

# WÜRZBURGER STUDIEN

ZUR EUROPÄISCHEN ETHNOLOGIE

Band 8



Sarah Schmittinger

## Observing the Digital Self

Ethnographic explorations on dimensions and intentions of digital self-constructions on Instagram

## Würzburger Studien zur Europäischen Ethnologie

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Würzburg 2021

Coverfoto: Sarah Schmittinger

Layout und Satz: Konstantin Mack

Dieses Dokument wird bereitgestellt durch  
den Publikationsservice der Universität  
Würzburg.

Universitätsbibliothek Würzburg  
Am Hubland  
97074 Würzburg

+49 931 31-85906

[www.opus.bibliothek.uni-wuerzburg.de](http://www.opus.bibliothek.uni-wuerzburg.de)

ISSN: 2511-9486



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# **Observing the Digital Self**

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Würzburger Studien zur Europäischen Ethnologie

Herausgegeben von Michaela Fenske und Susanne Dinkl

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## Preface

Since its launch in 2010, the App Instagram has been reaching over a billion users per month and is available in 32 languages worldwide. In public discourses, Instagram appears to be connected with terms like Facebook, Twitter, and selfies. Summarized as social media and modes of using social media, these applications, technologies and practices seem to polarise between, on the one hand, the pleasure of using them to feel connected and to present oneself in broad, international digital worlds and for commercial purposes. On the other hand, social media are associated with culturally pessimistic concerns about the isolation of the individual in “factual” worlds, a decline in communication skills, and an increasing development of selfishness and narcissism in contemporary society. Furthermore, as with most cultural phenomena, social media is also a double-edged sword: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enable everyone who has access to these technologies to share their opinion and their content to a wide audience. Therefore, these media expand the possibilities to participate in public and political discourses. Yet, this simple way to gather a crowd and to be heard by various recipients, while at the same time (supposedly) remaining anonymous also creates conditions for cyberbullying, the spread of conspiracy theories, and hate speech.

Practices on and with social media have not only been drawing attention to media studies, but also to social- and cultural sciences. The sociologist Christine Hine, for example, has been researching on practices with Twitter, the cultural anthropologist Barbara Frischling conducted research on modes of using Facebook, the sociologist Elke Wagner and the cultural anthropologist Julia Fleischhack have been investigating hate speech on social media, and the cultural anthropologists Ute Holfelder and Klaus Schönberger have been focusing on various meanings of selfies.

The special interest of qualitative research in European Ethnology/Cultural Anthropology is to focus on individuals and their practices, and therefore it aims to penetrate beneath polarising discursive surfaces to reveal individual, everyday cultural strategies and negotiations within broader discursive or cultural contexts.

This bachelor thesis follows precisely this idea. It focuses on practices on and with Instagram, socio-cultural meanings of Instagram profiles, and explores the modes of how the two female research partners in their 20s interact with this application. Both design their profiles on Instagram to present their craftsmanship and the craftswomen behind the products to a wider community.

Sarah Schmittinger's methodological approach combines participant observations of the profiles as well as within the processes of designing these profiles with semi-narrative interviews, to achieve a digital and visual ethnographic access into her field of research. The thesis brings to the fore considerations and automatisms in the design of the profiles, oscillations of the research partners between expected benefits of immaterial and commercial attention to their work and to themselves, and concerns about addiction or a meaningless use of time, as well as negotiations between the goal of an "authentic" self-presentation and the care for privacy. In all this, the author shows that the digital self-representation of her research partners is not a world detached from their "factual" lives, but in order to come across as an "authentic" (crafts)person, "factual" and "virtual" spheres are constantly intertwined. This thesis therefore reminds the reader that contemporary everyday worlds consist of digital and analogue dimensions and that research on everyday lives should approach its subject of research as a network of "factuality" and "virtuality".

*Elisabeth Luggauer*

*Würzburg, October 2020*

„Observing the Digital Self“ entstand als wissenschaftliche Abschlussarbeit zur Erreichung des akademischen Grades Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) am Lehrstuhl für Europäische Ethnologie/Volkskunde der Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg unter der Betreuung von Elisabeth Luggauer. Die Bachelorarbeit wurde im August 2019 an der Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg vorgelegt und für die Veröffentlichung leicht überarbeitet.







