Reaffirming Identity Through Images.
The commodification of Ilusions in the Contemporary Presentation of Self
Reafirmando la identidad a través de imágenes.
La mercantilización de las ilusiones en la presentación contemporánea del yo

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Abstract

In this paper, the construction of an ideal image of the self will be discussed within the theoretical framework of "Representation". Drawing more on Hall's concept of representation I would like to concentrate on the practices of "stereotyping", drawing out the links between representation and stereotype that are closely connected with the production of mass culture, consumerism, institutions, and social media. Photos from galleries and museums and heritage locations taken and shared on social media can be understood as a commodified presentation of the tourist experience of an attractive location that has come into existence in order to narrate an ideal trip. After a picture is shared on social networks, the process of the commodification of an illusion starts – an illusion that was shared and presented as a personal authentic proof of the visit to the location and experiencing a unique moment. Often one particular image from a museum is massively reproduced and becomes a form of an ideal souvenir or a goal of travel. The connection of the centrality of the location captured in images, stereotyping, and identity is crucial in this research. The aim of this text is to understand the current trends of enhancing identity via creating and consuming images and portraits. It also aims to address the changing patterns and techniques of visual self-presentation, pointing out shared cultural values that are becoming certain global standards and institutionalized conventions of the personal and professional commercial photography.

Key words: commodification of identity, consumer culture, marketing, mass aesthetic, portrait photography, commodification of heritage.

Resumen

En este artículo, se discutirá la construcción de una imagen ideal del yo dentro del marco teórico de la "Representación". Basándome en el concepto de representación de Hall, me gustaría concentrarme en las prácticas de "estereotipación", dibujando los vínculos entre representación y estereotipo que están estrechamente relacionados con la producción de la cultura de masas, el consumo, las instituciones y las redes sociales. Las fotos de galerías y museos y de lugares del patrimonio histórico tomadas y compartidas en las redes sociales pueden entenderse como una presentación comercial de la experiencia turística de un lugar atractivo que ha surgido para narrar un viaje ideal. Después de que se comparte una imagen en las redes sociales, comienza el proceso de mercantilización de una ilusión –una ilusión que se compartió y se presentó como una prueba personal y auténtica de la visita al lugar y de haber experimentado un momento único–. A menudo, una imagen particular de un museo se reproduce de forma masiva y se convierte en un recuerdo ideal o un objetivo del viaje. La conexión de la centralidad de la localidad capturada en imágenes, los estereotipos y la identidad es crucial en esta investigación. El objetivo de este texto es comprender las tendencias actuales de mejoramiento la identidad mediante la creación y el consumo de imágenes y retratos. También tiene como objetivo abordar los patrones y técnicas cambiantes de la autopresentación visual, señalando valores culturales compartidos que se están convirtiendo en ciertos estándares globales y convenciones institucionalizadas de la fotografía comercial personal y profesional.

Palabras clave: mercantilización de la identidad, cultura del consumidor, marketing, estética de masas, lfotografía de retratos, mercantilización del patrimonio.

Summary

1. Introduction | 2. Commodification of Illusions | 3. Methodology and Respondents | 4. Reaffirming an Ideal | 5. Framing a Movement, Framing a Fantasy | 6. Purchasing Identity - Becoming a "Micro-Celebrity" | 7. Consuming Location | 8. Conclusions | References

Suggestion to cite this paper

1. Introduction[1]

In early summer 2019, a post appeared on social media and subsequently in the media, showing how mass-shared photographs are taken from the Pura Lempuyang Temple, known as the Gate of Heaven, Bali. Photos from the site shown an individual visitor or a family, standing between two stone columns, a mountain massif covered with a dense jungle in the background, and a glittering water surface in front of the image. The whole captured image looks harmonious, almost unearthly. To share this attractive image, a tourist must climb 1,700 steps and also stand in a long queue to take a snapshot in a seemingly empty temple. It remains to pay a few dollars to a local photographer who, with a broken mirror in front of a camera, creates the illusion of a water surface in front of an ancient building.

