Possession and Obsession? Photography Shaping Our Lives

Maja Jerrentrup

New Media and Intercultural Communication, Faculty for Interdisciplinary Studies,
University of Applied Sciences Landshut, Am Lurzenhof 1, 84036 Landshut, Germany
E-mail: Maja-Tabea.Jerrentrup@haw-landshut.de

ABSTRACT More than ever, photography is an omnipresent medium. Drawing on an interdisciplinary literature review, this article explores the ambivalent relationship between the medium and its users: the existence of photography may push people to have more fast and superficial experiences, but also foster mindfulness. Photography can infiltrate our thought processes, for example by establishing and reinforcing stereotypes, but at the same time, we can use it to collect our personal thoughts, interpret, and express meanings. Memory can be encouraged as well as inhibited, and in terms of identity, photography can support identity construction as well as promote narcissism and superficiality. In result, photography certainly has a great influence on people, but that at the same time, people are constantly shaping the usage of the medium and thus actively create their culture with the help of it.

1. INTRODUCTION

A statement by essayist Susan Sontag gave the inspiration for this paper. She wrote in her famous work "On Photography" that "one can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images" (Sontag 1973: 126). Until today, this well-known statement has been much discussed in a variety of disciplines, ranging from security (Simon 2012) to exhibition practices (Shaw 2018), or to architecture (Otxotorena 2018) – and perhaps is more important than ever in times of digital photography and social media, where photography has become omnipresent not only with regard to its results, but also with regard to its practice.

The question, following Susan Sonntag's bold statement, is whether she is (still) right about her assumption, and how to evaluate this eventual possession and/or obsession. Having said this, it must be added that this topic cannot be comprehensively addressed in the present work, but that only several highlights from various disciplines can be presented in the form of an interdisciplinary literature review on the basis of interpretative cultural anthropology. In the end, these aspects should provide food for thought or a basis for further discussion and investigation. Thus, several sources were selected that can be applied to the question of possession or obsession, among them classics such as the works of Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Siegfried Kracauer, as well as recent accounts that look more closely at the usage of photography in the digital world such as the insights into NFTs by Wang et al (2021).

The focus in the present work is on the ordinary users of the medium, that is not professional photographers, photo models, curators, or art critics. In this context, non-professional means that the people in question tend not to earn their money primarily from photography, even though it may be a bit unclear nowadays, such as influencers/ micro celebrities who receive promotional gifts or smaller advertising deals through their photographs, professional photographers who also take photos as a hobby, and numerous other intermediate situations. Nonetheless, non-professionals engage in a variety of activities related to photography, continually look at pictures, often pose for pictures, take pictures, thus, have constant encounters with photography (van Dijck 2008: 58). So, people are constantly affected as both recipients and producers – or, shortly said, as users of the medium.

1.1 Objectives

This paper aims at transferring Susan Sontag's thoughts to today's social usage of the nowadays everyday phenomenon "photography." It is about the extent to which people's behavior and thinking is influenced by the omnipresent medium and about the evaluation of the relationship between photography and its users.

2. METHOD

Before explaining the method of the literature review, it is important to consider the underlying perspective: this paper is comprehensively located in the field of interpretative cultural anthropology. The basis of these considerations is the assumption that people find themselves in self-knitted webs of meaning and continue to shape them. This metaphor originates from Max Weber and was taken up by Clifford Geertz (1987: 9), who is considered the founder of interpretative anthropology and advocated a semiotic concept of culture understanding culture as text to be interpreted. That is, it presupposes both human action and creativity to keep finding or inventing meaning, but also certain pre-existing cultural frameworks that give or at least suggest directions. In our context, instead of "text", "picture" may be an interesting metaphor and the question is, referring to Sontag, in how far we "make" (and possess) the picture or the picture is the actual agent and acts as our obsession.

