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# VISUALISING IDENTITY. A CASE STUD USING PHOTOGRAPHIC PRESENTATION

## Abstract

- *Goal* – This article aims to explore selected aspects of the visual identity of young people transitioning into adulthood.
- *Research methodology* – The author conducts an analysis of the photographs submitted by the research participants.
- *Score/result* – This study draws upon photographic self-representations produced by student participants as the primary research material. I define this method of visual content presentation as photographic self-presentation. The objective of this work is to reconstruct the process by which individuals construct their identity within the context shaped by this visual exercis The analysis presented in this article allows for the identification of fundamental dimensions of young individuals' identity. Among them there are: ties to childhood, participation in popular culture, personal interests and hobbies, the emotional significance of pets, and the shifting role of expressing one's worldview.
- *Originality/value* – This work illustrates a non-traditional approach to studying identity, diverging from classical sociological methodologies. It highlights the potential of combining photography with the participants' narratives to construct and present identity through visual means.

**Keywords:** sociology, identity, visuality, photography, visual identity

## 1. Visuality and Identity – Introduction

The integration of sociology and visuality within research and sociological theory is by no means a novelty today. The origins of sociology (1837) and the invention of photography (1839) occurred almost simultaneously. Nevertheless, it was not until the end of the 19th century that sociologists began to utilise photography in their research – for instance, in the American Journal of Sociology – either as illustration or as empirical evidence to support their theses [Konecki, 2005: 42]. Gradually, the camera came to be perceived as just another method of documentation. As Howard Becker noted, photography became yet another "tool for exploring society" [Becker, 1974: 3]. For Becker, sociology and photography shared similar characteristics: both facilitated the study of society, both treated material in analogous ways, both influenced the collected data, and in both, the researcher's personal style left an imprint on the final results.

Photography quickly became a tool of scholarly inquiry in the social sciences, exemplified by figures such as Bronisław Malinowski and Margaret Mead. The act of photographing and the photograph itself constitute rich materials that enable the analysis of distinctly sociological issues in ways previously unavailable. This led to the emergence of concrete research, publishing, and institutional practices, collectively known as visual sociology. When superimposed upon the contemporary culture – in which the image holds an exceptional status and has become an indispensable element of communication – this development becomes even more relevant. Each day, we produce and disseminate massive quantities of photographs. According to estimates from Photutorial and MaxPhoto, approximately 12 trillion photographs have been taken globally to date, with around 54 400 new photos created each second. Notably, 92.5% of these images are captured using smartphones [www 1].

Many of these photographs find their way onto social media platforms, significantly expanding their potential audience and enabling them to exist independently of their creators. On popular platforms such as Instagram or Pinterest, images and short videos function as primary carriers of information. Visuality today increasingly centers around the mobile phone, which offers an optimal, always-available method for recording the self and the surrounding environment. Equipped with software and artificial intelligence, smartphones now afford practically unlimited editing capabilities. This includes conscious modification via apps (e.g., Pixlr, Facetune, Snapseed, Lightroom), as well as automatic adjustments made by the phone or by social media platforms themselves. We are able

to take photographs in virtually any context and share them instantly. This marks a significant leap, allowing us to observe and archive ourselves through images, to collect frames that we deem meaningful – snapshots of the life selected for remembrance. The phone thus becomes an ubiquitous, compact, personal tool for capturing, altering, distributing, and archiving photographs.

However, a critical issue arises in interpreting visual materials within the context of identity. To what extent do the images shared on social media reflect the genuine elements of identity, and to what extent are they acts of self-presentation, curated personas, mere trend-following, or even part of a monetised personal brand? Public display of photographs may itself impose constraints. Such publication invites judgment via audience reactions and comments, and subjects content to self-censorship. What defines this self-censorship? Should photos be technically correct in terms of composition and sharpness? Should they adhere to societal norms, legal requirements (e.g., displaying only those who consented, or objects not protected by copyright), or the aesthetic and topical standards of specific platforms? Moreover, should they reflect current stylistic trends, including favoured filters or framing techniques?

Photography accompanies us from the earliest moments of life, becoming a biographical record from the childhood onwards. Initially, others photograph us; later, we document significant moments ourselves using cameras or smartphones. The phone's memory becomes a diary of trivial and important events, a visual notepad of daily life. Over time, photography may even substitute memory. Taking pictures becomes automatic, requiring neither specialised skill nor equipment. Increasingly, photos exist solely in digital form – in phone storage, on social media (following a selective process), or on personal computers – rarely printed. Thus photography becomes an element of biographical identity, a support for memory. As Nicholas Mirzoeff aptly observed, human experience has become more visual and visualised than ever before, to the extent that the visual encompasses phenomena previously unseen as visual [Mirzoeff, 2012: 158].