After a picture is shared on social networks, there is something that can be called a commodification of an illusion; a commodified presentation of the tourist experience, which comes into existence in order to narrate an illusionary travel experience. This illusion is shared and presented as a personal authentic proof of the visit to the location and experiencing a unique moment. The illusion is massively reproduced and becomes a form of an ideal. This text aims to understand the current trends of enhancing identity via creating and consuming images and portraits. It also aims to address the changing patterns and techniques of visual self-presentation, pointing out shared cultural values that are becoming certain global standards and institutionalized conventions of the personal and professional commercial photography that take place inside cultural institutions and museums.

2. Commodification of Illusions

The display and presentation of the ideal, whether of beauty, harmony, or power, has been a key element of advertising photography from the very beginning of its use in marketing communication, since the beginning of the era of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1969). The published image has always reflected the time and social, gender or religious models. Global media and social networks have played an important role in shaping and codifying certain conventions in creating images and norms of presenting them to others, whether it is photos of locations captured from a certain point of view, or poses, jumps, gestures, and directions of capturing people, which become normative and expected for shared photos.

The construction of the ideal image of the self will be discussed within the theoretical framework of "Representation" as addressed by Hall (1997: 24). He defines three approaches to be used to examine the representation of meaning – the reflective, the intentional, and the constructionist or constructivist approaches. In Hall's definition, representation is how we "make sense of the world of people, object and events, and how someone is able to express a complex thought about those things to other people or communicate about them through language in ways which other people are able to understand" (Hall, 1997: 16). According to Hall, the "meaning-system" consists of writing, spoken language, and visual images, all connected in one system producing the meanings for us – "to express and to communicate thoughts to other people" (Hall, 1997: 18). The focus of this paper is limited to visual material obtained with professional assistance. Intentionally produced images of self are documenting processes of negotiating one's own identity that is grounded in a set of norms and a cultural context.

3. Methodology and Respondents

For this particular reason, the striving for visual perfection, the material discussed with the respondents was reduced to photographs taken by the professional commercial photographers. In-depth interviews with photographers who are owners of a photo studio or have worked freelance in the commercial sphere for longer than five years were conducted, to be able to observe trends in taking photos within museums and historical parks. The group of professionals who are knowledgeable about the terminology linked to the analysis of visual material, composition, overall studies of beauty and body image in history and the present

Jitka Cirklová

is considered to be the most suitable set of respondents in searching for the dominant patterns of contemporary image consumption and production.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews (n = 6) were conducted with the photographers individually in their studios (n = 4) or via the Internet (n = 2). The average length of the interview was about 65 minutes, and all of the respondents covered a complete range of issues and trends discussed in this paper. Their professional observations and changes in the demands in their services were key to gaining insight into the dynamic of changing patterns in the market for visual images. Some respondents pointed out they divide sharply their commercial work from what they consider creative and art photography in their work and self-expression. The names of the respondents were anonymized and the privacy of their clients preserved. No potential conflict of interest was reported.

The focus on the professionals inspired the work of Simmel's Rembrandt (2018). In the preface of the book, the author explains his choice of Rembrandt's work as a starting point for his reflections on topics that can be described as the sociology of aesthetics. Aesthetic analysis should relate to existing visual material, which is based on the quality of work and social values that can be associated with this production. In this way, Simmel justifies on the first page of the preface why he chose the work of a professional and "not of some dauber". As a sociologist, Simmel seeks to understand the changing social patterns of visualizing themes such as depicting the life cycle, especially aging, movement, beauty, death, piety, and individuality.

Photography is represented by two key areas of photography – portrait and landscape, chosen because of their position in the early history of photographic representation of the world. A photographic portrait was in the 1840s, in the early days of photography, when it was tied to the laboratory and the studio's most socially important application of the new medium. The first photographers who made their living from the new craft were often retrained, painters. The development of the portrait, which oscillated from the "mirror with a memory" to the interpretation of the personality, depended not only on the thought background and requirements of the client and photographer. This study also investigates the process of self-construction and status consumption by purchasing visual images.

