Veszelszki, Ágnes (ELTE)
Image and Self-representation

Giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.[1]

1. Introduction

The involvement of image information is commonly said to be an accessory of digital change (see: Schlobinski 2009: 6). Visuality has a much more important role in our days than it had in the earlier periods of communication history. Just have a look at the graphical user interface of computer programmes, the layout of web pages, texts full of smileys and the torrent of pictures shared on social networking pages. This paradigm shift in the wake of the Gutenberg Galaxy is termed by Gottfried Boehm as the "Iconic Turn" (Boehm 1994). With the spread of visual communication technologies, visual communication itself is getting more and more common, too (Nyíri 2003: 273). In fact, some speak about the *omnipresence* of pictures ("Omnipräsenz der Bilder"; Maar 2006). Images are not under the control of consciousness, they bypass our minds and influence our thinking and emotions through their suggestive power (Giulani 2006: 185).

Profile pictures on social networking websites fall into a peculiar category.

It's an open secret that our photos uploaded to such websites are not only viewed by our friends and family members but also by our present or future employer. A British survey, which was carried out by the People Search website, polled almost one thousand HR managers asking them if they inspected their employee-to-be's photos shared on the internet before contracting them. One third of the British managers said that they regularly viewed their colleagues' photos and internet posts, and they found this method of gathering information quite important before hiring a new employee. Surprisingly, a quarter said they had turned off candidates due to their self-representation on the internet. Drunk party photos and rude comments to other's photos were considered as bad signs. Social networking sites (such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter) have an outstanding role in finding a job, establishing relationships and building the so called "self brand" (Purkiss–Royston-Lee 2010: 41, 214–5).

This motivated me to examine profile pictures on social sites from the aspect of visual culture and self-representation.

2. Overview

Social networking websites are not only used for finding friends, passing the time, playing or, in general, maintaining interpersonal communication. Personal profiles also serve as "private home pages" with a layout scheme determined by the given system. More or less consciously, users use profile pages to build up their online self-images: they design their profiles according to the image created by themselves, or the desirable image they want to create of themselves in others. A non-verbal element of the profile page is the replaceable profile picture. This presentation deals with pictures used as profile (or rather: profiled) pictures on social websites.

The theoretical framework of this paper is given by the theories of marketing communications and public relations on image and that of psychology on self-construction.

---

[1] Facebook. http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/facebook [14. 11. 2010]

The marketing principles of organization image building also seem to be true for the individual's self image building.

In the second half of this paper I'm going to present an empirical research project done on Facebook.

3. Image from a PR perspective

Image is a concept or opinion in one's mind that is based on impressions, thoughts, emotions, beliefs and perceptions of a company, product, brand or person (Magyar 1990: 61). Generally, a distinction can be made between four main types of image: product image, brand image, corporate image and personal image (Szeles 2001: 71). Image may be created either spontaneously or consciously, in a planned way. It is formed by words, acts and physical presence (Szeles 2001: 51). And we should also add an element to the list, which is visual outlook.

Image is best studied if separated from corporate identity. Corporate identity means the way we present ourselves to the public and it primarily comprises of visual elements (Sós 2009: 64). It's a visual system which uses all the points of public contact and must be constantly taken care of to keep it work well (Smith 2000: 440). It can specifically project three things: who you are, what you do and how you do it (Wally Olins, cit. Smith 2000: 440).

There is a causal relation between the two concepts. To use the metaphor of Szeles (2001: 137; Nyárády–Szeles n. d.: 263–4) corporate identity is the *stamp* and image is its result: the *stamp impression*. Image is not a picture but the representation of a picture in one's mind; identity and corporate identity is the basis of the image, the picture itself (Nyárády–Szeles a. n.: 265).

Image and corporate identity may both refer to a person (e. g. Sándor 1987: 161, Ries–Ries 2005: 163, Nyárády–Szeles 2000: 181). One way of projecting personal identity is self-branding. "Everybody has a self-brand. Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos believes that our self-brand is what others say of us after we left the room" (Purkiss–Royston-Lee 2010: 11).