We view more, photograph more, and produce and consume more visual elements of culture. Our sense of self is increasingly saturated with images. Our memory is refreshed and sustained by previously stored photographs; in fact, certain memories may only resurface upon viewing related images, which may have gone unnoticed in the rush of events. Contemporary history reveals the growing permeation of images into everyday life. As modern communication technologies evolve and new ones emerge, older forms are reconfigured. A persistent trend is evident: the pursuit of easier methods of visualizing and integrating images into

online communication. Today, photography becomes an increasingly creative domain, diverging from the direct recording of reality or the authentic self. With the aid of applications, software, and artificial intelligence, we can enhance, distort, or completely fabricate images, creating virtual representations or generating entirely fictional personas through keywords and AI-driven narratives. Idealised or wholly false "images of the self" – such as deepfakes – illustrate the extreme potential of such technologies. These visuals, which may convincingly mimic reality, are often difficult to verify online.

The relationship between identity and visuality is now highly dynamic. Typically, "visual identity" refers to the branding of enterprises, organisations, or products – a single logo or a collection of design elements distinguishing a brand. However, the focus here is on the visual identity of the individual. A selfie, for instance, may function as a distinct element of visual identity – alongside portraits or a curated selection of images considered meaningful in terms of experience or memory. Individuals craft visual identities by consciously sharing specific types of images, shaping a persona – be it that of a professional, family-oriented person, or athlete. We reconstruct our personal biographies by browsing phone galleries or revisiting digital archives. Our visual identity comprises the images that articulate who we are, what matters to us, and what cultural universe we align ourselves with. These include both publicly displayed images and those kept private.

Among the most emblematic practices of visual identity in the virtual world there is the selfie. It encapsulates several core issues of identity sociology: authenticity, self-expression, image construction via selected elements, and narrative formation within specific contexts – daily or exceptional routines, social practices, or affiliations. Despite its self-centered focus, the selfie also reflects the search for an audience, a momentary "we," indicating a timeless need for connection [Liubinienė, Keturakis, 2014: 4]. From the perspective of this work, the selfie may also be viewed as a process contributing to the embodiment, exploration, and formation of the self [Lasen, Gomez-Cruz, 2009: 26]. Some scholars argue that in the virtual world, the selfie becomes a transmedia extension of one's real identity [Elwell, 2014], forming a legitimate component of the self-image we construct – a part of our private and public narrative.

The concept of identity is now widely utilised across disciplines such as sociology, psychology, marketing, and economics. Some authors point out that contemporary identity theory deals with a highly complex, multi-layered term. It is elusive – at first, due to the overlapping dimensions it encompasses: individual, social, cultural, biographical, collective, national, etc. Recent scholarship

introduces further distinctions, including fluid identity, gender identity, digital identity, and visual identity. Secondly, identity is approached from diverse theoretical perspectives. Thirdly, identity is "problematic" from the standpoint of the subject (individual or collective), who must situate themselves in a postmodern world marked by constant change and thus faces ongoing choices among often conflicting or indistinct alternatives [Smolarkiewicz, Kubera, 2017: 7]. Kenneth J. Gergen's concept of the "saturated self" illustrates this, portraying a fragmented self lacking coherence or authenticity [Gergen, 2009].

Two principal research traditions concerning identity are commonly recognised. The first, derived from Erik H. Erikson's work, views identity formation as a process leading to a relatively stable self, centered on an "identity crisis" during adolescence. Contemporary studies, however, suggest a prolonged, deferred formation process – the theory of emerging adulthood [Arnett, 2000: 469–480]. J.J. Arnett identifies a novel life stage between adolescence and early adulthood, occurring roughly between the ages of 18 and 25 – a period when many Polish youth enter higher education, and thus directly relevant to this study [Brzezińska et al., 2010: 82]. The second tradition is linked to thinkers such as William James, Charles H. Cooley, Robert E. Park, and George H. Mead, with Mead's work playing a pivotal role in developing the interactionist model of identity. This model holds that identity is constructed and maintained through interaction, making identity itself an intersubjective phenomenon [Melchior, 1999: 36]. Self-identity is thus shaped through relationships with others – through "reading the image of ourselves in the eyes of others," which forms the basis for self-awareness [Krzemiński, 1986: 70]. The individual is not a static set of traits, but rather a dynamic actor, equipped with self-definitions emerging from interaction [Bokszański, 1989: 32]. This interactional grounding of identity has much in common with visual identity – especially as presented on social media, where content is curated and shaped by audience feedback. Thus, identity is highly dynamic, constantly in flux, shaped by societal influence and individual agency. As Marek Ziółkowski notes, interactionism underscores the "primacy of social consciousness over individual awareness" [Ziółkowski, 1981: 80].