Research on the representation of beauty, gender roles, and race in professional photography is associated in general with the images used in advertising. Goffman (1979) was among the pioneering sociologists who analyzed the direction of gaze and body postures of models in advertisements. He pointed out the stereotypes and patterns that reflected certain social norms. Professional photos can be considered as a reflection of social trends and lifestyles because they are purchased to reflect the best of the captured person. Beauty is always depicted through socially set norms, never being a completely abstract concept. Photos taken with the assistance of professionals aim to capture beauty as it is rooted in contemporary trends, produced and reproduced in the process of self-stereotyping. In this paper, I would like to point out some contemporary patterns of self-stereotyping in the shared images of self as the presentation of the desired identity.

The evolution of photographic technology to the digital present allows the photographers to leave the studios and combine the portraits with the landscape or a public space. In the early 19th-century landscape photography aimed for projects to demanded a "true picture of the reality", in contrast to the portraitists, where interpretation and stylization according to various criteria were expected (Pospěch, 2010).

According to the respondents, to be captured by a professional photographer is no longer a once-in-a-lifetime occasion: sessions with a photographer are growing in popularity and frequency. They are considered to be "fun time" spent with a partner, children, or alone in special scenery. The photos in their quality stand out amongst the overwhelming amount of images taken using smartphones or non-professional cameras, by friends or in the form of selfies. Professional photos are used as a strong tool to present the desired identity – or an illusion of it.

4. Reaffirming an Ideal

Portraits are the first major category of images that according to all respondents have undergone significant change during the last decade, even more, significant during the last three years with the popularity and mass use of social media. Portraits have changed in all their complexity and a message is being included in them. Traditionally, they served as a keepsake item, a record of family history. The visual composition was a

rather passive, clear background, with people looking into a camera with a moderate smile as their main expression.

What the respondents pointed out can be elaborated on by starting with a sentence from Goffman: "private pictures that are designated for a display within the intimate social circle of the persons featured in them" (1979:10) are now transferred into something that is used for a public presentation; precious or even intimate moments can be accessed by anyone at any time. Goffman (1979) uses the term "socially desirable moments" for what is being captured in an enhanced way, typified in the desired role – be it a clever child or a beautiful mother-to-be. The main change in the contemporary presentation of self is the amount of the images, the frequency at which they are taken and the intensity of the desire to present social status, lifestyle, or wealth. Photo sessions with clients have moved out of the studio to museums and galleries or outdoor places of special value.

A client who does not perceive the photoshoot as financially demanding expects more of a creative approach from the photographer, who is seen as an expert who should be able to accentuate and to fix in the picture the already achieved social status. Both groups of clients want to establish and communicate their social status and share it broadly. The differences in the strategies of sharing were commented on by one studio owner (Karel, 41), who pointed out a growing trend of taking a family picture and using it as a Christmas or New Year greeting, which was not a local tradition until very recently when social media allowed the cheap distribution of personalized cards without expensive printing and mailing. Digital technologies and social media have lowered the costs of production of personalized cards and they have become more accessible to wider social strata.

Visual stereotypes are very often social and marketing constructs rather than a lived authentic reality. They are mechanically reproduced and the stereotypes become a social convention. Clients from the lower middle class use the professional photo sessions as an indication of the social status they are trying to elevate themselves into, using their inspiration for the session from mass media that are seen as an ideal visual representation of the desired lifestyle. The growing trend for seasonal greetings captured in a special authentic setting is one of these.

The main feature of the identity of consumption is the constant search for resources that provide instructions and solid landmarks. If according to Bauman (2013), in the environment of liquid modernity, we are nothing more than what we buy, then the behavior of photo studios' clients becomes completely understandable. The analyzed photographs illustrate how one's identity has become a problem like never before. Experience with oneself unfolds against a background of concern, discontent, and an attempt to stylize into the identity of other, perfect beings presented on the pages of glossy magazines.

5. Framing a Movement, Framing a Fantasy

With the growing impact of global media corporations, their role is growing in the socialization of viewers and the way certain global standards of beauty, success, youth, or parenting are institutionalized. An important pattern of dynamics will be analyzed in the following paragraphs. In contemporary professional pictures, we can observe activity and performances that were not seen in portraits before. "Fathers are intimately touching pregnant bellies, barefoot mothers are smiling broadly at their jumping kid with a messy hairstyle. Young men have their picture was taken with a sweaty looking sport shirt over their shoulder or a tennis racquet" (Leoš, 48, photographer). The ideal of current *mainstream* society is a dynamic, active person, who is active, traveling, healthy-looking, and living in a happy family.