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*With digital cameras, smart phones and social media it is easier to create and share our self-representations. But self-representations have always been part of our culture. We have drawn, carved, sculpted and painted images of ourselves for millennia; we have kept diaries, scrapbooks and photo albums; we have sung ballads and told stories about ourselves.*

*(Jill Walker Rettberg 2014: 2)*



## 1 Introduction and research question

In 1929, the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte painted his famous oil painting with the original title „La trahison des images,“ in English „the treachery of images.“ The painting shows a wooden pipe. Beneath the pipe, one sentence is placed: „Ceci n’est pas une pipe,“ which can be translated as „this is not a pipe.“ Magritte plays with the viewer’s perception by guiding him through the paradox created with the depiction and the negating text passage. The paradox opens up a space for interpretation, through which Magritte, following the most popular interpretation of his work by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, addresses two issues: Firstly, the fact that an image of something is never the original subject, and secondly, that Magritte is playing with the question about an object’s reality (Foucault 1983). If Magritte were still alive today in our digitalized world and society of the 21st century, he would certainly have a social media presence to spread his work and art. For example, he might have an account on the photo and video-sharing social networking service Instagram. I imagine his account there with a lot of pictures that show his paintings and in his profile biography, the sentence: „C’est n’est pas moi, c’est une image de moi,“ in English: „this is not me, this is an image of me.“ Magritte’s treachery of images can be seen along with the play of „reality“ and „virtuality“ in contemporary digitalized everyday cultures, as a mixture of virtual and the physical worlds, online and offline spaces, that are interconnected and overlapping but not dichotomized and is, therefore, an essential concept for the self and its creation in cyberspace.

As the quote of digital culture scholar Jill Walker Rettberg on the first page points out, self-representation has always been part of cultures (2014: 2). Therefore, in times of the internet and its networking possibilities, self-representation spreads throughout „factual“ and „virtual“ lifeworld dimensions. Especially through and in social media, we create profiles and thereby, images of ourselves. Through digital self-representation, we participate in online worlds.

This thesis aims to take a closer look at the dimensions and intentions of self-representation on the social networking service Instagram. It results from another work I completed in April 2018 at the University of Gdańsk in Poland and is, therefore, the second part of a long-term research project. So far, I have spent one year observing and analyzing digital activities on Instagram of two young female Czech students through an ethnographic lens. This ethnographic research is an attempt to gain access to practices of digital self-representations and the persons behind them and therefore strives to answer two research questions. Firstly: „What does ethnographic access to the virtual, self-created Instagram profiles of the two students Anna (@tsarina\_fannitika, @jatozvladnu, and @so\_va\_di\_na) and Marie (@mariepetraknits) look

like?“ and secondly: „How do the profile owners explain and perceive their online appearance and intentions on Instagram?“

This project's research field is practices of digital self-representation, which are perceived and investigated in their entanglement with analog dimensions of lifeworlds. This thesis is organized into seven parts: this introduction and research question, is followed by 2., state of research and development of the thesis, where firstly, the topic of virtual self-creation and online and of-line realities is located in the field of European Ethnology/Cultural Anthropology and secondly, the connection to the previous research from 2018 is pointed out. It was a great concern for me to get more involved in virtual research fields, which is why this part draws upon various research approaches and refers to further literature. Part 3., methodological approaches, is devoted to ethnographic strategies on the internet that functioned as methodological tools of this research. On that basis, part 4., the field, presents the field of research and its constitution process. It gives an overview of the set of methods used and the collected research materials. Part 5., digital self-representations, the centerpiece of this thesis, shows the analysis and interpretation of a selection of the ethnographic material that has been collected. Chapter 6., digital selves, discusses the digital practices of the research partners through the lenses of the concept of digital selves by the sociologist Shanyang Zhao and some considerations of digital culture scholar Jill Walker Rettberg on digital self-representations. This thesis is concluded with the seventh chapter that reflects the researcher's approach towards the field and the chosen research methods, followed by a conclusion and an outlook.