In its simplest form, individual identity may be defined as how one understands oneself, how one identifies, and what elements are considered meaningful. It is a unique essence of the individual – an autoconcept revealed through the experience and understanding of the self as both singular and temporally continuous. When analysing the concept of individual identity, we can distinguish two core dimensions: the personal (biographical) and the socio-cultural. Anthony

Giddens limits personal identity to the biographical dimension – deeply individual and unique. Identity is not a characteristic or set of traits, but rather the "self" as interpreted biographically. It implies continuity in time and space, but this continuity is understood and reflected upon by the individual [Giddens, 2001: 75]. In this view, individual identity lies deep within personal experiences; its uniqueness and biographical continuity may constitute a singular core of identity. It must also be remembered that identity has a narrative character. It consists of stories we tell about ourselves and the social world that surrounds us. The process of constructing one's identity should lead to the development, within the individual, of a sense of constancy in the knowledge of "who I am," coherence among the various components of identity, and a sense of distinctiveness [Mamzer, 2002: 52–59], regardless of the passage of time and changing circumstances. However, it must be acknowledged that today, the notion of stable self-knowledge has become increasingly problematic. The internalised values and roles – anchoring the fundamental elements of identity – are considered to be the "hard" points of reference, along with the socio-cultural center and collective identity forms, such as national identity.

A less stable view of identity is presented by Sheldon Stryker, who describes identity as a salience hierarchy. He argues that an individual possesses multiple identity elements, the configuration of which may vary over time depending on external events and the degree of engagement in specific roles. Consequently, the hierarchy of particular identity components may shift, and new elements may be incorporated into it.

The concept of postmodern, fluid identity is reflected in the work of Zygmunt Bauman. James Clifford describes identity as a temporary and improvised construct: "it is easy to build an identity – there are numerous options, instructions, incentives, and prefabricated components readily available. What is difficult, however, is to maintain it – and sustaining identity is not the primary objective of identity strategies in postmodernity or late modernity" [Clifford, 2000: 22].

## 2. Research method

The study was conducted in four rounds among students at the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Białystok in 2023. It thus presents elements of visual identity specific to students – young individuals approximately 20 years old. I employed photography as a specific strategy, understood – similarly to Krzysztof

Konecki – as "found materials linked with elicited materials, that is, narratives and verbal commentaries provided by the respondents in reference to the photographs presented to them" [Konecki, 2005: 44]. The only difference lies in the fact that in this case, the photographs were shown by the participants themselves, not by the researcher.

The study involved 31 students, including 19 women and 12 men, aged between 19 and 21. I define this study as photographic self-presentation – in short, a public presentation of key identity traits, as perceived by the participants themselves, conveyed through visual materials. The central visual element was to be photography. Each student was asked to present between 10 and 15 photographs, or, in cases where this was not possible or desirable, alternative visual materials. The photographs chosen were meant to characterise who they are, to portray their identity, to show how they see themselves and what or who is important to them. The imposed limitation on the number of photographs was intended to encourage deeper reflection on the selection process and help students identify the most meaningful elements of their self-presentation.

The participants were informed that the photographs could be either their own or taken by others. They were also made aware that these photographs would be presented and discussed publicly – in front of their seminar group, composed of peers familiar to them. All the photographs were presented in this setting, and each was accompanied by the participant's commentary explaining what it depicted, what was significant about it, and which element of their identity it expressed. These participant-generated explanations – rather than the subjective interpretation of the researcher – served as the basis for identifying the primary theme of each image. In the research process, photographs must be interpreted, and such interpretation becomes a concrete act of meaning-making [Olechnicki, 2003].

Thus, the dimension of identity and the interpretation of the images were carried out primarily by the participants themselves. It must be emphasised that the photographs were an intentional and autonomous choice of visual materials used to present how the individual sees themselves – taking into account the public nature of the presentation. The audience consisted of fellow students from the seminar group – people the presenter already knew.

In total, the students presented 361 photographs, averaging 11.6 photographs per person. The smallest number of photos shown by an individual was 8, and the largest was 17. The vast majority of the photographs were taken by the participants themselves or sourced from personal family archives. Approximately 10% of the images were taken from external sources. The quality of the photographs varied;

some were poorly framed, blurry, or technically flawed. However, this was often acknowledged by the students themselves, who emphasised that the importance of the photo outweighed its technical shortcomings. In my view, the technical quality of the photographs was a secondary matter. From the researcher's perspective, the content conveyed by many photographs was often surprising to the viewing group – suggesting that the participants were, to some extent, opening up in front of their peers.

