

Role of Profile Pictures on Social Networking Sites in Identity Construction

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Abstract

A meaningful representation in most succinct manner in social media is perhaps with profile pictures of users. These are present in every engagement on any platform alongside rival techniques such as creating posts, sending and receiving messages, viewing search results, filtering friend suggestions, integrating company interests, entrepreneurship frames, and even having interactions filtered in the form of career options and computer-generated interactions. Although their physical size is small, profile pictures are still framed as interfaces of identity, whereby the self is transformed into visible images that can be interpreted, particularly through contemporary cultural codes, current cultural practice norms, and even some social structures such as norms and values. The main objective of this paper is to investigate the current status of research on the uses of profile pictures in identity formation and to evaluate the key recommendations and lessons as well as truths revealed over the course of more than 30 research studies dedicated to the topics such as profile picture usage as an identity profile and selfie, use of visual representation in managing social media, and presentation patterns of digital self. To this end, the study seeks to address three research questions: how do profile pictures come into the build up of personal, social, cultural, professional and corporate as well as symbolical identities, what processes are there in theory and why, and which ways of investigating such complexities are the most pertinent. Imposed that the study follows the terms, a corpus-based research is carried out whereby cautiously all the elements investigated will be past and present profile picture research over here through coding broken down by year, theme, method of inquiry; platforms used and types of profiles. The spelling functions of profile pictures show that they provide for the construction of identity pronounced by a number of mechanisms. The five mechanisms of identity construction are manufactured spectacle, acted sincerity, conformity to norms, expectation of audience, and identification by representation. It also (a) is evident that profile pictures should not be viewed as a single and isolated action, for they have been waxing and waning under the impact of stereotypic practices specific to women and men, ethnic and age groups, cultures, professional areas, peer groups, which can also be adjusted by such conditions as features of the medium, technologies, and symbolic consumption of non fungible token avatars. To the field, the paragraph introduces a new identity face theory 'profile picture as an identity interface' and provides a plan focusing on the future of research, combining analysis of visual contents, studies of platforms, understanding of audience, pattern of computation manipulation of a picture data and extraction of identity narratives using distinct services.

Keywords: Profile Pictures, Identity Construction, Social Networking Sites, Self-Presentation, Visual Communication, Digital Identity, Selfies, Impression Management

1. Introduction

Profile photo is the visual correspondence that comes to the mind when we talk about social media. It is the embodiment of a username, serves as a reference point in an account, and becomes an ubiquitous visual mark in every post, comment, message, group, search, recommendation, and so on. What distinguishes it from the usual photos posted on the user's wall is that they are in a service called, social media, and all the uploaded photos are profile pictures. Such pictures can be associated with any typical user, as they are oriented towards the audience and are viewable by the public. This is the reason why not everybody is willing to part with their private space and real painted moon as it is seen over the horizon ward. The whole practice of submitting a profile picture instantly raises some questions regarding the target audience because even if a lay person finds an empty profile, they expect to see a face or a continuing account linked from a user's image. Many people, consequently, know exactly what whiteboard is for. But the issue is why on some screens, it is too hard to draw complex visualizations. This presents social media more as an establisher of interrelations and representations of new self-concepts rather than representing it as online storage of photographs and data. Most people will think that when it comes to Facebook, all they have to do is to pop in a profile picture in this square (or triangle).

Most people remove their profiles pictures only to put some other different kind. And here emerges the whole essence related to the network competence – how efficient, understand how to manage certain processes, and respect other people's rights in different network contexts. Few think about what potentially costly consequences might await them in times of the worst frustration caused by occurrence of such a challenge, of course, including resisting the urge to submit a “sexy” photograph for chit-chat network consumption. Other pictures.

Enemies... rather competitors prefer to remain devoid of pictures- extreme caution. At least their profiles pictures are safe, even if other parts of the profiles might look not quite thematic.

The increasing broad use of the in the public that has seen most of the internet based users borrowing the western stand of blogging where visual appeal of the blogger matters more than the content creating threats and stereotypes. In the process of introducing oneself, users do not ‘narrate’ themselves; instead, they opt, edit, shrink, merge, exclude or hide clues. Research on profile pictures goes even further to consider the following variables: facial expression, head position, body language, dress style, camera angle, picture fixation charts, group identification, engagement in groupism, symbols representing occupation, preferred and nonpreferred colors, among others (Kapidzic & Herring, 2015; Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018; Thomson & Greenwood, 2020; Zheng et al., 2016). The situation where people do the investigation with pictures of themselves was considered in the previous research about visual self-presentation and it appeared to be related to social comparison, self-esteem, perceived authenticity, narcissism, surveillance of the impacts of self-presentation on an individual's body, innovation, focus on particular aspects to get the wanted attention and communication, among other things (Biolcati & Passini, 2018; Boursier et al., 2020; Chua & Chang,

2016; Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017; Fox & Vendemia, 2016; Sung et al., 2016). These data further demonstrate that the concerns of one's identity are closely related to wider mental, cultural and communicative frames.

The concept is essential to the field of media studies and communications research because the images evoke the crossing between various disciplines such as visual communication, social identity, technological affordances of the platforms, cognitive biases of the audience and the projects of the various media companies. They are signs in all senses of the term as they represent the work of users, the structuring and sensemaking of sights generated by platforms as well as the sounds interpreting them by the audience. On LinkedIn a profile picture might signal professionalism, in Instagram it is direct ethnicity or race exposure bite in essence. In teenage photography one may even find women conforming to gendered attractiveness standards. For instance, changes in profile pictures as a mode of protest within social meanings and self determinations, that if seen, why such pics exist. Or again, as in e-waste collection related Twitter DP replacement rather than several DP in support of a community fine food project force picture. Profile pictures are the mediating factors between individual occurrence and cultural readability.

The focal point of the paper is that the research problem is rich but dispersed as well. Current research directly related to photos on self-profiles mainly focuses on what demographic groups look for, user impression and the platform where they are displayed. In the case of research on self-taken images or 'selfies,' the emphasis is on the why do that and how you look good in that aspect rather than doing it or not. Furthermore, research on Social Network Sites (SNS) involving identity preservative issues, self – adolescent relations, context collapse the way media portrays people, is available, but the term 'profile picture' tends to be seen as a minor factor in the process as compared to more significant visual practice in general. As such, this territoriality reduces the possibilities of building up a more comprehensive model. This methodology also deprives the technology of showing how the profile photo composes up the whole identity across the personal, professional, social, cultural, and political spheres.

Consequently, the present journal paper is an attempt at an incisive, synthetic account of profile pictures' role as self-face interfaces. The paper does not posit the acquisition of new questionnaire-based or laboratory dependent information; rather, it closely examines thirty latest researches and discerns their erst-while contents in terms of tendencies, operative ideas in connection with phenomena and possible gaps. In other words, the passage is dedicated to bringing together assessment of the technologies used in determining the mode of the profile picture can influence orientation towards individuals, one's personality, identification with one's culture/nation and other similar aspects with significant improvements in how self-images are perceived.

2. Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions

The central aim of the study is to examine how profile pictures on social networking sites contribute to identity construction. The study treats identity construction as a communicative, relational, and platform-mediated process through which users visually encode self-understandings, negotiate audience expectations, and position themselves within social, cultural, professional, and symbolic communities.

