



In the Eye of the Beholder: Subjective Views on the Authenticity of Selfies

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Introduction

The digitization of photography, the introduction of small, affordable photographic devices, and the seamless integration of photography into networked mobile communication have transformed photography into a ubiquitous and vernacular everyday activity (Hand, 2012; Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008). Visual self-representation is an integral and important part of current networked photographic practices (Autenrieth, 2011; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011; van Dijck, 2008), producing image types such as “one-arm-length shots,” “selfies,” or “ego shots.” Selfies and self-photographs are important elements with regard to identity work and the construction of authenticity in online environments. However, thus far photographic authenticity has mostly been examined in the journalistic context and thus in the field of professional photography. With this study, we want to address a research gap and focus on the subjective perceptions of authenticity in the field of vernacular photography. We use the concept of expressive authenticity that relates to the relationship between a person and his or her visual representation. Perceived expressive authenticity is achieved when people evaluate the visual representation as being true to the nature of the depicted person (Banks, 2013; Dutton, 2005). Using Q-methodology, we examine which compositional elements and visual representational strategies enhance or contradict the perceived authenticity of self-photographs and of selfies in particular.

A selfie is a self-portrait usually taken with a digital camera or a camera phone in order to be shared with relevant others. Selfies represent a particular subcategory of self-photographs and have become their own genre of visual self-representation with its own conventions, representational techniques, and poses, such as the “duck face” (pouting with the mouth), the “stone face” (appearing as unmoved but determined) (Forsman, 2014), and the “mirror selfies” (a selfie that is taken using a mirror). In many cases, the arm of the photographer is visible in the photograph. Such photographs “reflect on how they are made” (Van Gelder & Westgeest, 2011, p. 201), since they render the photographic production process visible (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011). Mitchell (1995) called pictures of this kind “meta-photographs.”

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In the last few years, selfies have drastically increased in frequency and have become a popular visual form of everyday communication. At the same time, this type of amateur photography is increasingly criticized and stigmatized (see introduction to the special issue). We agree with several scholars (Burns, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2014) who have argued that the selfie has to be respected as a valuable means of self-presentation and self-expression in today's networked media cultures.

Authentic Visual Self-Representation in the Online Context

Photo sharing on social network sites (SNS) serves many interpersonal, social functions and involves critical decisions regarding privacy management and disclosure. In this regard, photo sharing is a critical practice and investment that carefully balances disclosure and privacy (Litt & Hargittai, 2014) and demands for privacy management decisions. According to impression management theory (Goffman, 1959), users of SNS try to manage and work on their visual representations in order to create advantageous images of themselves. However, the demand for an authentic performance of the self sets certain limits to creativity in identity work because profile-based SNS, such as Facebook, typically support sociality among preexisting friend groups (boyd, 2008). It has been found that profiles that are linked to a group of preexisting contacts "are often more accurate than those that exist in a social vacuum" and that "people's self-presentations on social network sites may be less highly embellished compared to sites without visible connections, such as online dating sites" (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 164). Self-photographs are used for a detailed visual characterization of the represented self, and assuring authenticity is an important function of self-photographs on SNS.

In this regard, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011) found the visual aesthetics and the photographic composition of self-photographs in students' Facebook galleries to be rather unprofessional, sometimes even awkward. Emphasis is instead put on the motifs of the photographs, on the communicative significance, and on the connectivity within a certain group (Autenrieth, 2011). "Low-tech" photographs with snapshot appeal rather than professional or artistic photographs foster authenticity (Meier, 2009) and support authentic identity and image work. In addition to low-tech photographs, many amateur photographers also use photo applications (such as Instagram or Hipstamatic) that provide vintage filters that add signifiers of time or human production to digital photographs. Users thus employ a language of photographic imperfection. The backward-looking, vintage aesthetic of these photographs simulates "that certain something, the aura, which photographs lost with the arrival of high-quality lenses" (Bartholeyns, 2014, p. 65), rejecting the cold perfection of digital photography and instead generating a "simulacrum of analogue 'authenticity'" (Chandler & Livingston, 2012, p. 4).

Before examining the authenticity of current self-photographs, we will briefly discuss the history of photographic authenticity.