The change in the direction of the eye contact, body curve, and social distance captured in commercial images has been observed constantly since Goffman (1979) wrote his text. To add even more dynamics into the images, the whole set has undergone a significant shift. The place of production is being moved from the studio to an outside setting or attractive location. The photo session aims to narrate a story, illusion, or romance where the visual material clearly replaces words or text. In the outdoor staged compositions, people walk in blooming meadows, wild poppies in their hair, kissing a calm horse, gazing into the distance while sitting between two wolfish grey sheepdogs in a gothic castle.

In Hall's (1997:5) terms, we can look at such fairy portraits as at a signifying practice that carries meanings we wish to communicate so that others can decode our concepts, ideas or feelings about ourselves. In photos, we fabricate a social framework where the real and unreal are combined where the self-

stereotype is the main tool to construct an identity for the others. "This is who I want to be inside," wrote one client under her picture in which she walks in a simple dress next to a white horse with a long mane towards a Celtic monolith. The woman in the picture, a junior manager of a local branch of a multinational corporation, has a tribal-like tattoo drawn on her right cheek.

Based on the material provided by those who mainly focus on the production of stylized outdoor pictures within culturally or historically significant locations, we can understand such practices as a form of escape from an unsatisfactory social framework, a value or belief system (Goffman, 1974: 83). In the safety and elegance of a staged photoshoot session, a new, desired identity is being fabricated and narrated.

> Nobody asks me today for glamour photos like in the 90s, with heavy Hollywood star-like make-up. Fantasy character style and fairy romantic settings are the most trendy now. It is not only about the final picture, or two … It is about the process, about the dressing up, being with the animals in a beautiful spot. It's the whole experience they have playing the character they want to be. I advertise it as such, as an authentic experience (Klára, 43, studio owner).

Here we can find how the simple act purchasing of the professional portrait is being transformed into something else. The term make-believe (Goffman, 1974: 48) is used for an activity in which the actors run through something with full knowledge that the pursuit they are being engaged in has no practical outcome. No change in status or identity will come out of it. Such activities or fantasies bring the feeling of immediate satisfaction that the doing offers (Goffman, 1974: 48). Entertainment in a person's pastime is provided. For an individual to be engaged in playful activities, Goffman mentions it is necessary to "be free of any pressing needs".

The photos are a commodification of desired identity or a purchased possibility to become someone else in the most possible "authentic" way. A hard-working regional manager prefers to be seen by others as a member of a mythical, primordial, clan who lives close to nature and wild animals. Self-imposed fabrication of a different social structure, role, and hierarchy is being played out, as well as an illusion of membership in some subculture, tribe, or community that is considered to be lost and is longed-for. Such romantic imaginare that strives for authenticity while purchasing consumer goods, services, and experiences is known as a "romantic ethic" (Campbell, 1987) and is considered to be one of the sources encouraging modern consumerism.

6. Purchasing Identity - Becoming a "Micro-Celebrity"

In a similar matter, as described in the opening of this text, I would like to focus now on the aspect of place and location in contemporary commercial portraits. Having a picture taken in an attractive location is part of a tourist experience: the image brings back memories and at the same time serves as a proof of evidence of the visit. It can be perceived as a form of a souvenir. What has changed with the simplification of the technological process that leads to the creation of the desired photographs is the number of images taken, the desire to have one more perfect selfie or portrait, or a better one than someone I know took here, or to have the same one as an imitated celebrity. The proof of being present in some specific locality is often understood as a form of individual achievement, based on the sources of my respondents and discussion of the current trend of taking an individual picture all alone in a famous tourist destination, to create an illusion of a distant, beautiful place that the client is enjoying on their own, with a crowd of other tourists patiently waiting for the finish of their photo sessions. The illusion and fabrication of the desired narrative are often assisted by a photographer who is operating as a freelancer or is part of a purchased holiday package.