4. Self-representation from a psychological perspective

If an individual gets among other people, they start to gather information about each other: their socio-economic status, self-image, attitude towards the other, knowledge and reliability (Goffman 1959: 1). Information gathered in such ways informs others about what they have to do to get a favourable reaction from the individual. Therefore the individual has to act in a way as to consciously or unconsciously reveal himself, which the others have to perceive (Ichheiser quoted by Goffman 1959: 3). In the presence of others we try to behave in a way that matches the concept we want to project of ourselves. The individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favourable to him (Goffman 1959: 5). In a face-to-face situation many sources of information become accessible and many carriers become available for conveying this information.

This concept, however, is under drastic changes due to social networking websites. Information carriers on these sites are uploaded pictures, shared pages, videos, group membership and, in particular, the sample based profile page and the profile picture attached to it.

5. Social networking sites

"Today a number of internet tools help us to show ourselves, communicate, get online and make our voice heard" (Weber 2008: 17). Out of these tools Larry Weber considers social networking sites to be the most powerful (marketing) environment of the future. The greatest impact of web 2.0 that is social networking sites is the new structure of communities. In this new environment authors no longer create books, films or photos but content. And, in addition, users have become both consumers and producers ("prosumers"; Sós 2009: 89). In web 2.0 everybody can be author in his own way. "One just has to take a funny picture of himself and his friends on a party, put it on a social website and that's it: he has become a content provider" (Sós 2009: 91). Web services like Facebook (MySpace, Picasa or even Flickr) provide the ability to share our pictures „with friends as well as a broader audience of peripheral friends and strangers" (Ling 2009: 65). With social networking sites users have become traceable: they are not only (almost) continuously available but are also easy to track down (see: Ess 2009: 19).

Various studies deal with the age group born into the world of the internet or entered the age of majority in the digital era. The generation born into the 1980s is often referred to as Generation X, while people born in the 1990s are called Generation Y (or Net Generation). The members of Generation C on the other hand are not connected by their age but their online behaviour. The letter C in the name refers to the provision of online content, however, other expressions beginning with C may also be connected to this generation: constant connectivity, collaboration, change, curiosity and co-creation. Their significance depends on what and how often they share (n. a. 2010 BrandTrend).

6. The Facebook analysis

"Any of our actions contribute to the building and formation of our self-brand, but if we do it in a conscious and well-considered way, it will definitely bring about the desired success" (Purkiss–Royston-Lee 2010: 9). Our most valuable asset, or even our most significant capital lies in our self-brand. This, however, is not a static thing, it keeps developing (Purkiss–Royston-Lee 2010: 37, 39).

My analysis focuses on pictures people share of themselves on social networking sites. It is performed by looking for characteristics of Facebook profile pictures in a sample of more than 1500 randomly selected pictures with special respect to sex and age related differences and collective samples created accordingly. The analysis is expressly directed to profile pictures – I would have obtained totally different results if I had assessed pictures put in folders or on the Facebook Wall (this would have gone beyond the objectives of this analysis).

The pictures were collected in the summer of 2010 by randomly browsing the Facebook profiles of my friends' friends. I collected pictures only from Hungarian users and I always checked if the corresponding profile indicated the age and sex of the person on the specific picture. Each saved picture was given a code (e.g.: F27_14, meaning 14. 27-year-old female). As users under 14 are protected by Facebook's child protection rule, I could only pick my personal friends in this age group. Due to the random selection method and the average age of Facebook users the distribution of ages is not proportional in the sample, by contrast it is proportional to the number of Facebook users by age range. This is shown in the following diagram.
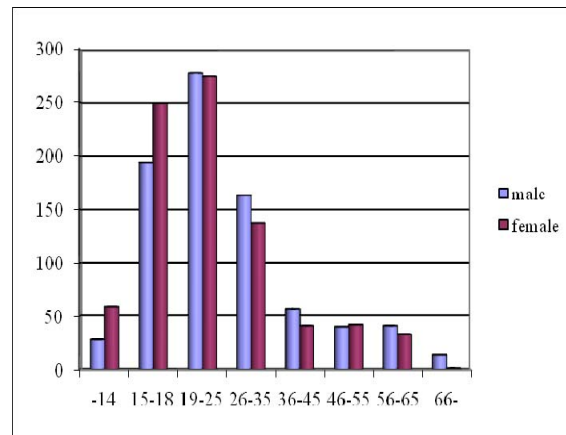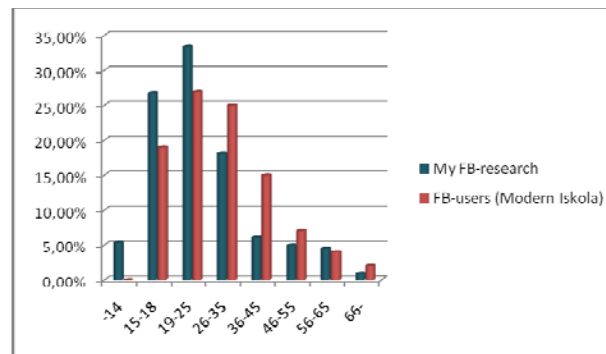
Diagram 1: Collected pictures (age, gender)