With this background, the present literature review has to be rooted in a constructivist philosophic tradition, which is, as stated by Anthony Onuwegbuzie and Rebecca Frels, "often associated with a claim that multiple, contradictory, but equally valid accounts of the same phenomenon – known as multiple realities – can coexists" (Onuwegbuzie and Frels 2010: 53). The authors move on explaining that such a philosophical frame would usually place more emphasis on qualitative findings, which can be confirmed for the current review, however, following their recommendation, quantitative data will be considered as well (2010: 49). As already mentioned, the present work deals with sources from different disciplines – for example, from the realm of sociology, pedagogics, media philosophy, psychology or even therapy – and with both empirical and theoretical works. For example, classics like Roland Barthes' work on photography, Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts on social capital, or Marshall McLuhan's controversary ideas on media are taken into account just as recent investigations. While the classics are often more theoretically or philosophically oriented, many recent works are based on an empirical approach, such as Silvana Weber's paper on social media and social comparison.

The form of the review can be characterized as "integrative review" as the goal is to summarize representative literature in a way that generates new frames and perspectives on the topic (Jones 2022).

Four fields were identified that recur in the literature on the social usage of photography and have to be seen in connection to photography as possession and/or obsession: (1) photography causing compulsion or motivation to experience new things; (2) its ability to infiltrate people's thoughts, but also offer freedom of interpretation; (3) its relation to memory; and (4) its relation to the self respectively identity. These aspects will be treated in more detail below.

3. DEFINITIONS

We live in a world that is shaped by pictures and in which the camera is one of the most important selection tools. Following the art historian and media theorist Hans Belting, pictures, nowadays usually photographs or videos, represent what plays a role in a society – whatever is important will appear in pictures, everything else is withdrawn from them (Belting 2007: 51). This applies, for example, to television news that are usually accompanied by pictures, as well as to pictures in newspapers, magazines and on the internet, and to pictures on social media.

Even though photography is so fundamental to our lives, the term is not easy to grasp: it can denote a hobby or a job, a process, an activity, and its results in the realm from fun to fancy artwork, from scientific proof to identity play. Thus, photography cannot be defined in few words.

3.1 Photography as Process

For many people, photography belongs to their most important hobbies (Amm 2021), whereby photography is meant here in the entirety of the conceptual content: it is not only about the results of the imaging process – photographs, which are viewed, sorted, edited, presented, deleted or destroyed and thus are part of the photographic process as well – but also or especially about the act of taking photographs (Schuster 2020: 126; Mechler-Schönach 2005: 15; Jerrentrup 2020). As a catchy example, sociologist Thomas Eberle writes in reflexive self-monitoring that he likes to photograph the same motifs over and over again,

but often pays little attention to the outcome afterwards, and his family and friends also shows little interest. He concludes that photography has to be considered "as an activity in its own right" (Eberle 2017: 99). This also corresponds to the researcher's own experiences, which the researcher made as the leader of ethnological photo trips: some participants said that they deliberately wanted to set off without a camera or without a card/film roll, because this way, they would have a photographic view and would capture moments more intensively, in the sense of remembering, but if they would actually take pictures, they would probably just create data garbage. Consequently, the act of taking pictures has to be considered of inherently valuable to people and in the latter, this dynamic will have to be addressed.

3.2 Photographs as Virtual Possessions

Even at a time when photographs were generally objects, it can be said that they also belonged to the realm of virtual possessions, that is, deriving from the Medieval Latin "virtualis = apparent" as things that do not have a physical dimension, yet resemble something real. Photographs represent moments that one has experienced, things that one has seen but that are no more respectively no more in the exact same shape or moment. In German, there is the beautiful metaphor for this of "having something in the box." This implies the possession of what was photographed, albeit in a small format, and just representing one moment in time.

Virtual property is usually defined a little more narrowly: "We consider these things (= virtual possessions) to include artefacts that are increasingly becoming immaterial (for example books, photos, music, movies) and things that have never traditionally had a lasting material form (for example SMS archives, social networking profiles, personal behaviour logs)" (Odom et al. 2011: 1491). Anyone who has a photo folder on their phone or computer will be able to relate, but the argument here is to understand the virtual more comprehensively: a photograph has always referred to more than its material existence; and taking a photograph, as Eberle's quote has shown, also usually consists not only in taking pictures intended purely for their physical presence, but possesses a further, not tangible dimension.