The central research question concerns which domains of identity are presented by the students. My intent was to explore which aspects of a young person's identity are disclosed in a specific, semi-public context – not in a one-on-one interaction with the researcher, but in a setting where others are present during the moment of identity presentation. These others were not anonymous spectators but known individuals, which constituted a particular kind of filter. On the one hand, this acted as a constraint – since the public nature of the presentation encourages the display of socially accepted content. On the other hand, the audience could function as a falsifier of the presented identity claims. The presenters were not anonymous, and group members already possessed some knowledge about their peers, which could inhibit the display of false or highly exaggerated content – commonly seen on social media platforms. Thirdly, the presentation in front of familiar peers – briefly and without permanence (unlike on social media) – could facilitate the sharing of more personal information that is not always disclosed in online contexts.

It should also be noted that, in this research design, the participant is the main and sole source constructing and expressing their identity. This study aims to reconstruct how individuals construct their identity within this elicited environment. It is their own reflection – not a choice among predefined survey answers, theoretical constructs, or questions imposed by the researcher – that determines what is presented.

Can we trust photographs in sociological research? A crucial issue concerns how we relate to the photographs themselves. I am aware of the immense creative and manipulative potential of photography. The internet is filled with idealised portrayals, staged events, and heavily edited travel photos that distort reality. These are often modified according to the creator's skill and intent. In our case, however, this is largely irrelevant. Firstly, the vast majority of visual materials used in the study were only minimally altered. Secondly, their primary purpose was to illustrate or symbolize particular meanings, places, or events. One could agree with Drozdowski [2006: 53], who argues that images are worth trusting when practicing visual sociology.

## 3. Research results

The first, and somewhat self-evident, category of the presented photographs consisted of those featuring the image of the participant. There were 40 such photographs in total. Interestingly, the majority of these (16) depicted the participants as children – images of toddlers, preschoolers, or early primary school pupils. These photographs predominantly illustrated a happy childhood, the so-called "sweet" moments, and were clearly drawn from family archives. These images reflect the biographical memory of childhood still present in the students' identities – references to the earliest remembered self-image, which continues to function within them. This is likely not only a self-image but also one nurtured through parental narratives.

The next most frequently occurring theme was "me at work," appearing in 11 instances. These photos represented a new role in life – typically part-time or seasonal employment undertaken during holidays or spare time. This reflects a more adult aspect of identity, associated with autonomy and the adult world. The participants tended to emphasise relationships with co-workers rather than the act of earning money itself.

In third place (10 instances) there were images explicitly focused on the self, labeled "this is me." These included selfies taken in various contexts or full-body portraits captured on different occasions. Few resembled the stylised selfies typical of social media. Instead, the photos conveyed a natural and spontaneous character. The photographs showing participants with their pets – cats or a lizard (4 in total) are als noteworthy. These were described as "me with my favorite animal." Remarkably, the pet-related photos were among the most frequently shared in the entire study: 45 images, mostly of animals belonging to the participants or to their families. Cats were the most common (23), followed by dogs (15), and other animals – including a cow, a rabbit, and a bird – appeared in seven photographs.

Another important dimension of identity presented through photographs was the presence of the significant others – individuals with whom the participants identified through social belonging and collective identity. This category included family members, friends, and acquaintances. Immediate family appeared in 21 photographs: siblings (7, including two nieces), parents (4), grandparents (2), and group family portraits (8), described by participants as "my family." Two participants included genealogical trees. When presenting images of close family members, participants often emphasised deep affection, using phrases such as "my beloved dad" or "my favorite niece."

Next among significant others were friends (12) and acquaintances (10). These included a variety of photos: individual portraits, group shots, and images taken during various events, meetings, and trips. A smaller subset of six photos depicted romantic partners, labeled "my boyfriend" or "my girlfriend."

Only marginally did participants include images of real or historical figures as role models or idols. These featured footballers Messi and Ronaldo, the author J.R.R. Tolkien, and Alexander the Great – mentioned by only two individuals.

Another key dimension of identity revealed in the photographs concerned physical and environmental spaces. In 18 cases, students highlighted their immediate surroundings – neighborhoods, buildings, or rural areas – as significant. This often involved a strong connection to nature. In several instances, stock photos or postcards were used, yet participants clearly identified these spaces as meaningful parts of their identity – places where they felt comfortable, rested, or experienced important events.

In 11 instances, photos related to education appeared, showing the participants' former schools (9) and their current university (2). Previous schools were generally depicted as positive spaces associated with fond memories worth sharing as part of one's biography and identity.