Diagram 2: The number of Facebook-users[2] compared with my data

The number of female users on social website considerably exceeds that of the male ones. This may be explained by the fact that traditional social roles attribute the responsibility for maintaining social networks to women (Bonka–Kraut–Frohlich 2003: 147–72). This rate is also reflected in the sample: collecting male user pictures was more difficult than that of female users.

Full body images are quite rare, it is easier to find metonymic portrayals where the part stands for the whole. Usually, the face is emphasised, but other parts of the body may also represent the self (eye, mouth, hair, hand). Back posing is a mannered way of self-concealment.
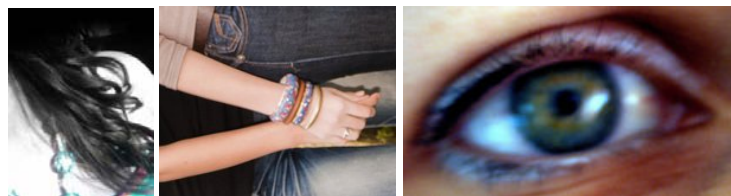
If you examine the collected pictures in relation of image manipulation and age, you will find that the younger the person in the picture is, the bolder, more elaborate and more

---

[2] Fülöp Hajnalka 2010: Szemtől szembe az „Arcok könyvében”. In: Modern Iskola, 2010/5. 25.

manipulated the photo will become. Youngsters under 18 frequently manipulate their pictures or create collage with an editing program (such as Photoshop). Here you can see some examples: the first two images are taken of/by girls under 14, the second two are of/by boys under 14.

You can observe the same trend looking at the age group of secondary school students. Half of the people between 15 and 18 shares manipulated or edited picture on his or her profile page. Some special pictures are split into two or four parts. Quite often pictures show intentional carelessness, that is extraordinary arrangement: upside down and rotated images, pictures with a "missing head" or with an overemphasised background.
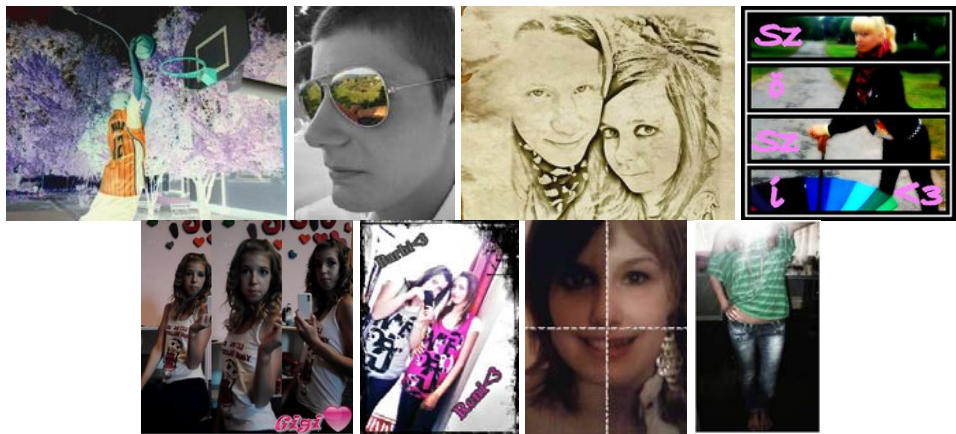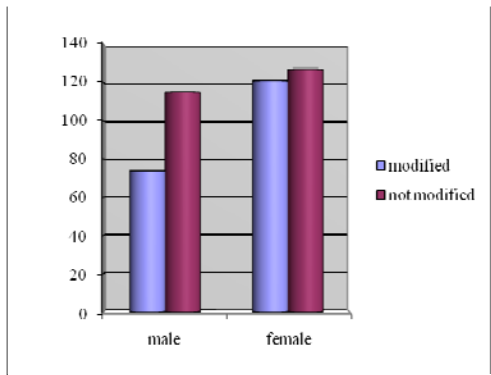