After seeing over five hundred shared pictures of location which are being vandalized by self-centered visitors in which thousand-years-old monuments and natural formations are being destroyed and endangered animals can be killed while passing from hand to hand for a perfect exotic visual memory, I would like to pause briefly at the meaning of the word consumption and to follow the irony of juxtaposition. Consumption is defined in Webster's dictionary as the action of using up a resource. The second meaning of the word is "a wasting disease, especially pulmonary tuberculosis, she had died of consumption – she had died of tuberculosis". Desire, Illusion, and Reality are the key terms in the presented process of reaffirming identity through images.

The connection of the centrality of the location captured in images together with the fabrication of an almost-real experience connects with Bryman (2004) when elaborating on the term "Disneyisation". Bryman uses Disneyisation to turn the sites into a kind of theme park where the experiences of staying at the site are intensified. These places, be they beaches, museums, open-air museums, towns, or temples, are commodified and reach the very core of the consumer society – they are being consumed in the sense defined above. After reaching the desired destination, the process of reframing reality takes place. The behavior of individuals in the picture is transformed: the narrative of joy, positive emotions, relaxed atmosphere, mystery, or even enlightenment is performed with the help of technology or material requisition.

The following paragraphs present how consumer decision making and behavior is influenced by the complexity of the interplay of digital technology, social media, reference groups, celebrity endorsement, lifestyle, and prestige. All, and more, could be understood as "Conditional View", based on Jean Baudrillard's (1994) concept of "media power". The image is explained not as a non-manipulated and faithful depiction of reality, but as a social and cultural construct, an image subordinated to all sorts of desires, wishes, needs of its creators or contracting authorities. The idea of such image is to deconstruct the illusion of the most faithful possible reproduction of reality and to show the motives and processes that reflect not only technological limitations, conditions and technical possibilities, but also conscious and unconscious influences on the creator's activity, strategies, ways of seeing the world, and the desire to see the world as we imagine it, how we want to see it. The professional photographers are the active agents and influencers who set the trends for the reality to be captured and recorded in played scenes.

"I fantasized my own world" (Ella, 32, studio owner) said. She can be considered to be a trendsetter for the composed photographs in the Czech Republic. Ella went through the classic commercial career – a wedding photographer, a baby photographer, and a Christmas photo collections. In her interview, she recalls a moment when she wanted to bring more of herself into her work. Archery and equestrian sports are her hobbies and she aimed to project them into the photographs. She is aware of the thin line between her photography and kitsch into which her work can slip very quickly. On the other hand, taking the risk made her projects become an extreme market success for almost 5 years. The popularity of her work correlates with the continued popularity of fantasy books and movies. She presents herself as a portrait photographer who is telling stories of her inner world, pointing to the paradox capturing reality in the photograph in which she brings a fictional world.

The work of Ella and other photographs offering a similar service is following the practice of the first commercial photographers who used to be often retrained painters. The photographer offers a selection of possibilities, either a thematic portrait or thematic photography with animals. Everything revolves around what the client would like to express. Whether he or she wants to become a warrior and want to go with a wolf pack alongside or a fragile fairy with a fox in her arms, a hunter with a bird of prey on the shoulder or a pilgrim on a black horse. Photos with animals, according to Ella, are a more played scene, photography she considers to be a bit emotionally flatter and it is more about clients' experience and about fulfilling their dreams. While composed portrait photography is a form of working with the personality of the client, her or his feelings and expression of their identity or relationship with their own animals. It's a process of finding and highlighting the individuality. But more than in any other form of portrait photography, the influence of marketing communication and stereotyping of the personal image according to the catalog offered by the photographers is obvious in such images. Ella in three years compiled a book of 40 characters, composed photographs telling stories of her fantasy land. At the same time, the book is appealing advertising of her work and she became a significant Influencer.