At this point, Schuster's comparison of photography and sex can be referred to: Schuster compares the photographic act in the phases of stalking, pulling the trigger, and subsequent satisfaction to arousal, orgasm, and subsequent satisfaction (Schuster 2020: 118). Following this line of thought, one can also draw the parallel that both activities are performed without a focus on an outcome for themselves and yet vocabulary from the notion of possession is used, such as that one "has" or "had" someone, in the sexual realm one also speaks of (imaginary) "notches in the bedpost."

Virtual possessions are obviously nothing new and not peculiar to photography. But even if photographs in general can be interpreted as "virtual possessions" in a broader sense, the digital revolution has perhaps reinforced this perspective due to the increased possibilities of archiving, editing, and presenting, but also the enormous creative possibilities, for example, to articulate or invent or work on one's own identity to a significantly increased extent. This context can even be expanded to NFT (non-fungible token), which are becoming increasingly important not only for professional artists and curators (Wang et al. 2021).

In addition, there are still more recent developments that may foster the importance of virtual possessions: in view of the Corona crisis, the fierce inflation in Europe and the U.S., and the Ukraine war in Europe, the ownership of non-virtual objects is receding into the background. In a newspaper article, Breit and Redl (2022) state that even for well-earning younger people, the older generation's dream of owning a home and having a family life is hardly financially feasible on their own, while at the same time there is a high level of uncertainty and concern about the future. In this situation, the focus for many is on work-life balance and the opportunity, instead of saving and planning for the future, to focus more on the present and free themselves from predefined goals that are hardly achievable anymore. Instead of material possessions, virtual ones are then all the more desirable.

Here, the idea of social, cultural, and symbolic capital according to Pierre Bourdieu also comes to mind (2012: 230): in brief, social capital is about group membership, cultural capital is about education and knowledge of action – that is symbolic capital through recognition, which also results in a dynamic to actual economic capital. Virtual property in the broad definition includes parts of social and cultural capital and can accordingly also be transformed into economic capital under certain circumstances. Bourdieu

said that "symbolic power is the power to create things with words" (1992: 153). In our context, we can say it is the power to create things with pictures. It is not for nothing that when it comes to the reputation of a person, one also speaks of his or her image. However, virtual possessions such as photographs do not have to be understood in this way, they do not have to be shown or displayed, and their goal does not have to be economic capital.

3.3 Photography as Inherently Hybrid

As already indicated, in many ways, photography is considered hybrid. Thus, as will be shown below, its evidentiary status is by no means clear – yet it is believed to a special degree not only because of its visual similarity, but also due to its origin, which is characterized by indexicality: the photographed subject itself leaves a trace on the film or on the chip.

Also, with regard to the artistic side, photography is ambiguous: photography has become a commodity, "a reflex of everyday life with the ambition for something higher: to be art. Thus, it became museum-like and remained popular, a phenomenon as banal as it was elitist" (Sager 1991). This corresponds with the popular saying that a photo can "speak more than 1000 words," but it is often particularly unclear whether these are the words intended by the author or model or whether the words corresponding to reality.

Yet another aspect shows the hybrid position of photography: looking at time, photography conveys the present of a moment that actually lies in the past. Therefore, viewing photographs "always means relating two different forms of presence to each other: our own and that of the image" (Siegel 2014: 9). This relationship can be characterized by proximity, similarity, or identity, but can also imply distance and alienation (Wawrzycka 1997: 95).