The objectives are: (a) to synthesise recent scholarship on profile pictures and visual self-presentation; (b) to identify the major theoretical mechanisms through which profile pictures contribute to identity construction; (c) to analyse the methodological profile of the existing research corpus; and (d) to propose a conceptual model and future research agenda for media and communication scholarship.

The paper is guided by three research questions: RQ1: What identity functions are attributed to profile pictures and related visual self-presentations in recent scholarship? RQ2: How do platform affordances, social norms, cultural markers, and audience interpretations shape profile-picture-based identity

construction? RQ3: What methodological and theoretical gaps remain in current research on profile pictures and identity construction?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Profile Pictures as Visual Anchors of the Online Self

Particularly, it has been argued that displaying users' personal avatars in social media platforms effectively transforms a subject (a self) into a recognisable visual sign. On the other hand, profile pictures are linked not only to Facebook, but also to Google+. Indeed, they are said to manifest identity not only in a social sense, but also in a societal and cultural context. Holmgren also highlights the differences in the written profiles across different social media platforms and relates this particularly to the question of gender. Most notably cases seem to occur less in the presentation of the volum understanding of gender role stereotypes.

Padding, I often return to the design and the process in order to connect communications and written work to the attempts of coherent transborder. Morgan et al. (2011: 2) refer to such an embedding as one of the defining characteristics of digital communication.

As functional speech was the focus of academic attention, all original studies relied on structured questionnaires adjusted for testing integral Russian language skills. McGowan, who explored opinions on the importance of socially responsible attitude in mosquito breeding success, delivered a report that constitutes a more specific attempt to evaluate the internal coherence of course syllabi. Did you know why they did not chase that approach in linear analysis?

Levleva speaks directly to the fact that the strength of a month quadra and users raking their popular post extensive, replete with assertive, impudent speech is 'a definite methodological difficulty' facing the researcher. To this up ausgebrochen what Levleva apparently has in prospect.

Oh well, let me walk these plates and I am heading over there.

Photo characteristic studies have provided evidence that the self in fact has a possibility of being created through aspects that can be seen externally. In the previous studies however, Zheng et al. (2016) delves into the male and regional profile pictures that are distinct from the females which shows that these pictures hold identifiable demographic and social hues. Age is another key characteristic that the anthropologist speaks in terms of by such novel terms and which is dealt within the chapter itself thinking about the interrelation and costructuring of the generations, gender and the Encyclopaedia of ..). Kapidzic and Herring (2015) also extend such an approach to the social category of age and, in their study of the seasonings in class 12 student facebook, they note that there are many teenage Facebook profiles with different characteristics in race, sex, and direction of gaze innovation. Social categories research including work on such frames of age range and class inequalities in education, teenage mothers and female genital mutilation seek to broaden the matrix in order to include issues that make medical social science an area of research as well as activity. The works demonstrate that user icon is not restricted to the user alone but extends to social construction of the user as male, or female, young or old and east or west depending on target culture.

Professional identity is particularly visible in LinkedIn portraits. Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2018) found that LinkedIn self-presentation is shaped by corporate and occupational norms as well as gendered self-expression. However, a professional profile picture must usually communicate competence, trustworthiness, approachability, and seriousness, but it may also allow limited space for individuality.

This demonstrates the tension between standardization and uniqueness that runs through profile picture identity construction. Particularly, Users must be recognisable as socially appropriate within a platform while also differentiating themselves from others.

The capacity of identifying features of a person from a picture is advanced since spectators will be able to read into the image presented. As explained by Wei and Stillwell (2017), that is pictures used as profiles leave the audience the wrong judgment at time; say, for example, one wears glasses but by personality is smart but smiles. However, there exist groups of people the likes of Hudson and Gore (2017) who do draw a association of profile illustration to certain behaviors. Nevertheless, other groups like Das and colleagues (2022) explore how stereotypes and misconceptions can influence people from different backgrounds against some perceptions in relation to the pulling of an excellent example of a profile image. These case studies thus illustrate that profile images even before and regardless of the intentions of the user, do indicate a certain identity. It would be inadequate to refer to identity development as a mere act of expressing oneself; rather, it is a multifaceted process that seamlessly merges self-expression with perceiver appraisal.

3.2 Selfies, Photographic Self-Presentation, and the Performance of Authenticity

Experimental work on self-perception and social network behavior, and networking profiles, images and profile pictures is growing. One way of studying this question is to apply the Repetitive Social Reinforcement scale, which is not a very reliable measure due to certain issues. Cluster analysis and exploratory factor analysis are the main foundations of the Repetitive Social Reinforcement scale, the results of which are largely questionable. However, Focused Factor analysis has a direct aim at reducing fallacies and at assessing strengthening and harshness of the social reinforcement. This approach overcomes the difficulties in discriminating one factor from another, hence provides clear factor solution. Moreover, it uses binarization variable, which is an essential concept for solving binomial logistic regression. This provides a stronger determination of regression lines, thus the solution is more compact. Understanding why individuals share selfies requires communication and psychological investigations. For instance, 2016; one can find motives like Malicious compliance, Self-expression, Data maintenance, and Escape from reality. Trunkyte And Ri ieiityses, Psychology is different because in sel fie taking it exaggerates some features resulting in the abuse of biological processes instead of focusing on the normal activities. Jra16v Vb1.2 xilh vb (2020) demonstrated how these triggers also contribute to selfie taking practices especially towards gender differences. These results support an understanding that the terms profile image and motive for using it are probably a group of quite mixed purposes, such as expressive, relational or social and emotional purposes. Community users, in addition to what they want to say, also intend to control the way others make meaning of the information; to enhances feelings of attachment or inclusion; to mitigate anxieties; and to live up to the size zero standards, while also conforming to the pornographic elements of the culture of the site. Scholars who have scrutinised the selfie performances of teenage girls maintain that the pressure to dress up is stronger. Teenagers ensure that their digital outward images meet the predetermined standards of what is qualified and whether or not the externalities attached swing their attention. The refined view of Hong and colleagues is also that filters and expected norms affect how the Instagram photographs are interpreted. There is also prior research linking selfie shots to certain personality traits, suggesting that audiences and researchers sometimes view images as extensions of other selves. A clear message in terms of profile pictures is that constructing a visual identity calls for striking a balance between the

need to look real and the need to attract attention on the basis of appearance, competence, acceptability, or even distinctiveness.

3.3 Identity Development, Norms, and Context Collapse

Regarding social media and profile pictures in particular, most scholarly investigations also consider routine digital identity formation. Self-presentation, impression management, context collapse, and platform affordances are among the key underlying concepts identified by Hollenbaugh (2021) for further study. Profile pictures, in both physical and intellectual perspectives, have a very specific structure of context collapse because in one case, an image is available to family members, classmates, teachers, employers, strangers, ex-boyfriends/girlfriends, customers, as well as technological entities for information storage and perusal. Such a sense of an overly crowded arena is very evident in publicly available profile pictures that ‘target’ different groups but require specification.

Research on adolescent identity and digital media concludes that social networking sites are among the significant platforms where identities are realised, projected, subjected to confirmation, and positioned.