The research partners in this ethnographic project speak Czech as a mother tongue, while the researcher's mother tongue is German. For and during this research, all participants agreed to communicate in English. Therefore, this thesis is written in English to ensure that the research partners can read its outcome. The participants agreed that their names and data are published in this thesis. All translations of quotations that appear in this work are done by the author herself.

## 2 State of research and development of the thesis

### 2.1 State of research

Since European Ethnology is a discipline that focuses on everyday cultures, it is appropriate to use ethnographic approaches for researching social media practices. European Ethnology combines work on micro- and macro-level by putting qualitative, empirical findings into a higher context and in social and scientific discourses (Schaefer 2017: 19). As this thesis examines the self in cyberspace, this research straddles the subdisciplines of media research and digital anthropology. The questions about the impacts and influences of the internet, the play between „reality“ and „virtuality“ and discussions about the formation of cyberculture have been present in the German disciplines of cultural sciences since the late 1990s. In American scholarship the discussions about „Anthropology of Cyberspace“ or „Computer-Lore,“ started a few years earlier, at the beginning of the 1990s (Schilling 2001: 579-80). The whole world has become interdependent and connected through the impact of digitalization and the internet. This subdiscipline and specifically, this field of research, reflect the same connectedness and interdisciplinarity. Besides European Ethnology, Cultural Studies and Cultural Anthropology, there are various approaches and influences from other disciplines like Media Studies, Human-Computer Interaction, Science and Technology, Sociology, Philosophy, Psychology or even Cybernetics, as the origin of basic research on computer development, that discussed the meaning of the digital and its outreach already in the 1940s-1950s (Koch 2017: 8). The ubiquity of the internet can also be seen from the fact that nowadays, more than half of the world's population is using the internet, and the numbers of internet users continue to increase (Bouwman 2018). In addition to the question of whether to research in, with, or via the internet, there are also questions about which fields of research result from this and how cultural anthropological approaches can be used on the internet, or whether existing cultural theories, concepts, and methods can be transferred to the new field of research or have to be reinvented. Addressing the questions about the fields of research on the internet, the Swiss folklorist Thomas Hengartner gave a short overview in the anthology „Methods of Cultural Anthropology“ and also mentioned, quoting Anja Todtenhaupt, the thematic area of digital self-creation, the topic of this thesis:

Self presentation, self-assurance and self-realization via the Internet 'Cyberspace Culture' is in a sense a 'thin line between virtuality and reality' (Todtenhaupt 1995, Todtenhaupt 1997), but especially between

publicity and intimacy (Hengartner 2001: 203).

As for the question, whether existing concepts lost their validity, the German cultural anthropologist Gertraud Koch advises to take all the changes in theories and methods of Cultural Anthropology that arise from the process of digitalization into a critical and reflexive frame, which can serve for further developments (Koch 2017: 16). Like Koch, American anthropologists Heather A. Horst, Daniel Miller, and Tom Boellstorff follow the idea that old, proven concepts can get a new coat of paint, instead of being rejected. The anthology „Digital Anthropology“ from Horst and Miller from the year 2012 is one of the first sources that deals explicitly with the new subdiscipline of digital anthropology. Horst and Miller identify six principles as the fundamentals of the subdiscipline and analyze the terms and definitions of digital culture and anthropology and their meaning for the subdiscipline, stating:

The digital should and can be a highly effective means for reflecting upon what it means to be human, the ultimate task of anthropology as a discipline and [...] the digital, as all material culture, is more than a substrate; it is becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human. (Horst and Miller 2012: 3-4)

Besides recognizing the materiality of digital worlds, they, for example, identify that the pre-digital life was by no means more authentic (Horst and Miller 2012: 3-4). In the same book, Tom Boellstorff uses the phrase „rethinking digital anthropology“ and gives an argumentation based on analytic considerations for: „[...] treating digital not as an object of study, but as a methodological approach, founded in participant observation, for investigating the virtual and its relationship to the actual“ (Boellstorff 2012: 40).