4. COMPULSION AND MOTIVATION TO EXPERIENCE

As already mentioned, experiences can be counted as virtual possessions following a broad definition. Typically, these days, experiences are recorded photographically. Among other things, it is about the evidentiary function of photographs, even if their truthfulness has often been hotly debated, and in the age of digital photography, it is

probably even more ambiguous than ever before: "The mechanical character of photography guarantees the perfect imitation of real nature to a degree that far exceeds the mimetic potential of painting and drawing. The photographic image is therefore considered the analog of the photographed object, its natural trace and double" (Dörfler 2002: 13). However, "even still photography, an apparently objective mechanical recording medium, can be ambiguous in its capacity to 'document'" (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015: 41). This can be seen, for example, in the many factors subject to selection, such as the moment, the perspective, the focal length, the aperture, the white balance, as well as the processing. Before and after the moment of the indexical imprint itself, which can be defined as neutral, photography is profoundly shaped by individual and cultural aspects (Dubois 1998: 54f). Many of us are probably aware of this fact, which is expressed, for example, in the social media platform "Be Real," where the user is supposed to take a picture in a given period of just two minutes, which is supposed to lead to more authenticity, more "realness."

Still, the camera remains a constant companion particularly during special experiences such as travel, festivals, or similar endeavours (Thurner 1992: 30). Photography's evidentiary function can be highly questioned, and yet in practice it is often handled in this way (Weber 2021). Thus, one could conclude that photography possesses us, it puts us under pressure to visually record experiences and, if necessary, to translate them into the realm of the visual in the first place, because not every experience is primarily visual in nature. So, here one could speak of a narrowing, but possibly also of increased creativity, that one thinks about how the invisible can be transformed into an image.

Furthermore, the focus on capturing experiences in photographs may also lead to a restless "hunting and gathering." Similar metaphors can be found in many terms around photography: one "stalks," "takes aim," "shoots," or "takes" a photo. Max Weber used the metaphor of "restless hunting [...] for modern life, which never becomes happy with its own possessions, and therefore must seem so senseless, especially with a purely worldly orientation of life" (Weber 1988: 59). The activity of taking photographs fits perfectly here. Even though photographs have been defined as primarily virtual possessions, it may often be about their accumulation as apparent

in many social media posts, encouraged by filter bubbles that may also narrow one's view (Pariser 2011). Photography is, of course, accompanied by real life experiences, but often superficial experiences, as very short insights can be enough to take the "compulsory" picture (Lippl and Wohler 2011). In this context, Halla Beloff's statement could be considered as well, that "a photographer may easily steal what is private" (1983: 165) in order to get what is considered a "good shot" – and this stealing takes place quite consciously and willingly, as we should add and explore a bit later.

Yet, this is not only about photographing others, but also about self-staging, because it is a matter of recording one's *own* experience. Photographs on social media frequently show beautiful, impressive selfie spots – but some people also post "backstage" or "reality versus social media" pictures, for example, of long lines of selfie enthusiasts waiting to take that exact picture themselves. For many, the experience degenerates into mere posing and pulling the trigger, even though some may even feel encouraged to become particularly creative under these circumstances. In addition, this context also shows how far people really go for experiences captured in photographs – even to the point of endangering their lives, as shown by numerous selfie deaths, people who fall off cliffs, bridges or mountain ledges in the attempt to take a spectacular selfie (Bertrand 2019).

However, one could also say that photography motivates people to have experiences precisely because they want to have a photo of it to keep for themselves and to visualize an exciting moment in order to show to their friends or to a wider public. Assuming that having experiences is preferable to not having experiences for people's well-being (Ow 2014: 9), photography therefore may help us to live a more fulfilling and, when showing and discussing the photographs, a more sociable life. The motivation for this is then extrinsic at first, but it can certainly become intrinsic at a later point in time (Kuhl and Koole 2005). Through the impetus of photography, people could be motivated to gain new experiences and explore new topics in greater depth.