In general, photographs are believed to carry an aura of authenticity and to be "true to life" (Banks, 2013). In the 19th century, the age of the professionalization of photographic techniques, William H. F. Talbot characterized photography as the "pencil of nature" suggesting a direct imprint of nature's hand on the resulting photograph (Talbot, 1969/1844). When Louis Daguerre invented the daguerreotype, he described it as a method that allowed nature to reproduce itself, thus acting as a direct way of

capturing and replicating reality (Chandler & Livingstone, 2012). Notions like these have created beliefs in "photographic truth," which were still dominant at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Research at that time was also fascinated by the photographic technique and had high expectations for the use of photography as an anthropological research tool because of the "apparent objectivity of the camera's eye" (Banks, 2013, p. 161). Later on, the knowledge that photography was not able to reproduce unmediated representations of reality became accepted. The particular "mediating" features of photography, such as representational techniques, selective representation, cropping, or framing, were discussed. Still, it is assumed that in general people tend to believe in the "authenticity" or "truth" of photography (Messaris, 2001).

For a further discussion of the authenticity of self-photographs, we differentiate between nominal and expressive authenticity following the work of the philosopher Denis Dutton (Banks, 2013; Dutton, 2005). The nominal authenticity of a self-photograph is achieved when the photograph is what it claims to be. The self-photograph, for instance, truly claims to be the self-representation of a certain user. In other words, nominal authenticity refers to the correct identification of, for example, the author or producer of the picture or its origins. Therefore, nominal authenticity assures that the visual media object is properly named. Expressive authenticity, on the other hand, refers to the relationship between a person and his or her visual representation and is achieved when "things are true to their own nature" (Banks, 2013, p. 161). Expressive authenticity of a self-photograph thus requires the representation of a user to be true to the user's "nature" and to be a true expression of the user's personality, values, and beliefs. Expressive authenticity is therefore more closely related to moral features and decisions than to technical features (Banks, 2013).

The present study examines the perceived expressive authenticity of self-photographs and selfies posted on SNS.

Method

Materials and Procedure

In order to examine the subjective audience evaluations of the expressive authenticity of self-images, we employed Q-sort, a research technique in the tradition of the qualitative-quantitative Q methodology (Stephen, 1985; Stephenson, 1953). Q methodology combines the qualitative data collection method Q-sort with statistical Q factor analysis and aims to study subjectivity in human behavior (Brown & Good, 2010). Thus the methodology is neither qualitative nor quantitative, but instead draws on the strengths of both traditions (Michelle & Davis, 2014). The interview technique of Q-sort does not ask for verbal answers to interview questions; it instead uses the relational sorting of a certain number of items, for example, verbal statements or pictures. Respondents are asked to sort different statements or pictures in relation to each other. It is a particularly useful tool for the examination of phenomena that are difficult to verbalize, such as the associative impressions gained from images. Q methodology is a fruitful approach for studying small samples and was developed to provide insight into audience subjectivities in a particularly rich way (see e.g., Brown & Good, 2010; Michelle & Davis, 2014).

We used a forced-choice Q-sort design, asking respondents to sort a *specific* number of pictures into a *fixed* number of categories, forcing a quasnormal distribution of items (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In our study, participants were asked to sort 33 self-photographs in terms of their perceived authenticity on a continuum from (-4) *not authentic at all* to (+4) *very authentic*, allowing for more items to be placed in the middle categories than in the tails.¹ Whereas only one item could be placed as *very authentic* (+4) and only one as *not authentic at all* (-4), two each items could be sorted into category +3 and -3 and seven items into the middle category (0). The allowed number of pictures for the nine categories was as follows: 1-2-4-6-7-6-4-2-1 (see Figure 1).

