Dr. Michaela Kramer, media education specialist at FAU, has investigated the influence smartphone photography and posting images on social media has on shaping young people’s sense of identity. She has drawn up a typology describing the different ways young people can present themselves via photos and what that says about their developing personalities.

Over recent years, photography has become an integral part of daily life, largely due to smartphones. Young people in particular appreciate the many different ways they can use photos for self-presentation and communication on social media. Bearing this in mind, the qualitative study focuses on the impact photography habits have on young people when exploring issues relating to their identity such as ‘who am I, how did I become who I am and who will I be in the future?’

For her thesis on ‘Visual biography work. Smartphone photography in adolescence from a media education perspective’ at Universität Hamburg, the FAU researcher Michaela Kramer developed a theoretical concept she refers to as ‘visual biography work’ which identifies the various ways young people use photography to help them find their own identity. ‘Life today, our biography, is increasingly being recorded as photos or videos, instead of just being passed on by word of mouth as was the case in the past,’ explains Dr. Michaela Kramer. ‘It is no longer only important occasions such as school leaving ceremonies or birthdays which are recorded, but predominantly snapshots of everyday life.’

For her study she selected twelve young people between the ages of 13 and 17, each from a different family background and with different interests. The boys and girls were asked to talk about themselves and then choose five pictures from their social media channels for comment and analysis. Dr. Kramer came to the conclusion that most images can be separated into the three main categories of body images, reproductions (in other words photos of photos and screenshots) and pictures of surroundings. ‘That is of course only a simplified definition,’ stresses Michaela Kramer. ‘Young people are a very diverse social group and use smartphone photography in a range of different ways and to a varying extent.’ However, she noted that social norms have an important influence on smartphone photography and that attitudes towards them vary among young people, with some taking a more critical stance than others.

By analysing the interviews in detail and interpreting photos together with the hashtags, likes and comments belonging to them, Dr. Kramer’s research has pinpointed three predominant types of visual biography work.

- She refers to the first ambitiously artistic type as ‘distinction’. Young people in this group use professional equipment to stand out from others of their age and take artistic, aesthetic photos.
- The second type can be classed as ‘conformity’: Young people in this group use their phone to take photos, and tend to take photos of themselves which focus on their body. They strike poses typically seen across social media channels.
- The third type is referred to as ‘minimal risk’: Young people in this group are unsure of themselves and tend to avoid posting photos of themselves on social media. These young people prefer to share pictures of their surroundings or screenshots which are less likely to show them up in front of others.
In her work, Dr. Michaela Kramer comes to the conclusion that media contribute to young people’s sense of identity. Her study showed that presenting their biography visually is important for young people. One interesting aspect is that this is a way for them to deal with their own past, present and future. The pictures do not only show how they want to be seen by others now and in the future, but also bring back memories every time the young people go back and look at them again. This helps them find answers to the question ‘Who am I?’.

The growing importance of media and visualisation in today’s society, in other words the trend among young people to communicate increasingly via visual media, offers both opportunities and risks, and this study offers a sound basis for further research into young people and media.

wissenschaftliche Ansprechpartner:
Dr. Michaela Kramer
Chair of Media Education
Phone: +49 911 5302 591
michaela.kramer@fau.de