Another prominent theme, present in 25 photographs, involved travel. These included family and friend trips, both from the distant past and recent times. Most destinations were within Poland, followed by foreign travel. Almost all had a leisure-oriented, holiday character.

The most extensive set of photographs represented interests and activities, forming approximately one-third (116) of all the shared images. The most frequently mentioned ones were:

- Music (20): including specific artists, concert attendance, and personal music-making such as singing (4) or playing instruments (3)
- Watching films and series (17): including manga and anime (6)
- Sports (14): including dance, basketball, swimming, and volleyball
- Food-related activities (13): both preparation and consumption
- Reading books (12)
- Football fandom (12): support for teams and players
- Playing video games (9)
- Drawing (8)
- Beauty and grooming (8): including hairstyling, makeup, and manicure
- Driving one's own car (7)
- Handicrafts (6)

- Board games (6)
- Theatre and opera (5)
- Shopping (4)
- Partying (4)
- Gardening (4)
- Nature and the environment (4)
- Writing poetry (2)
- Scouting (5): represented by one individual only

The other mentioned identity elements – though less frequently – included feminism, environmentalism, shooting sports, religious pilgrimages, Barbie dolls, sailing, volunteering, sleeping, darts, and even the colour green, which one participant felt best represented their identity.

## 4. Conclusion

In outlining the fundamental dimensions of identity presented by the participants, it must first be emphasised that these are individuals aged 19 to 21, just entering adulthood and beginning to interpret and make sense of the surrounding world. This is reflected in the study's findings, which point to Arnett's concept of a "prolonged moratorium," during which the core structures of an "adult" identity have yet to fully form. The primary dimension of their identity is linked to hobbies, entertainment, and the development of interests typically associated with media consumption, sports, music, gaming, drawing, and similar activities. These are areas to which the participants devote considerable attention and which they chose to present as meaningful reflections of who they are. When speaking about these, they expressed significant engagement and described the roles such interests play in their lives.

Some activities – such as music, sports, or drawing – were described as fundamental, long-term commitments that have accompanied them for years and form a crucial part of their sense of self. This world of interests and leisure appears as a completely natural component of this developmental phase. One might refer to this source of identity as a form of the "cultural supermarket" [Mathews, 2005], from which young people select elements of popular culture that suit them best at a given time. It may also be assumed that, despite being the most numerous, this dimension of identity is likely to be relatively fluid – prone

to change as new interests emerge and replace the old. This sphere of identity is dynamic, with shifting roles, activities, and commitments accompanying the transition into adult life.

A second, and somewhat surprising, identity dimension – given its emotional weight and frequency – was the participants' relationships with animals, accounting for 12.5% of the total dataset. Again, the participants highlighted the deep emotional bonds they share with their pets, which are described as integral to their daily lives and objects of substantial care and affection. Many statements emphasised the importance of animals in their routines, expressing strong feelings of responsibility, attachment, and emotional investment. This trend may help to explain the enduring popularity of pet photography on social media, particularly of cats – not only as visually appealing but as a meaningful form of self-identification and emotional expression.

On a deeper level, the emotional intensity and frequency of the pet-related photos might suggest a shift in focus from human relationships to those with animals. Pets, in this interpretation, become the closest and safest recipients of emotions – potentially a sign of withdrawal or escape from the complexities of the external, social world.

Another noteworthy finding is that the participants more willingly presented themselves through the lens of early childhood than via current self-representation, such as selfies. This suggests a persistent emotional connection to childhood, and to an imaginative self-image rooted in the past. Rather than perceiving themselves as adults, they stand with one foot still in childhood. This challenges the widespread social media culture of the stylised selfie. When showing current images of themselves, participants often appeared uneasy. The selfies they did share were casual and unposed – taken incidentally in elevators, in cars, or at family gatherings – devoid of the curated aesthetic typical of platforms like the Instagram.

Interestingly, participants rarely referred to worldview-related elements as important to their identity. Christianity was mentioned twice, and ecology, feminism, and veganism once each, with the latter three named by a single individual. Ideologies or political views were largely absent. There were also virtually no references to national identity or "Polishness." Instead, participants showed connections to local identities – related to their hometowns, neighborhoods, or football clubs.

In summary, the identities of the student participants center around several core dimensions:

- Types of activities they engage in (hobbies, interests)
- Relationships with domestic animals, particularly pets
- Significant others, especially friends and acquaintances
- Local spatial identity, linked to home environments and familiar landscapes

Their own image appears mostly in the context of childhood, holidays, or work experiences, rather than as a deliberate, stylized self-representation.

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