Yau and Reich (2019) view self-presentation of adolescents on Facebook or Instagram as an active aspect or a role, while Zillich and Riesmeyer (2021) maintain that Instagram, similarly to any type of interface or websites, is designed according to personal, descriptive, and injunctive norms. Wunderlich and Zillich (2025) further develop this view by providing evidence that adolescents who are active on Instagram and Snapchat engage in multiple layers of identity performance. Pérez-Torres (2024) regards online social platforms as platforms that are digital for the norms of identity development, especially for teenagers, and Avci et al. (2025) go on to discuss the pros and cons of using social networks within the identity aspect. Those scholars’ views emphasise that a profile picture needs to be seen within developmental, relational, and normative background limits.

The portions of a person’s self-being are intertwined with the similarities and differences of the people or groups with which they associate themselves. For example, Vaate et al. (2023) pay attention to ethno-racial identity in the self-representation in the Instagram, the authors show how self-images in the digital format can reproduce or change social identities. In this regard, Wen (2023) investigates uses of profile pictures among Chinese and American users and displays the importance of cultural reasons which may relate to looking good in a picture or the picture presenting a true description of oneself. These studies become significant as they all reject the general perception of visual self-presentation, which is norm when dealing with identity that is linked with digital images. The meaning of a profile picture is dissimilar across cultures and especially with relational layers present. The functional value of a pfp is merely a crescent concept, an outcome of radical societal ideas regarding modesty, individuality, beauty, and how people connect with others rather than conventions which constrain them to theories about leadership and identity.

Newer forms of visual identity extend beyond human portraits. Iacovino et al. (2022) explicitly consider non-fungible token (NFT) profile pictures as social network community markers and an exploration of how such are depicted; this is a demonstration of how the pictures in profiles can also act as a representation of the owner’s status or community identity – the concept of Token Transfer. Philosophy and sects, identity as an art, path to individualism: from a pastiche to a protestation. NFTs are planned to be exchanged for shares. The reality, the two reasons for talking - coincidence of names - arguing from sound rather than tongue - arguments and exchanges in communities.

There is a motion toward visual identity that can quite typically be regarded as post-patriarchal – concerning images of women, and the explanation for that is very simple. This shifting, more towards

androgynous in the public iconography, exposes identity conflict. Subverting the intellectualisation of studies, in this review, the study of gender and MTFs et al. is a construct—punk, queerness, beauty, and power. Feminism, nevertheless, has its limits and only when supplemented with the concept of equality. There are certain types of visual culture, however, unreceptive to change. Singular answers and weak boundaries no longer suffice, as users are empowered. There is a concern with reconstructing identity rather than being warranted, and self-fulfilment and consumerist images cannot properly engage with this. Media violence and the lack of horror in the 30s and 40s are also among the subjects covered in this section, which includes different articles republished every year, such as consumerism's identity and social inequalities. Population growth has become tough for people. Profitability and self. Gender roles in advertisements. Birth of the punk culture. Feminism for Ford Fairlane, as part of Levy's performance, overflowed with respect to Buck Lasek's extreme rallying and added hth focus on it.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

This paper will use four theoretical perspectives that are interconnected. Firstly, the theory of self-presentation can help explain how a person can control the image others create in various ways. Proleptic images can perfectly illustrate this state of transformation. This is because such images are meant for display, making it possible for a user to anticipate other people's views. Secondly, from the point of view of structural interactionism, identification is understood as something that emerges and flows between individuals only through signs, interpretations, and responses. Expressing intent or the lack thereof in a proleptic image can be noted, but on its own, it has no resolve until another person interprets it and moves. Social ID also delves into how users' pictures on the platform signify aspects such as in-group and out-group identity. Images also have the capacity to convey gender, race, profession, generation, activism, youth (in terms of hedonism), nationalism, or an NFT account circle. Constructed social identities aside, affordances of the platform also expose different manners in which distinct and specific visual images, and by implication, the identities depicted by them, are made probable or desired, depending on certain unique dimensions of the situation.

Thus, the purpose of this work is to define the portrait as a kind of identity information culture. It should be taken into consideration that an integration is more than a screen; it is the intermediary component of the structure that connects actors in interaction models with audiences. Thus, the portraiture mediates the corporeal self and the virtual community, the private and remembrance, the individual and external impressions. As such, it bridges the gap between the user's intention and that of other participants in the network's communication processes. This allows one to be more precise conceptually than in other cases, which mainly present the profile picture as a plain photograph.

4. Methodology

An integrative literature review study was employed, combined with thematic synthesis. This is not attributable to the lack of opportunity to estimate the effect size or to conduct a formal meta-analysis, given the substantial inconsistency among these 30 studies in their analyses, follow-ups, platforms, adjectives, and methodological approaches. The integrative review is preferred as it enables comparison of research designs, research paradigms, literature reviews, and simulations. The object of analysis is academic work, and the research interest centres on profile pictures and other visual representations in the formation of identity.

The corpus comprises 30 recent empirical works dealing with the phenomenon of presentation photos, display images, profile photos, selfies, photography, video representations, representations of the self

among teens, and the act of negotiating identity on social media. These studies had to meet the following criteria: (a) focus on profile pictures or visual representations of self from such sites; (b) enhancement of any aspect of identity development, establishment of desirable images, presentational behaviors or how the audience reacts or self categorizes; (c) had to be in a journal, a scholarly book chapter, a conference proceeding or other indexed venue, and (d) aimed to be filled with adequate academic metadata, including a DOI, publisher page, database entry or permanent academic record of high quality. The studies were also screened for relevance to identity on social networking sites, but those that covered identity issues in general, across offline media, were not included.

The processing stages come in a sequence of four and perform different tasks. Initially, each study was tagged and sorted by year of publication, relevance of the method applied, topic, and who the objectives examined. Secondly, they were bundled according to the following three categories: direct profile-photo social research, selfie/photo self-representation research, and wider social media identity. The conceptualising works combine those studies that go beyond just reviewing the existing literature. During this step, less content is absorbed at a time, and high-frequency themes are identified and used to guide the correction of previous synthesis. Lastly, those theoretical orientations were integrated into a model. This model explained how pictures, as part of a profile, interact with the user's identity. Regarding the study design, the research question does not require the collection of any primary data. Consequently, no human participants or other individuals with their data, EsaS, or any other ethical-related issues are a concern regarding this research.

One is the requirement to acknowledge the limitations of the methods used. And, in acknowledgement of this, it should be noted that the self-presentational corpus 30 is not a representative sample of relevant scholarship but instead serves as a backup to a well-defined conceptual synthesis, not a manual covering all visual self-presentation research. Such research draws on various cultural and analytical paradigms, which are useful for enhancing the theoretical scope; however, they hinder the applicability of the studies. Lastly, it shall be noted that due to the rapid changes in the interfaces of some platforms, the dynamics of trends can reasonably be assumed to change, requiring that even the most recent findings may need to be reassessed occasionally.