Diagram 3: Image manipulation by sex in the age group 15-18 years

In the 18+ age group edited or highly elaborate pictures become rarer with age. People above 40 prefer traditional portrait photos in particular, taken in front of a neutral background.

An opposite tendency to hiding behind edited images or schemes is the trend of exhibitionism or showing private parts of the body which is less frequent among men and more common among women (under 30). A surprising fact that really makes one stop and think is that people also share erotic and sexually provocative pictures with others on the web. Gabriela David (2009: 84) gives the explanation to this that intimate pictures are considered as special and everyone wants to share something special, unique and original.

Looking at the number of people in the pictures you find the following: Ling (2009: 64, 71) claims that the process of making photos serves as a group ritual and it is a source of group cohesion. This is why teenagers like to pose in the photos with one or several of their friends.


If you look at pictures where the partner is also present you will find that secondary school students tend to share expressly intimate photos, while a university student will upload typical posing photos with the partner.
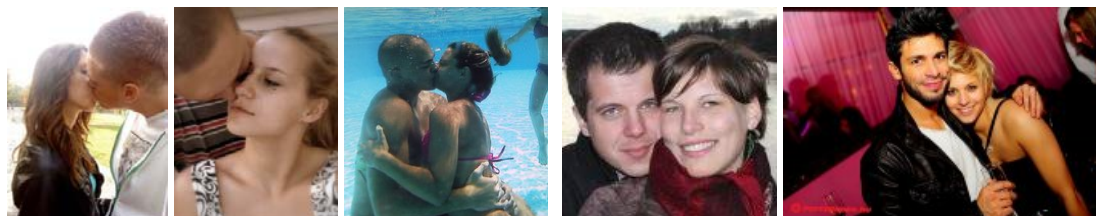

Typically, people in their 30s share photos with their child or children in them.