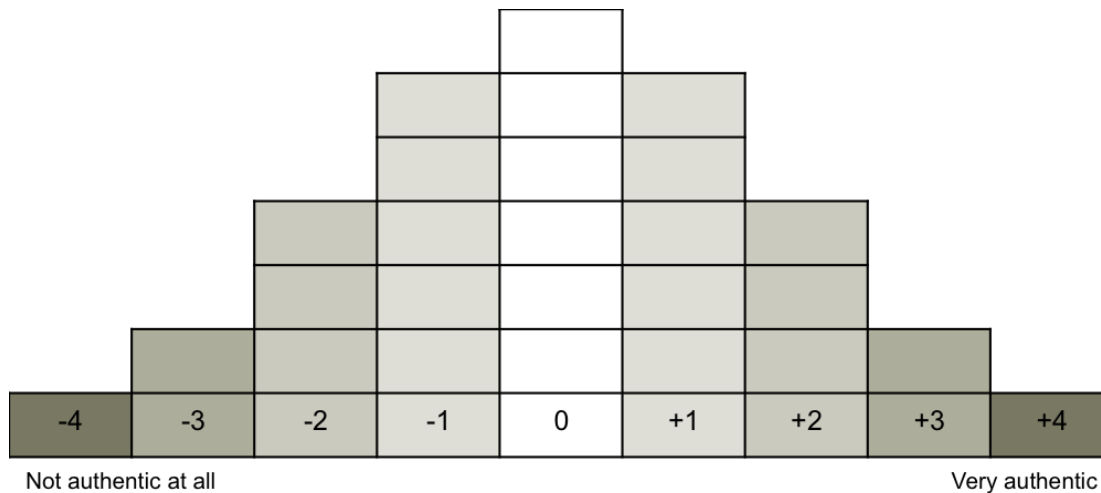


Figure 1. Example of the 33-item Q sort grid.

The term “authenticity” itself was not used in the study; instead we asked the participants if they believed the depiction of the person to be true to the person’s own nature (“Do you think that the depicted people ‘come across’ the way they actually are?”). Additionally, we explained the category continuum and the ranking procedure and instructed the participants to place the pictures intuitively. We assured them that there was no correct or incorrect answer, but that we were interested in their subjective views.

The present study was conducted in an “intensive analysis” setting. After finishing the sorting task, open interviews with the respondents were conducted in order to enrich the data quality and to gain

¹ Q factor analysis uses the Q sorts of all participants in order to find associations between the participants (in between-person correlations) based on their ordering of the items on the given scale. Items placed in the middle categories do not have a strong effect on the between-person correlation coefficient (Stephen, 1985), whereas the picture cards placed in the extreme categories do. Based on the rank ordering of the different items, factor analysis reveals those participants who sorted in a similar way. These participants with similar sorting pattern have a shared view on the given topic and form a factor (or group of participants) (for details, see, e.g., Brown & Good, 2010; Michelle & Davis, 2014; Stephen, 1985; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

additional information for the interpretation of the subjective viewpoints that emerged from Q factor analysis (Gallagher & Porock, 2010). Thereby we used the sorting results of the participants as stimulus for visual elicitation (Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2012). In the open interviews, we asked the respondents to verbally discuss their sorting results and to give us information about their photographic practices and sharing practices.

The selection of the *concourse*, which refers to the sum of discourse on any given topic, is at the heart of Q methodology (Brown & Good, 2010; Michelle & Davis, 2014). To represent the full breadth of the *concourse*, the sample photographs were chosen based on (1) the literature on young people's use of self-photographs and selfies in SNS, and (2) relevant stylistic features of authenticity found in the literature on the photographic authenticity of self-photographs. We accordingly selected pictures with various degrees of use of photographic filters (e.g., vintage filters), different degrees of professionalism, and different kinds of expressive self-representation and photographic distance. We made sure to include a broad repertoire of poses and gestures as well as different settings, including mirror selfies and bathroom selfies. Moreover, we selected pictures that use status symbols in different ways, as well as photographs that focus on clothing or makeup. We sampled self-photographs and selfies from publicly available "me-albums" on *Flickr*. Thereby we took care to represent the typical repertoire of digital self-photography.

Participants

Representativeness is neither a precondition nor an aim of qualitative Q-sort studies. However, we chose participants with different backgrounds, following the requirements of theoretical sampling to include a maximum of varying attitudes and positions. Participants of different age, gender, education, and migration background, as well as those with different proficiency related to digital photographic practices and new media use were selected. A total of 29 participants (11 male and 18 female) between the ages of 13 and 60 and living in Germany or Austria were recruited for the study. Sixteen respondents were classified as "digital natives." They were between the ages of 13 and 26; 11 were female, and 5 were male. Thirteen participants were "digital immigrants." They were between the ages of 36 and 60; seven were female, and six were male. We used the term "digital natives" for participants born after 1980 and "digital immigrants" for those born before that year. The concepts were used as simplified heuristics for sampling, as we are aware that not all youth can be classified as being "born digital" and sharing a common global digital culture. As the Berkman Center for Internet & Society (2010) states, digital natives share a culture

that is defined not by age, strictly, but by certain attributes and experiences in part defined by their experience growing up immersed in digital technology, and the impact of this upon how they interact with information technologies, information itself, one another, and other people and institutions. (2010, para. 1)

Hence, people born before the 1980s can be as or even more digitally experienced and connected than those "born" digital. We thus expected different perceptions of expressive authenticity of self-photographs to be dependent not only on age but on digital experiences, photographic practices, and sharing practices.