For him, it is a subdiscipline and a technique that makes it possible to study the virtual, thus analyzing the object of study in its own terms while acknowledging that virtual and physical worlds are overlapping and interconnected. As the research field of the internet is quite complex, it requires flexible research methods. Therefore, Boellstorff sees participant observation embedded in the written set of ethnographic research methods as the core method of digital anthropology (Boellstorff 2012: 40-41). His thoughts on doing ethnographic research online and the works of Gertraud Koch and Christine Hine, a sociologist of science and technology, in the field of ethnography on the internet, are the main works influencing my methodological approach. They are presented in the following chapter. But before we turn to the methods, I invite you to take a look back into the past, into the year 2018, and my first encounters with doing ethnographic research online and the foundation of this thesis.

## 2.2 Development of the thesis

The foundation of this thesis lies in a field research project I conducted in June 2018 during my Erasmus+-semester abroad at the University of Gdańsk. This opportunity was given to me through the cooperation between the Department of European Ethnology at the University of Würzburg and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of Gdańsk, I had the opportunity to choose an independent study seminar, where I had the freedom to choose a topic that I wanted to work on for one semester. It soon turned out that within the international student community, most of the communication took place on Instagram. People connected, shared information, communicated about upcoming events, or shared videos and pictures with their new friends in their new transitional residence. Accompanied by Professor Dr. K. Linda-Grycza, I did fieldwork among some Erasmus+-students. The study was entitled: „#studyabroad. Instagram – an application opens up new dimensions of private photojournalism“ and dealt with the following research question: „How is the photo and video-sharing networking service Instagram used by international students in Gdańsk during their semester abroad, and with which intentions is this way of private photojournalism practiced? To what degree does being abroad impact their virtual self-portrayal on Instagram?“ Following the research paradigm of European Ethnology/Cultural Anthropology, I approached these questions through the ethnographic tools of participant observation and interviews. I chose five research partners from different countries who differed in age, gender, and duration of stay in Gdańsk. Similar between them was that all five were international students at the University of Gdańsk and used Instagram nearly every day to share photos and insights from their stay in Gdańsk through their Instagram profile. This was the beginning of my interest in online ethnography. Within participant observations, I observed various photo uploading processes, them scrolling through their feeds (the place where they see all the pictures of other accounts they are following and are therefore interested in), and their general handling of the application. My perceptions and our situative conversations during the participant observations became contextualized with part-narrative interviews. I also focused on visual anthropology methods by analyzing their accounts as a whole, as well as single pictures. I gained first insights into the topic of virtual self-portrayal on Instagram and the usage of ethnography on the internet. It was exciting to see what it means to do an ethnographic study at the intersection of online and offline spaces. On this basis, I decided to continue this field research from June 2018 after I had left Poland. I chose two out of the five research partners, and they were willing to continue the research as a long-term project that then became my bachelor thesis. Starting from the previous research



interest, I wanted to focus more on the virtual self-construction and the intentions behind the online activities on Instagram. Additionally, I wanted to expand and prolong my data collection through ethnography, learn more about ethnographical access to digital selves on Instagram, and dive deeper into the research field of practices on Instagram.

### 3 Methodological approaches

European Ethnology is a type of empirical cultural studies that analyzes and describes ways of living, thinking, and expressing of individuals and groups without making judgments. The empirical data is generated inductively, which means that conclusions about the general and theoretical concepts are built up. Therefore, the formation of the theory occurs in the analysis and evaluation of the empirically collected data. A hallmark of European Ethnology is that a research subject is seen from several perspectives. This is performed, for example, through data or method triangulation, the combination of empirical approaches (Muri 2014: 459-60). As previously stated, these are essential features that characterize ethnography. Hence, to deepen the previous project on digital practices on Instagram mentioned above, I again combined different ethnographical tools to approach my research subject: participant observations, interviews, and Visual Anthropology. To understand what it means to do ethnographic research online, I first looked at ethnography in general and then specifically at ethnography on the internet and its particularities.