Childhood photos, drawings and pictures of persons other than the user (partner, child) serve as self-image substitutes. A study (Reading 2009: 99) showed that one quarter of the users don't use profile pictures at all and an additional 10% uses non-identifying self-images (such as flowers or children's drawings). This method of concealment is typically used by people above 30.
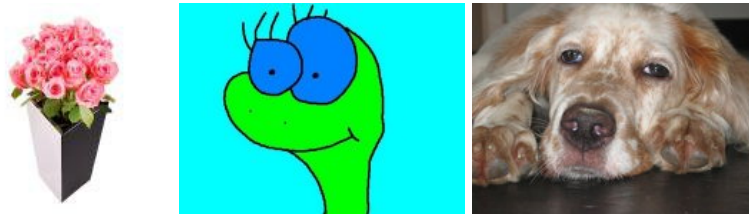
On 14 November 2010 the following Status Message appeared on Facebook as a chain message: "From 14 November until 17 November replace your Facebook profile picture with one of your favourite childhood cartoon heroes and get others to do the same! The goal is not to have human faces on Facebook till Wednesday, only the memories of your childhood! :-) It is good to be a child! :D" A variant of this message: "From 14 November until 17 November replace your Facebook profile picture with one of your favourite childhood cartoon heroes! It is good to be a child! And I want to be an individual! :D ("Yes, we're all individuals") But a child, yes I am! :) And for you who have reproved me: *Mazsola* (a favourite one – regardless of memories :))".
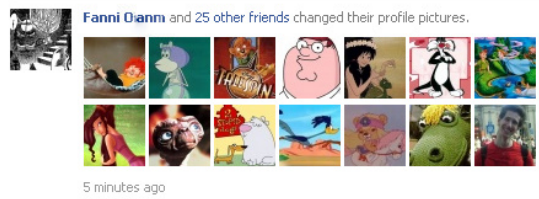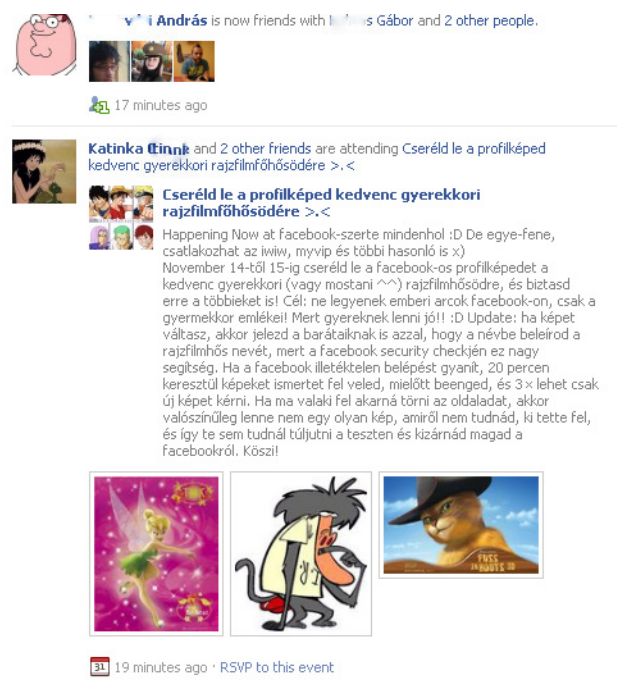
Ling (2009: 63–64) distinguishes between staged and action photos. The analysed photo corpus consisted of fewer action photos than staged photos which complies with the stereotypical concept of the profile picture. A separate group within staged profile pictures is the self portrait photos that were taken by a web camera or in front of a mirror. These pictures usually feature the camera or the (possibly branded) mobile phone. I call these mirrored pictures metapictures (see: "through a glass, darkly"). In some pictures the camera is more prevailing than the person.

The background of a picture gives us a glance into the home and intimate rooms of others (the self-taken photos reflect the bathroom in the mirror), "the intimate sphere becomes public" (Dede 2009: 111). Spectacular foreign photo scenes also show a hint of exhibitionism. Party is a common photo scene for younger generations.

Objects appearing in photos often represent status symbols (drink and glass, cigarette, sports equipment, fish, sunglasses). Alcohol Concern warned that Facebook is spreading the culture of acceptability around drunkenness and young people share their drunk photos because they provides excellent material for anecdotes and improve their social standing. „Drinking is a dimension of teens' lives and it represents a way in which they mark their transition from childhood to adulthood" (Ling 2009: 73).

According to Purkiss–Royston-Lee (2010: 41) he who shows a picture of himself that is not real is artificial, and he who copies others is stereotypical and conformist. The question is whether we show our real self-image and set of roles or our ideal self-image through our profile pictures (Dede 2009: 108–109). Most probably we show the ideal one, as photos of various (leisure) activities may also become profile pictures, but photos taken while working are quite rare (Dede 2009: 109, but: "exotic" professions are exceptions, e.g. stewardess, pilot). Clothing is also rather attractive, "sexy", elegant (e.g. suit) which again shows that people project their extraordinary self on the internet (see: Reading 2009: coded self).

7. Conclusion

Self-representation is a form of impression management, an intuitive effort to manipulate others' opinion about us with all available tools and possibly without being noticed. Such a tool is the profile picture on social networking websites which contribute to the building of our self-image. To quote Röttger's post-modern version of Descartes saying: "I am seen, therefore I am" (Röttgers 2009: 91). Or to go even further: "I share, therefore I am."