Subsequent to the sorting process, statistical Q factor analysis was used to identify patterns in the sorting. The statistical Q factor analysis yielded four different groups (factors) of participants with different evaluations regarding the authenticity of the self-photographs. For factor interpretation, we used the crib sheet system suggested by Watts and Stenner (2012), which puts particular emphasis on the differences between the individual factors. In the qualitative tradition of Q methodology, the crib sheet system approach sustains holism during the interpretation of the results because it allows consideration of all items in a factor array instead of just including the most typical item evaluations in each factor (see Brantner & Lobinger, in press; Lobinger & Brantner, in press). Moreover, the qualitative interviews in which the participants were asked several questions—for example, why they had placed certain pictures at the end of the continuum—were important for interpreting the subjective views. In the following description of the factors, we include typical comments from the participants.

Results

PQMethod (Schmolck & Atkinson, 2012) was used to conduct an exploratory Q factor analysis. The methodological approach allowed us to detect different subjective constructs of visual authenticity and to identify the respective elements and relevant signifiers of visual authenticity. The best solution of the statistical procedure yielded four groups of participants with different concepts of expressive visual authenticity. Overall, 55% of the study variance is explained by the four factors: factor 1 explains 25% of the total variance; factor 2, 10%; factor 3, 9%; and factor 4, 11%.

The groups differ regarding their evaluations of various features—for example, posing, visual style, and photographic setting—when judging the authenticity of self-images. In the following sections, the four groups of participants are presented based on the data gained by both sortings and interviews.

Factor 1: The Selfie—A Prototype of Expressive Inauthenticity

Sixteen of the 29 participants were associated with factor 1. Six were men and 10 were women, between the ages of 13 and 50. Hence, factor 1 was a mixed factor in terms of age. All 16 participants in this factor used the Internet daily. Respondents in this factor, with the exception of two, took pictures at least occasionally. In general, they had very little experience using digital visual practices; they rarely edited their photos. Only five respondents, all of them “digital natives,” used filters and apps to take and share photos. Respondents in factor 1 only shared their photographs with their friends and relatives; they neither shared their photos publicly nor used photo-sharing websites.

For participants in factor 1, the expressive authenticity of self-photographs was strongly related to the visibility of the photographic production process. They credited those self-photographs in which the camera or the arm of the depicted person is visible with lower authenticity compared to other factors. This indicates that for them “meta-photographs” (Mitchell, 1995; Van Gelder & Westgeest, 2011), including selfies, are generally less authentic than other forms of self-representation. Moreover, clearly recognizable poses (e.g., the duck face or posing in front of the mirror) and the focus on particular parts of the body or clothes (e.g., tattoos, sunglasses, fingernails) were rejected and evaluated as not authentic. This group of

people considered posing as well as imitating role models known from star and celebrity culture as inauthentic ways of showing off and deliberately trying to put the best face forward. Melanie, age 47, for example, argued that these photographs are inauthentic because “these are sheer show-off-images. She [a depicted young girl] uses a pose that she has maybe seen in a magazine; she is a teenager imitating somebody, but in reality, she is presumably still very childlike.” Authentic photographs, on the other hand, are snapshot photographs with natural facial expressions and poses. Sandra, age 20, explained that she sorted pictures showing people “with friendly, natural charisma to the right [authentic], all with posed grimaces, twisted mouth, duck face or similar to the left [not authentic].” When sorting the pictures she evaluated “to what extent it looks like someone wants to show-off with the picture.” Overall, the sorting results and the interviews revealed that, for factor 1, conventional poses, often referring to celebrity culture, are elements that definitively impede expressive authenticity. The same applied to “meta-photographs.” Filters seemed to be related to authenticity as well and influenced the sorting decisions, even though respondents did not refer to them in the interviews. The Q-sort results showed that many of the photographs evaluated as authentic use vintage filters or color-modifying filters.

***Factor 2: Photographed Situations Are Authentic—
Photo Situations Are Inauthentic***

Four participants, between the ages of 44 and 60, were associated with factor 2. Three men and one woman constituted this oldest factor. The photographic practices of these participants were limited to some snapshot photography. They did not engage in photowork (Kirk, Sellen, Rother, & Wood, 2006). In other words, they did not edit or annotate the photographs they take. Owning photographic equipment was not important to them either. They used their partner’s cameras or a simple camera phone to take snapshots. Similar to factor 1, they can be described as photographers favoring what Chalfen (1987) called the “home mode” of photography. They were not interested in the aesthetic quality of the pictures but instead focused on the photo situation as well as the motifs to be captured. They shared their photos with family and close friends.