Portraits are taken in prepared settings, the photographer picks a location in advance, shows the body pose and postures, provides the animals and the gowns. The photographer is the professional whose work is seen as successful and this leads to the standardization of personal images. Even though the portraits are marketed as an authentic reflection of customers' individuality. By using digital technology and social media where pictures are shared show the effort to self-construct identity and enhance own status. It is an instance where consumer behavior helps to form the self- concept and identity through the self-branding. Self-branding (Khamis & Ang, 2017) persists with the rise of Social Media Influencers. The Influencers are perceived as authentic, compare to the traditional form of advertising. And by participating in the visual presentation of the Influencer, by purchasing the photo session the client is also becoming a 'micro-celebrity' for the circle of her or his social media followers. Socio-cultural research into the visual material as a crucial

part of marketing communication and on-line communication, in general, is necessary for a better understanding of the contemporary patterns of interpersonal attachments – the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to belong, to be understood and to form a social attachment and social recognition appears to have multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and cognitive processes (ibid.). Purchasing an identity in fantasy land and becoming one of the characters designed by a successful professional is a way to enhance the lived identity. According to the respondents, the transformation into fantasy character make them feel more beautiful, stronger, they believe they become a more interesting person, more capable and with more powers. They also mentioned photos helped the to feel a part of a better 'a tribe'. I would like to point out the element of appropriation of aesthetic and character attributes of the animals in the picture to fill in some perceived gaps in the abilities and competencies of clients.

The visual images and social media practices promote new patterns of communication and social dynamic that requires further research to cover the image-based content, external and internal influence factors of behavior in contemporary society.

7. Consuming Location

Let us now return to the Temple of Heaven Gate, mentioned in the introduction. In shared photographs taken with assistance, disneyisation parameters can be identified as defined by Bryman (2004). There is a unification of the theme of the depicted story which the site personifies: for example, a place of ritual character, personifying the values associated with Buddhism, or another symbol of the visited culture. However, it is consumed in a completely hybrid way, often by turning tranquil, sacred places into a panoptic, in the true sense of the word. By the direct impact of the power of marketing communication, such places are desired by a growing number of people who are trying to experience what they have seen captured in images shared by friends or advertising agencies. Inside galleries and museums, we can observe people waiting in line to take a picture of one specific exhibit, as the complexity of cultural value, social statuses, and authenticity are projected onto this one object.

Without knowing the term "disneyisation", the respondents mentioned the growing pattern in purchasing professional portraits. Professional photographers are being hired to take photos of families during their birthday parties located in museums. The quality of the image adds greatly to the perception of the family's ability to consume high culture. Little girls' ordinary dancing performance is narrated in the baroque building of the Czech Museum of Music as a performance by ballet prodigies.

Moreover, the aspect of the location is here the factor with the most influence over the process of reframing the family narrative into a grand moment. Well-known, historically or culturally significant venues are rented for the spectacle. Often, the fact that the child is singing a little song on the stage of a known theatre a dance conservatory, or an opera house, or having a photo taken in a historical costume in a museum, is at that moment beyond the understanding of the little performer. The child's identity is commodified and used to reaffirm the identity of the parent, who is purchasing the services of the museum or a gallery, paying for the high rent of the venue and photos by a professional photographer in order to intensify and share the socially desired social status, lifestyle, or happiness. The locations considered as parts of cultural heritage are defined as important for the memory of a particular community and society, they are a source of understanding to the history and help to understand and to structure present. There is a clear aim to present the relationship between the location and identity of individuals who record and share their visitor experience of culturally significant places. The notion of identity, visitor experience, values, and technology is often investigated in the context of heritage tourism (Di Pietro et al., 2017) as a process of meaning-making for nations or communities. With the accessibility of new technology that makes it possible to share the visitor's experience widely, the new form of commodification of location connected with the highly individualized human identities is more frequent in the places that represent some form of social heritage or collective value.

8. Conclusions

The text addresses some changing patterns and techniques of the visual presentation of self within specific public places. These places are defined as institutions with a unique contribution to the public by preserving and interpreting the public value of history, social memory, or aesthetics. Photos taken within such spaces are a strong personal statement of belonging and a tool of identity construction.

Many questions have emerged during the research and there are some lines that deserve to be explored more. Who is the most active agent in the contemporary trend of enhancing identity via shared images? Is it the destination marketing and branding of specific places and objects? The reciprocal influence of influencers? A vicious circle of new media? Or is it a form of an individual search for a values-based social structure and authentic institutions in a fluid consumption-based social reality?

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