5. INFILTRATION AND UTILIZATION

Another aspect to be addressed here is how photography shapes thinking, perhaps even "possesses" it. In connection with the evidentiary function, the special epistemic character of photography has already been pointed out: "we are inclined to trust them in a way we are not inclined to trust even the most accurate drawings or paintings" (Cohen and Meskin 2010: 70). In this context, for example, the reproduction of stereotypes through images in the news, advertisements, or in social media is of particular interest (Schleicher 2009; Cortés 2000). The semiotician Roland Barthes already remarked: "If [...] there is no perception without immediate categorization, photography is verbalized at the moment of perception; or better yet: it is only perceived verbally" (Barthes 2002: 223). In the researcher's interpretation of this statement, Barthes is not concerned with questioning the immediate perception of images, but rather with pointing out instantaneous, culture-bound categorizations of image content. In addition, "repeated exposure to photographs may consequently encourage a fragmented, atomized view of reality" (Ow 2014: 15), which may be particularly true for the reception of photography in social media. Photography thus seems to encourage incoherent thinking in categories or stereotypes.

On the other hand, it is also said that a picture can say more than 1000 words. This means that photos are very information-dense. Unlike text, they work synchronously. As they can easily move away from their original source, no matter if in print or in digital versions, they can be viewed without their original context, providing room for a wide variety of readings (Kuivila 2022). The author of the photograph and the person depicted thus completely lose control over the work and the recipient has the freedom and/or burden of contextualization and interpretation.

No matter how deeply they are interpreted, photographs can very quickly evoke particularly strong reactions, which is also related to their evidential value. Thus, photographs can promote empathy: "viewing a photograph involves paying attention to its subject, and any attention, no matter how feeble, is usually preferable to ignorance and apathy" (Ow 2014: 9). Of course, this property of directly addressing the emotion can be used for good – for example, to draw attention to grievances – as well as for the purpose of advertising, propaganda or fraud. This aspect is all the more important because typical school education deals with text interpretation but hardly with image interpretation, even though

knowledge about images and media literacy are particularly important today (Silverblatt et al. 2014: 4). However, "to examine the context of an image invites us to explore how various groups make meaning of any particular representation, and how that representation challenges dominant ideas in society" (Sensoy 2010: 51) and therefore should be seen as a key ability in today's photography -dominated world.

While the aforementioned points to a way of bypassing the mind, it should not be neglected that there is a second side to the coin, that photography can be used consciously to convey information or emotions, but also, that photography can support the emotional or cognitive focus. The framing – the view through the viewfinder or the look at a naturally spatially limited photograph – helps to concentrate, as "we become less scattered and, through this, gain a sense of empowerment and calm, of personal well-being and heath" (Koithan 1994: 249), which reminds on Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow (1975). In this context, mindfulness in the sense of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012) also plays a role, that is, using photography to practice a non-judgmental view. As a result, one can state that photography is able to take on therapeutic features. These examples show that photography does have an influence on human thinking, but that people can also actively use these influences for themselves.

6. FOR AND AGAINST MEMORY

Already in the famous Phaedrus dialogue, Socrates harshly criticizes artificial sources of memory. The dialogue is about writing, and in his argumentation, text is not a means of internalization as memory should be. Photography can be accused of the same, as again, memory is externalized and thus does no more belong to the person, especially since photography is inflationary in social media, for example. However, at this point, one can also refer to the photo tour participants already mentioned above, who used photography, or more specifically the act of photographing, as a means for a specific and intense visual memory. Apparently, a reflective approach to photography can help with memory. In addition, photography can ensure that memories are less deceiving, for example, less glorified. The tendency towards glorification, associated with nostalgia, seems to be inherent in humans – "everything was better in the good old days" – but a look at old photos, especially those with journalistic or documentary motivation, may provide a more realistic picture of history.

However, the power of photography goes further: "these artificial memories not only supported, relieved and occasionally replaced the natural memory, but also gave shape to our ideas about remembering and forgetting" (Douwe 1999: 10). Photography determines *how* we remember something, and so influences our thoughts. The media theorist Siegfried Kracauer saw photography and memory in a field of tension, since a very specific moment is picked out of the flow of time and preserved exactly, while the human memory is more fragmentary and imprecise and at the same time follows a logic that is oriented towards meaning instead of mere visual resemblance. Consequently, Kracauer describes photography in contrast to memory as "a mixture partly composed of waste" (Kracauer 1977: 25), to which meaning is lost.