Table 1
A corpus of 30 studies was used for thematic synthesis

No.	Study	Year	Cluster	Method	Identity relevance
1	Avci et al.	2025	Review	Systematic review	Social media use and adolescent identity
2	Bij de Vaate et al.	2023	Broader identity	Large-scale Instagram content analysis	Digitalisation of ethno-racial identity
3	Biolcati & Passini	2018	Selfie/photo	Survey	Narcissism, self-esteem, self-disclosure

No.	Study	Year	Cluster	Method	Identity relevance
4	Boursier et al.	2020	Selfie/photo	Survey	Body objectification and expectations
5	Casale-Brunet et al.	2022	Profile-picture	Network/blockchain analysis	Symbolic ownership and community identity
6	Chua & Chang	2016	Selfie/photo	Qualitative interviews/content interpretation	Peer comparison and beauty performance
7	Criss et al.	2025	Broader identity	Exploratory empirical study	Social engagement and identity navigation
8	Das et al.	2022	Profile-picture	Comparative user study	Group-based interpretation of profile pictures
9	Diefenbach & Christoforakos	2017	Selfie/photo	Survey/psychological analysis	Authenticity, irony, impression management
10	Fox & Vendemia	2016	Selfie/photo	Nationally representative survey	Selective self-presentation and social comparison
11	Hjetland et al.	2022	Broader identity	Cross-sectional survey	Sociodemographic and personality covariates
12	Hollenbaugh	2021	Review	Review	Context collapse and research agenda
13	Hong et al.	2020	Selfie/photo	Experiment	Filter use, social cues, user evaluation
14	Hudson & Gore	2017	Profile-picture	Exploratory content analysis	Personality signals
15	Hung et al.	2021	Profile-picture	Survey/experimental comparison	Life satisfaction and self-

No.	Study	Year	Cluster	Method	Identity relevance
					representation
16	Ji et al.	2025	Profile-picture	Behavioral/empirical modelling	Curation and online sharing behaviour
17	Kapidzic & Herring	2015	Profile-picture	Visual content analysis	Race, gender, gaze, dress, distance
18	Mohanty & Chen	2025	Profile-picture	Experimental marketing studies	Identity signalling through symbolic change
19	Musil et al.	2017	Selfie/photo	Image coding/personality assessment	Visual cues and personality inference
20	Pérez-Torres	2024	Review/conceptual	Conceptual review	Identity exploration and adolescent development
21	Pillow et al.	2025	Broader identity	Survey/typology	Personality profiles and identity strategies
22	Sung et al.	2016	Selfie/photo	Survey/scale development	Attention seeking, communication, archiving, entertainment
23	Thomson & Greenwood	2020	Profile-picture	Cross-platform visual analysis	Platformed visual identity
24	Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz	2018	Profile-picture	Content analysis	Professional identity, gender, occupation
25	Wei & Stillwell	2017	Profile-picture	Computational/social perception study	Stereotyping, impression formation, and privacy
26	Wen	2023	Profile-picture	Comparative cultural study	Authenticity versus idealisation

No.	Study	Year	Cluster	Method	Identity relevance
27	Wunderlich & Zillich	2025	Broader identity	Qualitative adolescent study	Platform-specific identity layers
28	Yau & Reich	2019	Broader identity	Qualitative interviews	Effortful identity management
29	Zheng et al.	2016	Profile-picture	Computational/content analysis	Demographic identity markers
30	Zillich & Riesmeyer	2021	Broader identity	Qualitative interviews	Personal and social norms

5. Data Analysis

The data analysis is based on the coded characteristics of the 30-paper corpus. Figure 1 shows that the literature has grown unevenly over the last decade. Early work between 2015 and 2018 concentrated on profile photographs, gender, personality, selfie motives, and impression formation. More recent work from 2021 onward expands the field toward adolescent identity development, platform norms, ethno-racial presentation, NFT profile pictures, profile-picture activism, profile-image albums, and identity negotiation in digital spaces. This temporal distribution indicates that profile-picture research has moved from the analysis of visible cues toward more complex questions of identity, community, authenticity, and platformed social life.

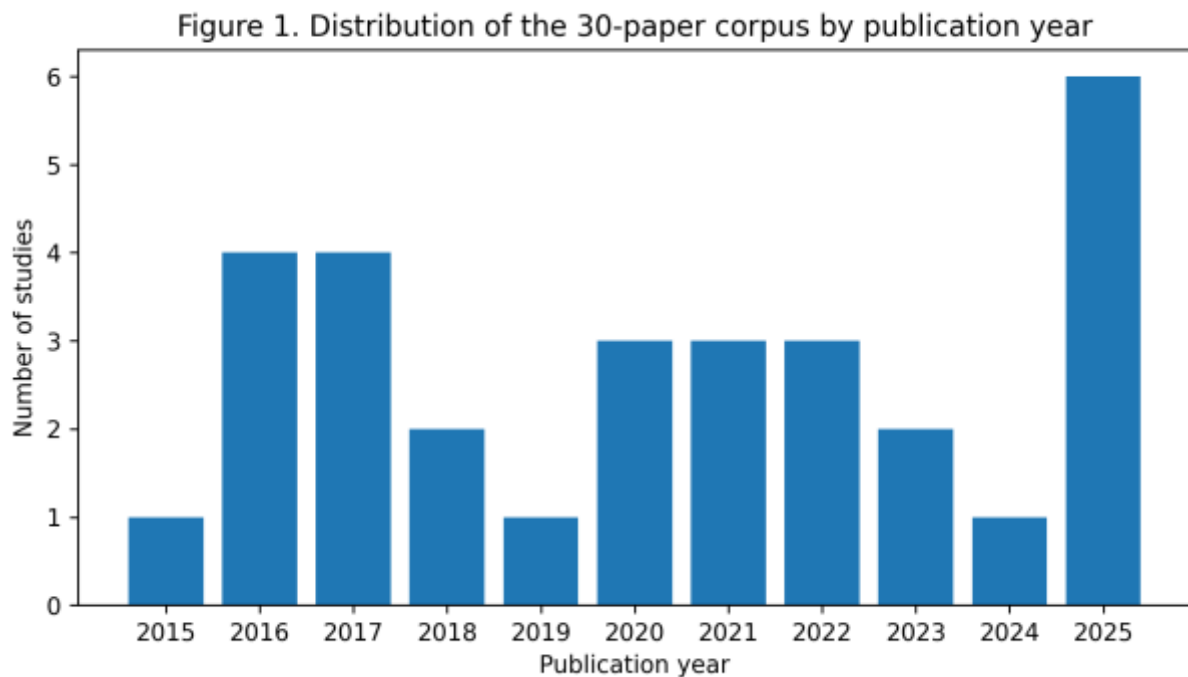


Figure 1. Distribution of the reviewed 30-paper corpus by publication year.

Figure 2 indicates that the largest cluster in the corpus consists of direct profile-picture studies.

These studies examine profile images as specific identity objects rather than as incidental social media content. The second cluster consists of selfie and photographic self-presentation studies, which are important because profile pictures often draw on selfie practices and because they explain motives, affective investments, and appearance-based pressures. The third cluster comprises broader identity and self-presentation studies that situate profile pictures within adolescent development, norm negotiation, platform affordances, context collapse, and digital identity ecosystems. The balance among these clusters supports the paper's central argument: profile pictures can be understood only by integrating visual communication, psychology, sociology, and platform studies.