#### 3.1 Ethnography

The aim of ethnography, concisely, is to discover. To discover and try to understand how people do what they do, how everyday worlds are designed, and made sense of. The term itself comes from the Greek language and is a combination of the two words *éthnos* = folk and *graphé* = scripture. Ethnography is a method and research strategy. It is also a bunch of different methods, or in the words of the American ethnologist Clifford J. Geertz:

[...] a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another [...] Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries [...]. (Geertz 1993: 10)

It is based on the researcher's ongoing presence in the field of research and analytic descriptions of foreign or own cultural practices. Through these descriptions, ethnography manages to create special access to cultural practices and ways of life, even for uninvolved readers (Breidenstein et al. 2015: 7). The idea is: „To observe people in their situational or institutional contexts while they are doing their practices“ (Breidenstein et al. 2015: 7). Ethnography is predicated upon empiricism. In connection with this, the German educational scientists and sociologists Georg Breidenstein, Stefan Hirschauer, Herbert Kalthoff, and Boris Nieswand mention in „Ethnography“ from 2015 three basic attitudes that a researcher of ethnography needs to have. These are an interest in discursive and silent forms of knowledge and practice, curiosity about the idea that social realities offer something surprising, and thirdly, the willingness to adapt to the unique challenges of ethnographic fieldwork (2015: 7). The centerpiece of ethnography is, following Breidenstein and co-authors, participant observation. This inevitably leads the authors to further explain tensions between attendance and distance or being present and representing, which the researcher has to face and reflect upon. He or she acts in the interface of not being a complete member and not being purely a tourist or spectator. Field research, Breidenstein et al. conclude, is therefore mainly characterized by two aspects: immediacy and durability. Furthermore, the authors describe ethnography as a set of methods that gain knowledge first-hand, directly, and over a long period (Breidenstein et al. 2015: 8-9). The amount of time and work compared with other qualitative research strategies is huge. As no regulated procedure capable of being used repeatedly and uniformly in every case exists, the task for each ethnographic project would be to develop a combination of ethnographical tools that fit with the research subject. Breidenstein and his co-authors understand ethnography as an attitude and research strategy that approaches a social phenomenon empirically so that it reveals itself to the observer in its full diversity, complexity, and inconsistency (2015: 7-8). This method achieves the necessary sensitivity through its flexibility and adaptability to both the requirements of the field and the variability of its practitioners and subjects. This also becomes conceptually visible: „Doing ethnography means [...] switching between observation phases as well as reworking and correcting the research questions and the theoretical framework“ (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 9). The field's constitution can be seen as a circular process because ethnography, like other qualitative research strategies, is based on a recursive design. Data collection and data analysis alternate several times. While taking a multi-faceted view, ethnographers switch between observation phases and the various types of data they collect through the different methods. Ethnographers work with combinations of data like protocols, diaries, interview transcripts, photos, video sequences, audiotapes, conversational

recordings, or ritual documentation (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 45-46). This is the multiplicity of structures that Clifford J. Geertz talks about (Geertz 1993: 10). It is up to the ethnographer to see through these knots and masses of data, arrange them meaningfully, and reconcile them, to connect, analyze, and evaluate them in order to present a written result at the end. It is this multiplicity and variety caused by the different types of methodical approaches that are so fascinating to me. It has decisively guided my research interests and is reflected in the first part of my research questions, about what ethnographic access to digital selves looks like. I wanted to see which data sets arise in the interface of online and offline. Before passing on to the specifics of online ethnography, I want to take the two concepts of „ethnographic experience“ and „ethnographic view“ into consideration that are related to the writing culture debate and the ideas of reflexive anthropology that Clifford J. Geertz has decisively shaped. The terms are emerging in the context of a problem in presenting research data and the researcher’s objectivity in general. Ethnologist Volker Gottowik summarizes the core issue in his book „Construction of the Other“ in which he deals with Geertz’s approach to ethnographic representation, as follows: „The object described always carries traits of the descriptive subject, even if it is purportedly „pure description“ (Gottowik 1997: 67). Even though the goal is to observe, analyze, and write down neutrally, and without judgment, each individual is always and at all times influenced by subjective perception, previous experiences, attitudes, and expectations. This must be critically reflected and considered. While „ethnographic experience“ means that a researcher understands that the world’s perception and the organization of the social can be based on other categories than the well-known ones, „ethnographic view“ allows the researcher to perceive something familiar as foreign and reflect critically upon cultural self-evidences. It is about looking at the well-known through the „ethnographic view“ in order to get to know the cognition-enhancing dimension of „ethnographic experience“ (Gottowik 1997: 74-75). Since the chosen field of Instagram was not new to me, this open attitude and these two concepts were present in my mind throughout the whole research. As I have also been using Instagram for many years, I oriented myself based on these concepts and tried to see it as something unknown. To what extent this has succeeded must and will be critically reflected upon. To sum it up, ethnography is a circular research strategy and method that uses the researcher’s participation, collects a diverse set of data, and aims to create a multi-faceted portrayal of the research setting.