At the same time, it could also be shown that our memories can easily be manipulated through photographs. The psychologist Elizabeth Loftus (1998: 61f.) and other memory researchers have demonstrated in numerous experiments that memories can be deceived by text and/or images. Typical experiments used photomontage, integrating images of the subject as a child into contexts that never existed. The test subjects found out nothing about this montage and surprisingly often reported memories of these situations that have actually never existed. Because of its similarity to reality, photography can thus suggest reality so credibly that we not only believe it unquestioningly, but even adopt it into our personal history.

This power, this feeling of genuineness and presence is described by art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau as follows: "The photographer is manifestly absent from the field of the image. Instead, we are there, we are seeing what the photographer saw at the moment of exposure. This structural congruence of point of view (the eye of the photographer, the eye of the camera, and the spectator's eye) confers on the photograph a quality of pure, but delusory, presentness" (1991: 180). This "presentness" can be instrumentalized, for example, to make a political ruler appear omnipresent or an influencer appear like a close friend, or to burn images into the collective memory, so that historical moments are always associated with certain pictures, pictures in which

one sees a specific *zeitgeist* condensed. This can be understood as stereotyping and simplification, but it represents perhaps the only way in which history can be made manageable at all.

In summary, the ability to burn images into personal or collective memory becomes even more relevant in times when digital imaging is on the agenda and needs to be examined more critically. Again, this speaks to the need for comprehensive media education.

7. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND SELF-OBSESSION

"Images are places in which we can have experiences about our own identity and history" (Sinapius 2008: 100). This statement of art therapist Peter Sinapius leads from memory to identity. Identity, from Latin "idem = the same," is a complex concept that is central to numerous disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology (Sökefeld 2012: 39). Today, it is often assumed that identity as a sense of consistency and belonging is no more given, but has become a working project (Ferchhoff 2011: 107). From its beginning, photography has been considered an art of the person in the context of identity (Barthes 1989: 89) and may have gained even more importance under postmodern conditions.

"Photographs help us to construct our individual, family, and cultural identities as they appear to others. Through domestic photography we create an ideal image, wherein happiness flourishes in everyday life, in holidays, and in travel with friends and family" (Sarvas and Frohlich 2011: 6) - thus, on the one hand, it is a matter of representing one's own identity to others and the desire to communicate positive social identity. On the other hand, it is also a matter of construction one's own identity and playing with it: "the psychological adjustment that the inhabitants of digital modernity have to make is apparently not an act of passive and reluctant submission, but one of active and voluntary appropriation: at last they can speak out, put themselves in the picture, and show who they are" (Altmeyer 2016: 21). This does not always have to be about actual identity, but also about a playful approach to the same (Coleman 2009: 110). Of course, this can be extended to images that depict not the people themselves, but their preferences, their interests, their wishes, their aesthetics – in short, their pictorial motifs

(Cohrs and Oer 2016: 12). Put pointedly, photography can "function as a tool for identity formation and as a means for communication" (van Dijk 2008: 58).