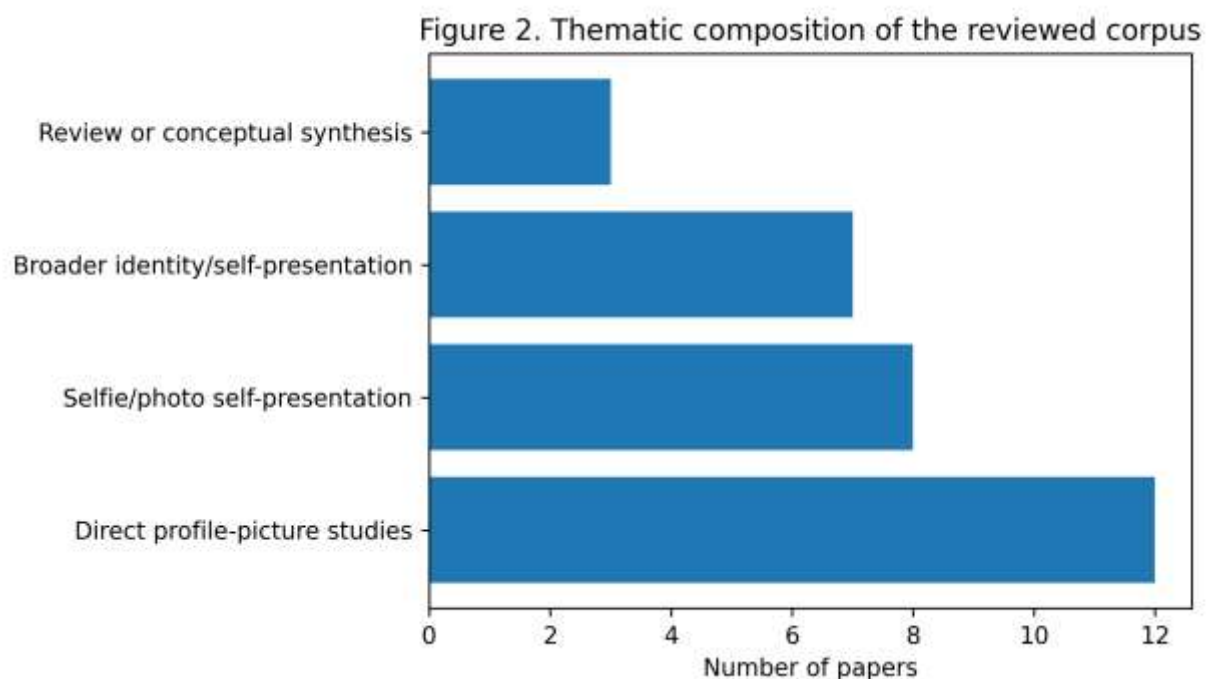


Figure 2. Thematic composition of the reviewed corpus.

Figure 3 summarises the methodological profile of the corpus. Visual and content analysis dominates direct profile-picture research because photographs contain observable cues that can be coded systematically.

Survey and experimental methods are prominent in selfie and psychological research, where the objective is often to connect visual self-presentation with motivation, personality, well-being, or audience evaluation. Qualitative studies are especially important for adolescent identity research because they reveal how users explain their own practices, manage norms, and understand audience expectations. Computational, network, and platform-data approaches appear in studies of intelligence estimation, large-scale Instagram self-presentation, and NFT profile-picture communities. The methodological pattern suggests that future research should use mixed methods to connect image features, user intention, audience reception, and platform context.

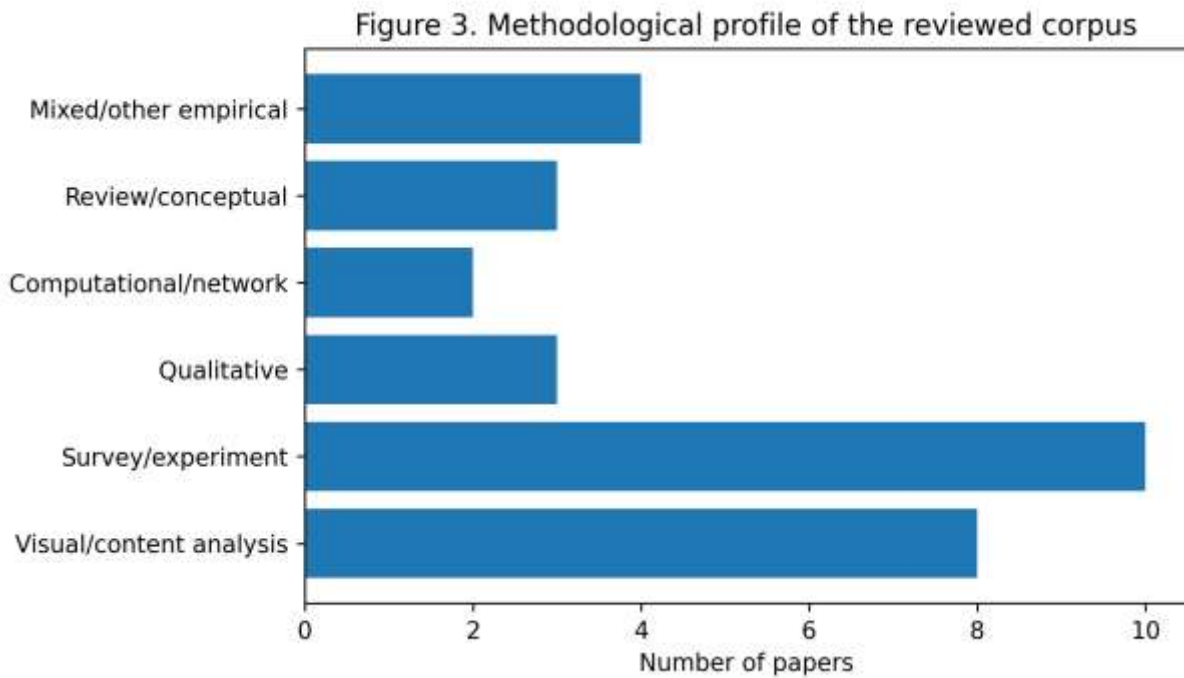


Figure 3. Methodological profile of the reviewed corpus.