Let me finish my presentation with a quote that is often used as a Facebook status and has become part of the web folklore: „We only see two things in people: what we want to see, and what they want to show us." (Harry Morgan)

References

Boehm, Gottfried (Hrsg.) 1994: Was ist ein Bild? München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 3. Auflage 2001.

Bonka, Boneva – Kraut, Robert – Frohlich, David 2003: E-Mail und interpersonale Beziehungen. Das Geschlecht macht den Unterschied. In: Höflich, Joachim R. – Gebhardt, Julian (Hrsg.) 2003: Vermittlungskulturen im Wandel. Brief, E-mail, SMS. Frankfurt am Main – Berlin – Bern – Bruxelles – New York – Oxford – Wien: Lang. 147–72.

David, Gabriela 2009: Clarifying the mysteries of an exposed intimacy. Another intimate representation Mise-en-scène. In: Nyíri, Kristóf (ed.) 2009: *Engagement and exposure*. Mobile Communication and the ethics of social networking. Vienna: Passagen Verlag. 77–86.

Dede, Éva 2009: Énbemutatás és az ikonikus fordulat – amikor a képek beszélnek. [Self-representation and the iconic turn] In: Balázs, Géza – H. Varga Gyula (eds.) 2009: Ikonikus fordulat a kultúrában. Budapest: Magyar Szemiotikai Társaság, Eger: Líceum Kiadó. 102–113.

Fülöp Hajnalka 2010: Szemtől szembe az „Arcok könyvében" [Face-to-face in Facebook]. In: Modern Iskola, 2010/5. 22–25.

Giulani, Luca 2006: Macht und Ohnmacht der Bilder. Eine frisch gewaschene Schürze und die gemordeten Mamelucken. In: Maar, Christa – Burda, Hubert (Hg.) 2006: Iconic worlds. Neue Bilderwelten und Wissensräume. Köln: DuMont. 185–204.

Goffman, Erving 1959: Presentation of self in everyday life. Carden Ciy, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Ichheiser, Gustav 1949: Misunderstandings in Human Relations. In: Supplement to The American Journal of Sociology, LV, September 1949, 6–7.

Levy, Andrew 2007: The ladettes who glorify their shameful drunken antics on Facebook. Daily Mail Online. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-491668/The-ladettes-glorify-shameful-drunken-antics-Facebook.html [01. 11. 2010]

Ling, Rich 2009: Trust, cohesion and social networks. The case of quasi-illicit photos in a teen peer group. In: Nyíri, Kristóf (ed.) 2009: *Engagement and exposure.* Mobile Communication and the ethics of social networking. Vienna: Passagen Verlag. 59–75.

Lomas, Natasha 2009: Drunk Facebook photos killing your job prospects? Silicon.com. 05. 02. 2009. http://www.silicon.com/management/cio-insights/2009/02/05/drunk-facebook-photos-killing-your-job-prospects-39392454/ [01. 11. 2010]

Maar, Christa 2006: Iconic worlds. Bilderwelten nach dem iconic turn. In: Maar, Christa – Burda, Hubert (Hg.) 2006: Iconic worlds. Neue Bilderwelten und Wissensräume. Köln: DuMont. 11–14.

Magyar M. Kasimir 1990: A marketingé a jövő! [Marketing has the future] Budapest: LSI Alkalmazástechnikai Tanácsadó Szolgálat.

Nyárády Gáborné – Szeles Péter [é. n.]: Public Relations I. Budapest: Perfekt.

Nyárády Gáborné – Szeles Péter 2000: Public Relations. Elmélet és gyakorlat [Theory and practice]. Budapest: Budapesti Gazdasági Főiskola Külkereskedelmi Főiskolai Kar.

Nyíri Kristóf 2003: *A gondolkodás képelmélete.* In: Neumer Katalin (szerk.): Kép, beszéd, írás. Budapest: Gondolat. 264–278.

Nyíri, Kristóf (ed.) 2009: *Engagement and exposure.* Mobile Communication and the ethics of social networking. Vienna: Passagen Verlag.