Especially in the context of the photographic preoccupation with one's own self, it is often assumed that some kind of obsession takes place: "the most interest is shown in those photographs in which one is depicted oneself. These are looked at the longest. Like portrait painting in the past, private photography today (and also some branches of professional photography) beautifies the person depicted" (Thurner 1992: 29, see also Singh and Tripathi 2016). Thus, the interest in self-portraits is not a new phenomenon, because at least since the portrait painting in the times of the bourgeoisie, people wanted pictures of themselves. A special feature here, however, is the indexical quality of the photos. While painting often should not or not only capture mere physical characteristics of the person, photography naturally focuses on the surface. Consequently, the image of the mythological Narcissus falling in love with his own reflection on the water's surface seems to find its repetition when looking at the one's own photographs. Surprisingly, this self-focus or even self-obsession seems to be possible even when the person being photographed is well aware of the fact that his or her photograph does not reflect reality – if it is highly staged, edited, if photos are taken with apps like "Beautify" or if the photos are altered with Instagram filters and changed beyond recognition. Still, people post such pictures on social media and identify them as self-portraits. Possibly, the photographic self-portraits are experienced in a similar way to mirror images, which would ultimately lead to a distorted self-perception. However, it is also possible that they are not meant to actually refer to real life but to the experience of a specific moment that actually may be more emotional, more immaterial (Jerrentrup 2018: 108) – thus, they could eventually be perceived as ideas, visions or phantasies.

Exhibitionism is also a recurring theme when it comes to people photography and self-portraiture. A certain amount of exhibitionism seems to be necessary when one wants to have a picture of oneself. Incidentally, in its basic Latin meaning "exhibitio = showing", the word does not necessarily have a sexual connotation, but refers to the desire for visibility. "Today's photography [...] is exhibitionistic. A look at YouTube and Facebook is enough to see how people are exhibiting themselves," says curator

Florian Ebner, interviewed by Christiane Hoffmans (Hoffmans 2015). This is obviously especially true for photography on social media, however, people pursue very different goals with their photographs, from ameliorating loneliness (Pittman and Reich 2016: 155) to a self-commercialization (Marwick and Boyd 2010). The transitions can be fluid and pathological narcissism and exhibitionism may often not be clearly identifiable. Therefore, the pejorative term "exhibitionism" falls short here.

Also interesting in the context of social media is the anonymity behind which one can hide and which at the same time makes it easier to show oneself and to turn one's inner self outward (Jakaza 2022). The person posting is often physically in a retreat while virtually on stage. This can lead to a special mixture of public and private, which is also reflected in many photos: all too often on social media, you see selfies in front of the bedroom or bathroom mirror. Of course, the fact that private or erotic insights are beneficial to the number of followers also plays a role here. The platform "Only Fans" shows particularly clearly how intimate things, especially bare skin, can easily be translated into money. Moreover, given the democratizing potential of social media (Tomova 2020), it is easy to imagine the red carpet underfoot (Schilling 2002: 226). This process of self-disclosure could be self-reinforcing and dangerous with regard to cyber-mobbing, job opportunities, and, in the end, self-respect.

However, some visual intimacy may also allow for more intense connections. The openness with which others meet you may facilitate the development of para-social as well as real relationships. Photos not only show the exterior, but also visualize the interior, such as interests, preferences, wishes or fears. Yet, it has to be pointed out to the fact that these pictures can easily be misinterpreted: "In the relationship between photo and text, the photo literally begs for an interpretation, and the words give it him usually. The photograph, irrefutable in its evidence but weak in its meaning, sustains the latter through the words. And the words, which themselves remain on the level of the general, get their specific authenticity from the irrefutable nature of the photo. Together they become very powerful; an open question seems to have been fully answered" (Berger 2000: 50). This means that a false image is easily manifested through photos, either consciously or unconsciously. The self-image

that one communicates will always be ambiguous. This can be used to one's own advantage, but can also lead to misperception of self and others.

8. RESULTS

In the attempt to answer the question, how photography relates to possession and/or obsession and how to evaluate this, it has been shown that different scientists approach photography from different perspectives and that they come up with different assumptions or results. This starts with the definition of photography, which can be seen as a process or a result. Photographs can be characterized as both physical and virtual possessions. Their mixture of past and present, of snapshot commodity and "high" art also makes them hybrid media.