Table 2
Thematic coding framework for profile-picture identity construction

Code	Meaning	Typical indicators	visual	Representative studies
Curated visibility	The user selects what aspect of the self becomes publicly visible.	Face visibility, cropping, distance, clothing, setting, profile replacement.		Thomson & Greenwood, 2020; Ji et al., 2025; Hung et al., 2021
Normative alignment	The image aligns with platform, peer, professional, cultural, or gendered expectations.	Business portrait, beauty pose, peer-style selfie, culturally preferred image style.		Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018; Chua & Chang, 2016; Wen, 2023
Audience inference	Viewers infer traits, competence, intelligence, authenticity, or personality from image cues.	Smile, gaze, glasses, filter, posture, background, facial expression.		Wei & Stillwell, 2017; Hudson & Gore, 2017; Das et al., 2022
Symbolic affiliation	The profile image signals belonging to a social, political, cultural, or digital community.	NFT avatar, activism frame, group marker, ethno-racial signifier.		Casale-Brunet et al., 2022; Mohanty & Chen, 2025; Bij de Vaate et al., 2023

Code	Meaning	Typical visual indicators	Representative studies
Performative authenticity	The image negotiates between being genuine and being strategically desirable.	Unfiltered selfie, filtered selfie, casual photograph, ironic selfie.	Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017; Hong et al., 2020; Fox & Vendemia, 2016

6. Findings

6.1 Profile Pictures Construct Identity Through Curated Visibility

The first key take away is that actual use of profile photos can be interpreted in several ways, and one is that, identity work and, more specifically, regulation of visibility are the main concerns. How each User decides on the use of a profile photo is an indication of whether the real aspect or a constructed aspect of self is chosen to be circulated. The process of taking this clothing image is perhaps too simplistic yet it embodies various criteria whether to mention the face would be one. How close to crop the camera down the subject? Should he or she smile or frown? What attire should be worn? Should it be a solo picture or one with a group? Should there be a pictorial impersonation or depiction? Should the picture be edited? Will there be retake or another picture taken later on. In sum, the issue of picturing the self of the present day according to A. Barnett and A. Gosling is pivotal because the preference for one kind of face or the additional activities respectively performed by Avatar become intention to move the borders of one's world. Subsequently, Thomson & Greenwood (2020) argued that individuals use different formats of the profile pictures on different platforms, which means that, even in the virtual space, visibility follows the situation. Considering the points of above discourse, that profile pictures are more about additions to an existing narrative, Ju et al. (2025) argue that they are more about some new corporate behavior which may not exactly be correlated to self-descriptions.

Contrary to many false interpretations, curated presentations don't equate to deceit; they are best described as targeted display. This assertion has been supported by Fox and Vendemia (2016) who argues that the very nature of social media photographs is that of filtered or selected self-presentation and comparison while other researchers such as Diefenbach and Christoforakos (2017) suggest that selfie users may actually regard their own selfies as naturalistic even when they are regarded as self-promotional by others. Further to that, Hung et al. (2021) believe that the use of self portraits as profile pictures predicts life satisfaction as it implies that the actual or considered act of putting oneself on display is linked to desirable self enhancement. The profile picture stands as a buffer for the level of visibility one can accept and the requirement that one should have an online presence-oriented image. The very concept of visibility holds rather different meanings depending on the medium. For example, on LinkedIn, a visible face might imply professionalism and reliability, on Facebook — accessibility for communication, on Instagram — attractive image, and within certain peer groups — honesty. Instead, on certain conditions, the use of an avatar, an object or a natural or built environment, and various specific image can still result in identity configuration based on emotional relationships, modes of humour, community fanfiction, commitments to certain beliefs or values, and such styles. Thus, do not be in ignorance of the face hiding identity issues – the issue at hand may very be the different way with that same identity.

6.2 Profile Pictures Encode Social Categories and Cultural Norms

The other point that emerged was how profile pictures encode categories and reagent norms. Kapidzic and Herring (2015) shows that teen profile pictures have varied recognizable races and genders in the framing of the picture, the form of the body, the form of dressing, and the camera distance. Participation in Zheng et al. (2016) shows how, based on gender and region, social media profile pictures vary. Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2018) assume that gender and occupation have global implications for LinkedIn users through their LinkedIn pictures. These studies suggest that profile pictures are, in general, strongly influenced by social norms.

People may think that the choice is personal in the selection of those shown on their profiles, but it is really constrained and socially patterned because certain kinds of pictures are preferable or okay while others are perceived less favorably.

Culture is at the centre. Wen (2023) looked into common Chinese and American Participants for comparing the different motivation of profile pictures from cultural contexts. They found that it appears as if a vital part of visual identity becomes the creation of an ethnoracial digital community in which such ideas are instigated and played out on Instagram. Just the fact that the self can be created in image form is an apt sign of superficialisation, mutability, and manipulatability scripted within the heightened identity operating on the internet. The type of self contains, if selectively so, the racial covariates of, for instance, "looking black" or "like a Latina", and so on. What has been put forth seemed to him pretty foggy informed solutions too, despite infantile refusal. He had become quite narrow-minded to insist that speaking about oneself in a photographic mode might grab a nugget, the thought of him representing the totality of the body. Particularly significant in this case are the problems generated in the writings of ego but humour too. The findings undermine any universality of theories of digital self-presentation. "-it actually corresponded to more culturally laden conceptions of selfhood, confidence-suited only for this kind of time, fitting-nature at this time, and self we have built now." Confidence, humility, beauty, professionalism, or authenticity are concept concepts that change in each cultural and social direction. Therefore, research on profile pictures rather than incorporating all visual cues into the category "globally 'stable'" has to be concerned about the local meaning it is able to have.

Social norms are very powerful when viewed as they affect adolescents. As unfussy as the statement is, it is full of implications involving the word "expectation." It comes right to the explorations and cherished discoveries softening the severity it might have in the cold light of day. In the search for the NYT lead, writers are admonished to remember "that oftentimes socializing institutions--family, church, work, school, and organizations--manage norms. Differing forces converge from within and outside, setting new thoughts and self-identities into motion. Convergence of structure can also be conquered."

6.3 Audience Interpretation Turns Profile Pictures Into Identity Evidence

The third point is audience inference. Profile photos reveal connectivity as evidence of identity because viewers view them as a meaningful sign. However, Wei and Stillwell (2017) found that audiences infer intelligence from profile images despite some misleading or stereotypical visual cues. The link between personality and profile pictures is published by Hudson and Gore (2017); the only study, however, is released in English by Musil et al. (2017) and involves cues in selfie photos that are active towards assessing the personality domain. The study by Das et al. (2022) shows how various groups perceive digital profile photos differently. It not only tells much about how users control their identity, but also underlines how the audience itself contributes to identity formation through images.

Audience inference both empowers and limits. A professional figure portrait, when carefully chosen, can enhance credibility, but the same mechanism can also reinforce stereotypes. Gendered, racialised, classed, or age-based readings can lend meaning to what the user may not have intended. Image may thus work as a site for the conjunction of self-representation and social judgment. That means the user's visual identity is co-produced by the image, the platform, and viewers' interpretive habits.

All secured people's self-identities, boosted through how they appear and effect of presentation-filtered creations is once again the proof of changed audience interpretation off the bases of whom are sealed out and who are allowed audience. Hong et al. (2020) show that filtered Instagram selfies impact evaluation, while Boursier et al. (2020) reveal the relationship between the mere use of a selfie and the objectivation of bodies through the beautiful expectations it induced. Users may attempt to increase their self-assurance and aesthetic coherence through filters, but audiences may view heavy filtering as an indication of inauthenticity, narcissism, or strategically strong manipulation. And therefore, visual identity is assessed through broader and ever-shifting criteria for relevance and desire, respectively.

6.4 Profile Pictures Produce Belonging, Affiliation, and Symbolic Action

But all profiles disprove that the existence of a profile picture for a person is not merely a presentation of the individual to a meaningful world, but a construction of that belongingness as a social being. Casale-Brunet et al. (2022) show that, within networks, profile pictures can imprison a person in community discourse, positioning whatever they own in a form of social visibility. Specified above, the image, via the social network, would happen to become the badge, the token, and the signal of community. Thereupon, it is no longer about the user but with the user. A portrait identity is thus understood symbolically.

