle is used mostly for emotional and dramatic purposes. Regardless of the point of view (whether subjective or objective), oblique angle reflects imbalance and a psychological crisis and depression as well as being used to create a dynamism in the frame.

## **5.2 Camera performance**

From a gender point of view, clear distinctions are seen between individuals in self-presentation before the camera. Charisma is a theme aimed for especially by male users. They stress out that they are inaccessible by avoiding eye contact with the camera, looking away, and posing seriously not smiling. In the photos analyzed, male models stood upright with their hands in their pockets or fastened in the waist level. Females have a wider range of posing styles than males. In the photos analyzed, it was observed that except for 4 models, females smiled, at least briefly, looking directly in the camera which means she was interacting with the viewer. This clear intergender distinction may well be attributed to social gender roles. Distant, cold-hearted and “tough” stance attributed to men and qualities attributed to women by the society such as “sociable”, “lovely” and “attractive” are reflected in the photographs as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a result of postmodernism, everyday life is rushed by images and image-oriented activities and ‘aestheticised’ (Slater, 1995:137). Similarly, bodies on social networks are aestheticised before being presented. Photos shared on Facebook are created depending on various strategies adopted by the users. Major strategies models adopt while taking, picking up and submitting photos include perfecting one’s own image, highlighting his/her individualism, acting in accordance with popular culture and trying to transcend his/her social class.

Considering the family album, it can be said that photograph has been personalized with popularization of personal photos taken anywhere anytime and visualizing the personal experience. Personalization of the tools and popularization of cell phones and digital cameras caused photographs to be taken anywhere anytime which focus on the individual. With the personalization of the tools, content was personalized as well and photos were turned into a daily means of communication and expression.

The individual highlights his/her individualism in Facebook profile photos as well. Poses in these photos not only state “I am successful and charismatic, but also give the message “I am different than others, self-confident and unique”. In Facebook photos, the individual idealizes himself/herself and highlight his/her uniqueness. The individual uses various codes while trying to present himself/herself in the most ideal way through photos. S/he utilizes technical auxiliaries and visual codes to minimize the setting, adorn and highlight the body and copy star poses. When compared to writing, photograph actually provides more options for doctoring and tailoring the body and image, selectiveness, sharing photos as a reflection of charisma, trying to look attractive, copying pop stars, being both far from and near the viewer etc.

Social networkers produce their own images by copying current role models through which they actually generate images of others instead of their own and turn themselves into the subjects of collective view (Astheimer, 2011:118).

Imitating and copying stars is of course not a new thing. Popular iconography studies emerging in late 19th century and developing with 20th century popular culture aim to understand and explain the admiration shown by the masses to the stars. What is new here is that star poses are copied and shared on public platforms with the fall in photo costs and popularization thereof. Global popular culture is regenerated in daily life through photos. However, this regeneration is also one of the functions of one's identity construction. Having suggested that identification with certain role models is a personality-related problem, Morin notes: "Each of us has an identity, yet we all live with a myth about our own identities. In other words, each of us builds an immediate identity totally in contrast with his/her true identity and reaches his/her true identity therewith" (Morin, 1972:127). Within this context, copying the stars corresponds to the need to approve one's own individualism (Morin, 1972:129). A great majority of the young people develop their personal relationships by using and adapting popular products (Astheimer, Neumann-Braun and Schmidt, 2011:15).

Another function of regenerating star poses is individual's efforts to transcend his/her social class. Facebookers submit idealized images featuring body capital isolated from the environment by using symbols of status, minimizing the setting and background, and hiding class differences. Subject of the photo creating an idealized image belonging to himself/herself becomes a part of the popular culture of attractiveness and tries to transcend his/her current social class. Photo makes us stars by removing us from the social environment we live in and look like, and by breaking our class belonging, thus we can easily be a part of the social status we would like to have. Eventually, photo becomes a means of achieving social status and turns into a kind of conspicuous communication. In conclusion, it can be said that photos shared on Facebook are affected by the intersection between the images becoming more popular with the global popular culture (compliance with norms), communicative context specific to Facebook (sharing on a semi-public and semi-private platform) and visual culture, and the individual's sense of privacy.

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