For this group of participants, the depicted situation determined whether self-photographs were considered authentic or inauthentic. Expressive authenticity was thus achieved when users depicted themselves in either everyday situations or during special moments and events (such as travels). Interestingly—in contrast to factor 1—it made no difference whether the depicted person posed or not; it was the photographed situation that made the difference. Photographs evaluated as inauthentic were described as “staged.” In these cases, participants assumed that the situation was created *in order* to take a photograph. Thus, photographs representing staged or artificially created scenes that were made only for the purpose of taking pictures were rejected as inauthentic by this factor. Moreover, it made no difference in terms of authenticity whether the photographs were clearly recognizable as selfies or not. For Peter, aged 44, the visible camera rendered the picture even more authentic: “Look, all those [persons] who have a camera in their hand . . . [these pictures] are all natural ones.”

The photograph evaluated as the most authentic depiction was a one-arm-length shot taken by a young man smoking a shisha and posing for the camera. Respondents explained that the depiction seemed authentic because even though this might have been a special situation for the young man, he did

not seem to smoke the shisha just to create a photo opportunity. Moreover, the typical duck face, mirror, and bathroom selfies as well as depictions of people displaying grimaces (e.g. sticking out the tongue, showing the victory sign) were evaluated as being more authentic by participants in factor 2 compared to the other factors. The use of photo filters did not influence the sorting decisions of this group of participants.

Factor 3: Picture Editing Determines the Perceived Authenticity

For factor 3, the photographic style and the assumed photowork after image capture were indicators of a lack of authenticity. Three teenagers—two girls and a boy—between the ages of 14 and 15, were associated with this “youth factor.” Taking photographs and doing photowork was a standard daily activity for respondents in this group. They used a variety of photographic practices, and chose the photographic equipment (e.g., smart phones, digital SLRs) according to the photo situation.

The young participants decided whether photographs were authentic or not by evaluating how much photo editing after image capture had been done in their opinion. While the two girls admitted to editing their photographs slightly by using filters and by changing colors or lighting in their photos, the boy totally rejected editing practices. Contrary to factor 2, the photo situation was not relevant for this group’s concept of authenticity. Moreover, the three interviewees argued that posing is normal and even expected with selfies. The girls explained that they also pose for selfies this way and that they often take pictures of this kind together with other friends. This illustrates that “meta-photography” is a standard element of their everyday communication practices and thus considered authentic. However, for this group, the perceived authenticity of self-photographs was highly dependent on the estimated amount of photo work, editing after image capture, and use of filters. This is the only factor that judged expressive authenticity based on stylistic features only. However, they disagreed somewhat regarding the evaluation of photo work. For two participants, editing techniques after image capture inhibited authenticity, as did visual transformations enabled by filters and other stylistic features inherent to certain photo applications on smart phones. Charles, age 14, explained: “If you take a photograph with your smartphone, you can of course use certain special effects.” When judging authenticity, he particularly looked at artificial contrasts, modified colors, and special use of lighting. He “simply [looked] for pictures that could not be taken the way they are.” However, one girl in this factor argued that filters can enhance the expressive authenticity of self-photographs. What we can learn from the sorting decisions and the interviews with factor 3 participants is that, when asked to judge expressive authenticity, for this group the aesthetic, formal, and stylistic features of photographs were more important than the motifs and the depicted situations. Even though there was disagreement about the actual impact of filters and editing techniques on authenticity, overall their mental concept of expressive authenticity was strongly related to photographic and editing styles and techniques.

Factor 4: Authentic Photo Fun

Factor 4 was, just like factor 1, a mixed factor in terms of age: Two participants, a man age 49 and a woman age 26, were associated with this factor. Neither took selfies themselves nor did they engage in sharing practices on a regular basis. For them “arty” pictures and pictures that seem “too

perfect” were considered inauthentic. Expressive authenticity is ensured when people take pictures for the fun of taking pictures and not for artistic purposes or with the intention of artistic self-expression. Selfies can be normal elements of this fun and were only described as inauthentic when they appeared too perfect and too aesthetically composed.

These findings show that, indeed, for some participants a professional photographic style, as argued by Meier (2009) and Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011), can diminish authenticity in the context of self-representation on SNS. Participants in this factor related authenticity to the concept of naturalness, as opposed to inauthentic “designed,” “scripted” or “artistic” photos. Markus, age 49, rated as the most authentic a picture that shows a man taking a photograph of his distorted reflections on a metal object, “because this is not an art picture, he [the photographer] is visible in the photo . . . and his clothing seems authentic to me.” Filters were not important to factor 4. Photographs with vintage and color modifying filters were found in all categories, from inauthentic to authentic.