For the user, although their documentary function is questionable, photographs offer a kind of obligation and stress: one hunts for pictures. Furthermore, photographs infiltrate thought, influence memories, and replicate stereotypes. The "present-ness" of their content makes it easier to manipulate people. Moreover, self-portraiture in particular leads to self-obsession and danger for personal life.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned feeling of obligation to photograph can also prepare the ground for a more intense engagement with the photographed. In addition, photography can help to organize thoughts and promote empathy and mind-fulness. Looking at the past, one may gain a more adequate image through photos. The photographic preoccupation with oneself, in turn, can lead to a greater engagement with the now increasingly difficult area of identity, and to more intense connections with others. This is also ultimately about overcoming the focus on the purely external, visual and communicating something beyond that.

9. DISCUSSION

"We become obsessed with images. Now and again the danger that results from this lights up. These images design us and let us design others. They are the ones who are always ready when we get lost. With them we modulate our bodies and the bodies of others" (Pazzini 2005: 26). Considering the results of this study – the way photography shapes our thinking and leads us to certain actions that as the selfie deaths show can even be life-threatening – one could agree with the pedagogue Karl-Joseph

Pazzini. The users of photography often seem to become victims of their images, obsessed and possessed by their photographs. Or is it more of a possession that people work with in their own creative ways?

The controversial media scientist Marshall McLuhan (1964) dealt with the implications of certain media technologies, what influences they could have on human coexistence, the types of communication, as well as on the psyche of the individual – in short, how media, just by their existence and usage, shape the cultural context. Of course, these thoughts did not go unchallenged. First of all, McLuhan can be accused of a lack of empirical foundation, his ideas are often not empirically grounded, can hardly be proven and are very speculative. On the other hand, and this is perhaps the most important criticism of his ideas, media determinism is implied here – that media provoke certain feelings, behaviors and situations or even bring them with them as an inevitable consequence. This fails to recognize the creativity with which people approach media and may use them in very different ways over and over again (Carey 1967: 28). The situation is similar with several statements on photography found in the literature – here it is assumed that certain consequences for people necessarily result from the existence of the medium. This underestimates scope for action and human creativity, as well as conscious decision for or against certain uses of a technology such as photography.

Besides people's agency, the cultural context must be considered as well. Photographs are always "produced by a complexity of cultural factors […] Therefore it is the forces of culture that constantly alter our perception and understanding of photographs. As such, any image may have no fixed meaning at all and, although physically static, its message becomes subject to the fluctuations of shifting social patterns" (Wright 1999: 6). This may be true not only for the photographs, but also for the medium photography itself. Several of the sources discussed, including Susan Sontag's famous statement, lack cultural embeddedness. They provide highlights but often neglect counterarguments. However, this is also in the nature of pointed statements, which inspire articles like this one. Following Silverblatt et al. (2014) and Sensoy (2010), then, this article suggests more emphasis on media education.

10. CONCLUSION

Following its research objective, this article has shown that there is some evidence that photography "owns" us with, shapes our thoughts and behaviors: especially in times of social media, it gives us motivations and compulsions to experience, it often guides our thoughts, it can structure or even replace our memories, and plays a central role in our identity construction up to narcissism. At the same time, we can and do make use of it and constantly redesign how we deal with it.

Consequently, no definitive answer can be given to the research question: photography is not a uniform phenomenon and does not automatically lead to one single social practice, but depends on the cultural context and the individual situation and predisposition. Today's use of photography, especially with regard to social media, already creates new constellations with regard to the described phenomena of compulsion, thought infiltration, memory and identity. In any case, there is no end in sight to the multifaceted relationship between photography and its users.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Empirical studies dealing with the use of photography should support and concretize the findings of this study. In particular, it would be interesting – but certainly very challenging – to design a study that is not dedicated to just one phenomenon, but examines a broader range within different cultural contexts. For example, it would be conceivable, to analyze via a longer-term interview study in different cultural contexts whether people active on social media feel more of a (negative) commitment to experiences or a (positive) motivation, and whether these experiences must ultimately be characterized as superficial, or nevertheless offer certain insights, arouse further interest, or are conducive to empathy or general education.

Focusing on action orientation, the paper shows that more media education is needed to help people make the best use of photography for themselves.

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