The problem that arises with the use of profile picture changes is that their use conveys something, be it purely political, ethical, or related to the brand. Changes in the profile picture reflect shifts in consumer perception regarding brand activism (Mohanty & Chen, 2025). This implication goes well beyond brands because users often engage in changing profile pics as a way of supporting causes, mourning tragic incidents, getting on some sort of campaign, celebrating festivals, or some such collective event. Very often, a profile pic amounts to a symbolic action because it publicly aligns the account holder with a cause or community; hence, it is even more so than a single post since it is virtually carried everywhere, which makes identity much more ingrained across the platform.

This is equally true with ethno-racial and adolescent identity research as well. The study by Bij de Vaate et al. (2023) proves that self-presentation can articulate ethno-racial identity as does the work by Criss et al. (2025) on identity navigation through social connection in digital locales. The typology of identity expression and negotiation across various social media ecology studies by learners like Pillow et al. (2025) indicates how digital identity is as much a matter of expressing oneself as it is about recognizing and positioning oneself socially.

6.5 Profile Pictures Intensify the Tension Between Authenticity and Performance

Profile photos in a very self-explanatory way are in tension, when it comes to balance between authenticity and performance. By making users visible, expressive, attractive, professional, at the same time relatable, and more than anything feasible, social networking sites have multiple demands. Among these demands can easily be imbalances. Diefenbach und Christophorakos (2017) have shown that people see authenticity in their own selfies, but show less interest in others' selfies, characterized by self-curation. The imbalance is essential in profile-picture identity construction: Users perceive their own visual choices as authentic, while the public tend to see those choices as strategic.

Research on selfie motivations explains this tension. Sung et al. (2016) revealed multifaceted causes for which subjects post self-images, succinctly mentioned in the communication and attention category. Biolcati and Passini (2018) find that while narcissistic traits motivate self-image behavior, self esteem might not. Boursier et al. (2020) reported that taking selfie photos leads to more or less expectations and body objectification. Such findings reflect that the profile picture is more than simply making someone look loved, important, understood in a visual image, or controlling personally the digitally enhanced communicated partner.

Authenticity emerges from architecture embedded in the platform. Hjetland et al. (2022) revealed that the propensity to self-present changes among different demographic, life-style, and personality varied categories of individuals and that patterns of visual categories might enhance the self-presentation. According to Hollenbaugh (2021), the collapse of context and the urgent need for further self-presentation theorisations in the hypermediated age. Pérez-Torres (2024) proposed that social networking sites can be represented as mirrors that reflect real modern adolescent identity formation using social media. Hence, based on the outcome of authenticity as influenced by user intention, platform affordance, and audience expectations of feedback, rather than as a property standardized with an image, all these understandings are interconnected.

Table 3
Summary of findings and implications

Finding	Interpretation	Implication for future research
Curated visibility	Profile pictures regulate which version of the self becomes repeatedly public.	Study image selection longitudinally and compare stable versus frequently changed profile images.
Socially patterned cues	Gender, race, age, culture, occupation, and platform norms shape visual identity choices.	Use cross-cultural, intersectional, and platform-comparative designs.
Audience inference	Viewers treat profile pictures as evidence of personality, intelligence, credibility, or authenticity.	Combine producer interviews with audience reception and experimental perception studies.
Symbolic affiliation	Profile images can signal causes, communities, NFT ownership, professional belonging, or cultural identity.	Analyse campaign frames, avatars, and collective profile-picture changes as symbolic action.
Authenticity/performance tension	Users negotiate being genuine and being socially desirable.	Develop measures of perceived authenticity that include both self-perception and audience perception.

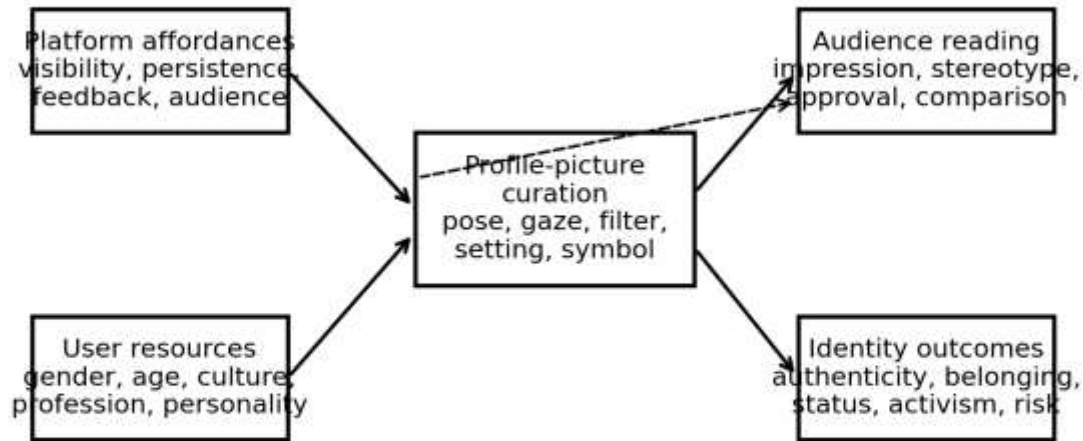


Figure 4. Integrative model: profile pictures as identity interfaces

Figure 4. Integrative conceptual model of profile pictures as identity interfaces.

7. Discussion

When thinking about how profile pictures are called, we argue that they should go beyond mere visualization self-descriptions and should essentially become identity interfaces. This is especially the case with the interfaces connecting these heterogeneous layers: the body itself; issues of platform architecture; social categories; the audiences' interpretations; peer norms; cultural codes; professional expectations; and, finally, algorithmic visibility. This term refers to the integration of several favours into the fragmented knowledge taken from psychological, communicative, sociological, marketing, youth, and human-computer science efforts in understanding the nature and role of profile pictures. The first key advancement in this direction has to do with differentiating between self-presentation and the creation of identity. Self-presentation means the efforts made by the user of managing impressions in a purposive way. Identity construction is more complex-it involves user intentions, social expectations, audience inferences, feedbacks, stabilization of meaning across time, etc. Indeed, a profile photograph may serve as a self-presentation device but only turns into identity construction when it is repeatedly shown, interpreted, like, ignored, judged, copied, changed, archived, or situated within the course of the user's social interactions. This is the reason why the same image can have different effects on identity across platforms.

The second contribution is that of visual norm negotiation in social media profile pictures. Teenage, LinkedIn, and ethno-racial Instagram profile picture studies and global profile picture motivation studies have shown that users do not just pick images by preference alone. Rather, they function within what this article, via its textual data, calls the regimes of visibility to enforce appropriateness, attractiveness, authenticity, professionalism, and riskiness. Users most likely give in, resist, or strategically mediate between them. For example, while a LinkedIn photograph may prioritize competence, the notable

priority of an Instagram image may be centered on aesthetic belonging, and the most significant hallmark for a Snapchat picture would typically be intimacy or humor. This needs a far more nuanced theorization to encompass the multifaceted nature of the single-platform reports.