Conclusion

With the Q-sort study, we showed that expressive authenticity is a subjective matter. We identified four groups of respondents differing regarding the concept of expressive authenticity. We found poses to be either interpreted as unnatural, inauthentic behavior (e.g., by factor 1), or as normal and ritualized conventions of self-representation (e.g., by factor 2 and 3). All factors—with the exception of factor 3—based their evaluations on the depicted motifs and assumed photo situations.

For example, the largest group in the sample (factor 1) judged the authenticity of self-photographs based on the depicted nonverbal behavior—in other words, on the subject’s posture and gesture (e.g., duck face poses, grimaces) in front of the camera. Snapshots of people were considered authentic whereas posing for the camera or imitating role models from celebrity culture was evaluated as inauthentic. The category of “meta-photographs” (Mitchell, 1995), including selfies, was intrinsically inauthentic for this group of people. Overall, factor 1 rejected the styles of current juvenile visual self-representations as being inauthentic. From these findings, it can be concluded that participants in factor 1 consider selfies a gratuitous, useless form of representation. The second group, factor 2, estimated authenticity based on the photo situation. If the situation seems to be set up *in order to* take pictures, the resulting self-photographs were considered as inauthentic. In contrast, for the third group, factor 3, not the content but the stylistic features—and thus the “how”—determined authenticity whereas the “what” (e.g., motifs, situations) was of less relevance. Thus, stylistic features are particularly important to teenagers familiar with currently popular picture editing practices, photo filters, and photo apps. The last group of participants, factor 4, again focused on the conditions of taking photos. These respondents appreciated photographs showing people in natural, everyday situations depicted in a nonprofessional “amateur way” instead of artistic and visually scripted or composed pictures.

This study focused on the perceived authenticity of self-photographs. However, emphasis was put on the evaluation of the photographs alone. After all, our participants did not know the people depicted and could thus only estimate the authenticity based on photographic features. Hence, our study shows on which photographic features participants based their evaluation of expressive authenticity. Because it can

be presumed that the evaluation of expressive authenticity is affected and altered if the depicted person is known, further studies should consider the influence of the personal relationship on the subjective perception of authenticity.

Only a few participants declared to take selfies themselves. This is interesting with regard to the popularity of the selfie genre. Teenagers and young adults in particular generally seemed to underestimate their own sharing behavior. Most participants objected to sharing photographs with unconfined publics highlighting privacy concerns, and several interviewees declared that they did not share photos at all or did so very rarely. However, when asked about specific message services typically used for exchanging photos, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, or Snapchat, some respondents revealed frequent and multifaceted sharing practices. Similar to the assumptions of Burns (2014), we found vernacular photo sharing practices to be increasingly criticized and stigmatized. We thus hypothesize that due to social desirability bias and reasons of impression management, some people conceal their actual photo sharing practices. Moreover, some people are not aware that they actually do share when uploading pictures. Hence, in the current study, the additional open interviews turned out to be helpful not only for factor interpretation. They also underscored that quantitative surveys on selfies and sharing practices have to be complemented by in-depth qualitative approaches that can dig deeper and use various modes of addressing sharing behavior.

Finally, we contend that the particular qualitative-quantitative combination provided by Q methodology definitely enriches (visual) communication studies. It enables the identification of the patterns of subjective interpretations of visuals by combining a qualitative sorting procedure with statistical factor analysis. Pictures are of an associative, simultaneous nature, closer related to feelings than verbal text, and they are also experienced more intuitively (Müller, 2007; see also Brantner & Lobinger, in press; Lobinger & Brantner, in press). Hence, the intuitive sorting technique is particularly suited for visual studies. Moreover, participants usually enjoy the Q-sort task. The postsort interviews, however, turned out to be trickier than initially expected, as the participants had issues with verbalizing their sorting decisions. They intuitively and quickly sorted pictures as authentic or inauthentic but had difficulties explaining the reasons for rating the pictures like they did. They quickly got a feeling about whether a picture was authentic or not, but they could not easily translate it into words. This comes full circle with the theoretical assumptions on the associative, simultaneous nature of pictures as stated above. Thus, the triangulation of a qualitative sorting procedure, statistical factor analysis, and qualitative interviews rendered the applied methodology particularly valuable. We contend that Q methodology and visual elicitation combined is a powerful tool not only for our study. This method can also enhance audience studies in the field of visual communication and communication research in general.

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