Purkiss, John – Royston-Lee, David 2010: Énmárka. Tedd magad eladhatóvá. Budapest: HVG Kiadó. [Brand You: Turn Your Unique Talents into a Winning Formula. Artesian Publishing LLP, 2009]

Reading, Anna 2009: The playful panopticon? Ethics and the coded self in social networking sites. In: Nyíri, Kristóf (ed.) 2009: *Engagement and exposure.* Mobile Communication and the ethics of social networking. Vienna: Passagen Verlag. 93–101.

Ries, Al – Ries, Laura 1999: The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding. London: Profile Books.

Ries, Al – Ries, Laura 2005: A pr tündöklése, a reklám bukása. Budapest: Geomédia Szakkönyvek. [The Fall of Advertising & the Rise of PR. HarperBusiness, 2002]

Röttgers, Kurt 2009: The pornographic turn – or: the loss of decency. In: Nyíri, Kristóf (ed.) 2009: *Engagement and exposure.* Mobile Communication and the ethics of social networking. Vienna: Passagen Verlag. 87–91.

Sándor Imre 1987: Marketingkommunikáció [Marketing communications]. Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Kiadó.

Schlobinski, Peter 2009: *Von HDL bis DUBIDODO – (K)ein Wörterbuch zur SMS.* Mannheim–Leipzig–Wien–Zürich: Duden.

Smith, P. R. 1993 (reprinted 2000): Marketing communications. An integrated approach. London: Kogan Page.

Sós Péter János 2009: Mindennapi PR-ünk. Gyakorlati public relations. [Public relations in practice]. h. n.: B. Swan Partners.

Sos, Peter J. é.n.: A new folk art or narrowing the gap between the private and professional publishing on the net. freesideeurope.com

sz. n. 2010: A digitális kor véleményvezérei. [The opinion leaders of the digital age] BrandTrend, 2010. 11. 09. http://www.brandtrend.hu/hir/4683/a_digitalis_kor_velemenyvezerei.html [2010. 11. 09.]

Szeles Péter 2001: A hírnév ereje. Arculatelmélet. [The power of reputation. Theory of corporate identity] Budapest: Alapítvány a public relations fejlesztéséért [sic].

Veszelszki, Ágnes 2009: Milyen képet (ne) tegyünk fel az iwiw-re? [Which photo you shouldn't share on iwiw?] http://www.e-nyelv.hu/2009-02-09/milyen-kepet-ne-tegyunk-fel-az-iwiw-re/ 2009. 02. 09. [01. 11. 2010]

Weber, Larry 2008: Marketing a hálón. Vállalati és közösségi honlapok, blogok. Budapest: HVG Kiadó. [Marketing to the Social Web: How Digital Consumer Communities Build Your Business, John Wiley & Sons, 2007]

www.iconic-turn.de [01. 12. 2010]

Statistics

(http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/press/info.php?statistics [14. 11. 2010])

People on Facebook
- More than 500 million active users
- 50% of our active users log on to Facebook in any given day
- An average user has 130 friends
- People spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook

Activity on Facebook
- There are over 900 million objects that people interact with (pages, groups, events and community pages)
- An average user is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events
- An average user creates 90 pieces of content each month
- More than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) shared each month.

Global Reach
- More than 70 translations available on the site
- About 70% of Facebook users are outside the United States
- Over 300,000 users helped translate the site through the translations application

Abstract
Veszelszki, Ágnes: Image and self-representation

Social networking websites are not only used for finding friends, passing the time, playing or, in general, maintaining interpersonal communication but personal profiles also serve as "private home pages" with a layout scheme determined by the given system. More or less consciously, users use profile pages to build up their online self images: they design their profiles according to the image created by them of themselves, or the desirable image they want to create in others of themselves. A non-verbal element of the profile page is the replaceable profile picture. This presentation deals with pictures used as profile (or rather: "profiled") pictures on social websites.

The theoretical framework of the presentation is given by the theories of marketing communications and public relations on image and that of psychology on self-construction. Marketing principles of organization image building seem to be also true to the individual's self image building.

The study includes an empiric research as well: it analyses the characteristics of profile pictures on Facebook based on a sample of more than one thousand randomly collected pictures – with special respect to sex and age related differences and the collective samples create accordingly.

veszelszki.agnes@gmail.com