### 3.2 Ethnography on the internet

With regard to the ubiquity of the internet in people's everyday life and the question of whether existing cultural theories, concepts, and methods can be transferred to the new field of research, I focused on the ideas of Tom Boellstorff, Christine Hine, and Gertraud Koch, whose work is also based on Boellstorff's digital field research. In his efforts to „rethink digital anthropology,“ Boellstorff intentionally makes use of ethnographic methods, as shown in his statement: „[...] digital anthropology typically implies ethnography [...]“ (Boellstorff 2012: 53). He distinguishes three areas that should be rethought: the theoretical framework, the studied socialites, and how a researcher engages in the research itself. As „ethnographers of virtual socialites work in a dizzying range of field sites [...],“ and ethnography enables the researcher to adapt and to be „flexible“ in diverse contexts, he shows why ethnography, with specific participant observation as one part of it, is so important for the new field of research. He points out that participant observation is never rapid and that it takes a lot of time and more than just interviews in isolation to dive into a field of research (Boellstorff 2012: 55). He conducted a famous study in the year 2004, where he created an avatar to participate and interact on a platform called Social Life (Boellstorff 2012: 43-45). As a result of this study, Boellstorff shows that online and offline happenings are closely related and that there is a common set of issues that makes digital anthropology coherent as a field of study (Boellstorff 2012: 50). Following the results of her online studies, Christine Hine sees the connection between online and offline spaces related to each other and as an ongoing question the researcher and the participant have to figure out during the research process (2015: 70). Gertraud Koch refers to ethnography on the internet and distinguishes similar areas: the definition of the field, the access to the field, the question about validity and reality, and the particularities in the transfer of existing cultural-analytic concepts. She says that despite their ubiquity, the options of digital communication are still rarely considered in their impact on the fields of research in ethnographical research, even though the internet has become an important area for social action that acts as „[...] an important driver of social and cultural change [...]“ (Koch 2014: 367) within cultural studies. I want to point out her thoughts because she focused on research in and with the internet, but not via. She specifically focused on one part of the internet, the World Wide Web, which is often equated with the internet as a whole. This helped me with my approach to the research field of Instagram. It is important to distinguish between the internet and the World Wide Web now in order to be able to locate the social networking service Instagram. While the internet is a technical infrastructure, a network of data lines, the World Wide Web (WWW) is just one service that uses

this network, albeit the most popular. It is a worldwide information system that consists of websites constructed through electronic hyper-text documents (Cailliau and Gillies 2002: 1). Therefore, Instagram, as an application and website, is located on the World Wide Web. Most research concerning the internet refers to the WWW. Koch suggests to limit this huge field by following two principles: Multi (Web) Sited and Sighted (Web) Research. While multi-sited means to work case-oriented and to „follow the thing“ to different places, such as analyzing different websites and interviewing the providers or customers to connect the virtual and the real world and include the social context—sighted research means to work field-oriented. A good example of this strategy is the research of T. Boellstorff. Through the avatar, he was able to communicate and interact with other platform users and their avatars. Also, Boellstorff pointed out that the connection to the person’s real-life was present and that the social context of the „factual“ reality plays an important role. Depending on the research question and object, one will choose one of these principles or create a mix of both (Koch 2014: 370-71).