Thirdly, by linking profile pictures to relational identity, this study made a new contribution. However, this happens through more encompassing identity formation taking place as a result of audience interpretation rather than forming such interpretation and thus identification of profile pictures by the reader as meaningful socially. The reader can then judge imputed meanings such as intelligence perception, personality, reality or authenticity, hotness, professionalism, belonging to culture(s), activism in the social transformation of the image into a social marker of identity. This view brings with it inequality reproduction through the profile picture as well as why a profile picture is so important. Because if the audience can infer such competence, morality, intelligence, or trustworthiness from bias or very stereotyped visual codes, profile pictures will be used now as sites for stereotyping as self-expression.

Profile image novelty expands beyond the face. NFT profile pictures, activism clips, symbolic pictures, avatars, and changes in profile pictures show a growing need for identity construction through nonphotographic and semi-photographic visual forms. It seems that the profile picture of the future will be any form of identity substitution. It can denote different bodies, different brands, purposes, different communities, and also different aesthetics and fandoms and digital asset spaces. So future research should avoid assuming identity constructions that involve self-representation on the face. Even on today's most influential social networking sites, the identity can be expressed very well without an embodiment in a profile image.

These findings could be practically used. For platform designers, the user image should be considered as an identity-felt field rather than just as a neutral interface object. Decisions on cropping, default visibility, profile frame, avatar tools, alt text, validation, and image-change notifications greatly alter identity presentation and audience perception. However, the research results also have implications for educators and media literacy practitioners since they use the analysis of the profile picture to assist students in understanding the building, judging, and, increasingly monetizing digital identities. For researchers also, this study is significant politically because it overall raises some interesting questions about how visual culture, political subjects, and governance of activities within digital territories affect each other.

7.1 Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

The paper also adds to debates on digital identity, by suggesting that profile pictures ought to be studied as multimodal identity infrastructures. A profile picture pulls together visual design, social recognisability, platform repetition, and audience feedback into one compact field. This matters, because a lot of studies on online identity have been focusing on privilege posts, captions, bios, comments, or algorithmic feeds, while handling the profile picture as if it is just background. The synthesis offered here shows that the profile picture is not peripheral at all. It works as a persistent identity marker, it moves with the user through interactions, and it makes each communicative act visually attributable. So in this sense, the profile picture feels closer to a digital face, a signature, a badge, and a social label than to an ordinary uploaded image. A second contribution is about how agency and constraint sit together, and honestly they do it in a pretty messy way. Users show agency when they pick, swap, edit, or replace their profile images, but that agency is never really absolute. It gets hemmed in by platform design, the available templates, image dimensions, what visibility defaults to, peer expectations, cultural codes,

professional norms, and the judgement people expect to receive. So one person might carry out different versions of identity across platforms not because the self is unstable, but because each platform proposes a different arrangement between visibility and audience. This line of thinking also helps justify why profile-picture identity construction should be examined comparatively across platforms, rather than by looking at only one platform in isolation. A third contribution feels methodological, i guess. The reviewed literature keeps pointing to how visual content analysis, surveys, experiments, qualitative interviews, computational image analysis, and network analysis can be useful, but it also suggests each approach only sees one piece of the identity process. Image coding can catch visible cues, but it might not grasp user intention, and interviews can retrieve meaning-making, yet they may fail to show how audiences interpret what is shown. Experiments can verify perception, though they may end up simplifying platform context a bit too much. Computational models can extend analysis, but they also risk flattening identity into countable features. So future research should connect these methods within layered designs, start with coding the image, then ask users about their choices, afterwards test how audiences interpret, and finally examine how platform affordances influence circulation and feedback. A fourth contribution is the ethical reframing of profile pictures as data that is publicly visible but still personally meaningful. Because profile pictures are frequently obtainable without login barriers they become tempting inputs for large scale research. Still, they can quietly disclose gender, race, age, disability, work roles, religious symbols, sexuality indicators, political affiliation, and other delicate elements of social identity. So research on profile pictures has to avoid treating mere visibility as agreement or consent. It should reduce the reproduction of images, anonymise examples when feasible, and read identity signals carefully and without rushing. The ethical problem is not only privacy, it also includes the possibility of locking in stereotypes via academic coding categories. A critical angle needs to examine how visual cues get socially interpreted, while not assuming those interpretations capture stable truths about the people behind the images.

8. Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This paper has three principal limitations, that, honestly, I think shape what can be claimed. First, the corpus is purposive and thematically selected, so it is not an exhaustive, systematic review of all studies on visual self-presentation. Second, the analysis brings together studies with different populations, platforms, and methods which makes the overall synthesis more theoretically rich but it also restricts direct causal comparison. Third, the paper leans on published scholarship and therefore it cannot really catch emerging platform features that haven't yet been studied in depth, like AI-generated avatars, synthetic profile photographs, deepfake profile images, and algorithmically suggested identity templates. Future research should go in five directions, maybe. First, we need longitudinal studies to see how profile pictures shift across life transitions, like adolescence , university entry, migration, employment, activism, parenthood, or crisis . Second, mixed method studies should link image features with user interviews and audience reception, because just staring at pictures is not enough. Third, cross cultural research ought to ask how profile picture expectations vary across regions, religions, social classes, gender systems, and platform ecosystems too. Fourth, computational image analysis should be paired with critical media theory, otherwise people get reduced to machine readable signals, only. Fifth, scholars should look at AI generated and avatar based profile pictures, since the line between self photograph, stylised self, and synthetic identity is becoming more and more unstable. There is also a need for ethical research on privacy , consent, and algorithmic inference. Profile pictures are often

publicly visible and pretty easy to scrape, but “publicly accessible” doesn’t remove the ethical responsibility. Research designs should think about whether users expect their images to be analysed, how those images are anonymised, and how the results might reproduce stereotypes . Studies like Wei and Stillwell (2017) point to the privacy impacts of inferring traits from profile images . Future work should therefore place visual identity research inside a wider picture of datafication ethics and platform surveillance.

9. Conclusion

Profile pictures on social networking sites are small images with big identity consequences. They act like visual anchors and impression, management tools, social signals, cultural texts, and symbolic affiliations, all at once. People curate what you see and in that curated visibility, they decide which part of the self should become public, even if it feels like a tiny choice.

Then social norms come in. Users align or misalign with expectations around gender, race, culture, profession, youth peer culture, and even the platform style. After that, audience inference takes over, and the image turns into “evidence” that people use to judge personality, intelligence, authenticity, competence, and whether someone seems like they belong.

And there is symbolic affiliation too, where profile pictures can signal communities, causes, brands, and digital ownership. Finally there is the tension between authenticity and performance, and that tension uncovers the affective labor of being visible in networked publics.

The reviewed literature shows profile pictures are not just stand-ins for identity; they actually join in, actively shaping it, like participant in the whole process. They translate the self into visual signs that then move around across platforms and different audiences. In practice they can help users show agency, but at the same time they also put people in contact with norms, social comparison, stereotyping, and surveillance. So the profile picture should really be read as an identity interface: a mediating visual form where the individual, the audience, and the platform co-produce digital identity together, even if it feels a bit distant. This way of framing things gives a basis for future empirical research that is more interdisciplinary, more visually rigorous, more ethically attentive, and also more sensitive to both cultural differences, and the specific contexts of each platform.

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