A distinguishing feature of the WWW is the media convergence. On the one hand, well-known media forms, such as pictures, text, radio, photography, film, and more, grow together and mix. On the other hand, however, there are new media forms, such as E-Mails, internet portals, platforms, newsgroups or the so-called Social Web, „Web 2.0“, with its new ways of communication, notable among them the „like“-buttons. Like Boellstorff’s study in *Social Life* shows, communication can also mean to communicate via virtual characters. Avatars can chat or speak online. A distinction between interpersonal and mass media communication, i.e., between private and public communication, and between synchronic and asynchronous communication has to be made. Synchronic means communication in real-time, as in a chat, while asynchronous means time-shifted communication, as in e-mails. Social networking services like Facebook, MySpace, and Instagram show a double character, as the providers leave it up to the users to choose how to portray themselves and decide what will be shown and uploaded in public or left private. Koch suggests to transfer the concept of communicative genres to the internet and the WWW to distinguish, for example, between homepages, with their offer on information, and virtual worlds like *Social Life* or social networking services like Instagram that have a pastime character marked by a direct, interpersonal exchange on verbal and nonverbal communication levels (Koch 2014: 371-72). The media genre and forms of communication are important for the research process and the localization of field and case because they present the particularities of the various websites, social networking services, blogs, games, online platforms and more. Every new media genre has specific communication forms—for example,

chat, e-mail, and voting-buttons or „like“ -buttons that can be seen as specific repertoires of communicative action. These unique features are also challenging. The users have to adapt to the functions and develop the specific knowledge and skills to be able to use them. Another important element is the context of use. From trade to entertainment, the possibilities are extensive and diverse. For the constitution of field and case in the greater research field of the WWW, it is useful to choose between the principles of field-oriented and case-oriented strategies and consider the communicative methods, the media genre and the context of use. Within the context of use, it is also possible to distinguish the different terminals on which the internet and the WWW can be used. For example, applications (Apps), like Facebook and Instagram, are specially designed for mobile devices.

As a result of the field constitution, the WWW's participatory observation depends on the communicative genre of the chosen research field. As in „factual“ research, the aim is to adapt to the circumstances the field offers. Whether the researcher is „lurking,“ as it is called in internet slang, which means to be a passive, silent observer and not participating in the sense of ethnography, but in the sense of discourse analysis, or the researcher is actively participating like Boellstorff was, both are possible and depending on the field. While a choice between active and passive can be made, there seems to be no choice of being public or anonymous in the case of a self-created internet identity. For an empirical field research, it is necessary to create an internet identity, and pseudonyms can never maintain complete anonymity because at latest, the interaction brings out the „factual“ persons behind the „[...] amorphous crowd of internet users [...]“ (Koch 2014: 375). Personal features will show themselves unintentionally and during the process of creation when active choices need to be made:

[...] effective presence requires some initial active choices from the ethnographer about how to portray an identity and an ongoing attention to being socially acceptable within the setting. (Hine 2015: 71)

It is important to note that the access to the various communication genres is not always self-evident and easy. Some field approaches require more skills and special knowledge than others. Some examples of these skills might be creating and controlling an avatar or knowledge in programming. However, the field access to the internet is not different from other „factual“ ethnographic fields that require special knowledge like language skills or specific experience background. To sum it up, access to the digital field of research can be active and passive, but participating actively means to become visible as a researcher and create an internet identity. To participate on the internet means, as in „factual“ field research, to have or gain special skills. I also use

the definitions of Boellstorff here, who, in his study “Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human” from 2008, differentiates between „virtual“ as a not physically tangible reality, „factual“ as a physically tangible, material reality, and „real“ as a social reality that can be from both characters, „virtual“ and „factual“:

Following the American Internet researcher Tom Boellstorff, a distinction is made between „virtual“, „factual“ and „real“. “Virtual” – is an imagined, symbolically generated reality that is not physically tangible, yet still has a real content in the sense of an interpretation horizon or symbolic worlds of meaning. „Actually“ – this refers to the physical realities and the material world of things, which in turn gain their meaning in social contexts on the basis of interpretations within specific systems of meaning. „Real“ – in the sense of social reality virtual and factual realities can thus be defined as real, if they are recognized and experienced as such. (as cited in Koch 2014: 377)

This already answers a part of the question about virtuality and reality. Koch refers to Boellstorff and points out that online and offline are closely related and that there cannot be an online study independent of the „factual“ life:

Like other imaginations, ideas, myths and symbolically generated systems of interpretation, virtual entities on the Internet are highly effective for the actual design of everyday life and therefore [...] a central object of cultural-analytical research. (Koch 2014: 377)

Besides the subjective validity of the virtual, it is still important to use validation criteria for internet sources and to be as reflective and aware as possible while taking background information and questionable data into account. To sum it up, it is important to be source-critical with the WWW and the appearing data. Still, virtually generated entities and meanings have subjective validity and impact on the „factual“ everyday life.

The question remains on how existing cultural-analytic concepts can be transferred. A good example is the concept of identity in comparison with „virtual“ avatar analysis. It seems to be transferrable at first, but conceptual gaps emerge, for example, when one person creates various avatars with various phenotypic features, and the direct relation to his or her identity seems to become indistinct (Koch 2014: 380-81). The conceptual fit is often only given superficially and requires a more intense contextualization. Here, ethnography can unfold its potential to determine the social happenings in the WWW-based on its analytical approach:

The openness towards social and cultural constellations [...] to pick up the complexity and contextuality of the examined objects and to discover and problematize such reconfigurations by means of ethnographic re-

search and also to point out the resulting revision [...] that arises in the context of Internet research. (Koch 2014: 381)

To sum it up, the concepts are still valid, but they need to be contextualized and examined. Here, ethnography is a useful tool. All in all, this discussion shows that the new field of research requires a lot of reflection and a researcher's critical view. No matter if it is the internet as a whole network, parts of it like the World Wide Web, or an even smaller field, such as a single application, a website or the „virtual“ doings of a single user. Following the traditional definition, doing ethnography on the internet is an „immersive“ method that uses the researcher's participation to build a multi-faceted portrayal of the research setting (Hine 2015: 55). Immersive describes the effect of diving into and identifying with the virtual world. It shows that ethnography also has the potential to dive deeper into the virtual world. Simultaneously, as in the „factual“ world, ethnographers cannot be omniscient and omnipresent in the „virtual“ settings. Many aspects of the studied situation will escape the understanding or show limits, for example, the amount of data that can be produced (Hine 2015: 4).

## **4 The field**

### **4.1. The researcher and the field**

This thesis aims to take a closer look at the dimensions and intentions of self-representation on Instagram. In the following section, I will concretize and reflect the field of my research, its structure and the access to it. To answer one question about the access in advance, this research was on and with the internet. Because of my position as an international Erasmus+-student in Gdańsk in 2018 and the fact that I then had been using the social networking service Instagram for three years already, I was actively embedded in the communication and connectivity processes that took place on Instagram within the international student community. I had already observed happenings and actions on Instagram incidentally, starting with this personal involvement even before I decided to start my ethnographic research officially. This factor is important and needs to be taken into account while reflecting upon the research field's constitution and access to Instagram, as space where the field is situated. On the one hand, I had already been an active user with my own personal account, knowing how to handle the application's basic functions, and on the other hand, I had already been inter-



acting with all research participants on Instagram before the research started. Therefore, access to the research field, the practices of Anna and Marie on Instagram was already given. I was actively following Anna and Marie, and they were following back my personal account @sarahxshaya. Due to the research project, „#studyabroad. Instagram – an application opens up new dimensions of private photojournalism“ I developed a first research interest and research questions. The new research interest and questions can be seen as a result of the recursive design and circular process of ethnography. During the previous observation phases and the analysis of the collected data, I steadily modified the research questions and theoretical framework and realized that I wanted to focus more on the person behind the online activities on Instagram. I wanted to analyze a person’s intentions and individual perceptions of their online presence and virtual actions. Therefore, I set a deeper focus on two of the former research partners and chose the two female Czech students Anna and Marie, though one has since graduated and is working now. I specified the research questions, ultimately arriving at „What does ethnographic access to the virtual, self-created Instagram profiles of the two students Anna (@tsarina\_fannitika, @jatozvladnu, and @so\_va\_di\_na) and Marie (@mariepetraknits) look like?“ and „How do the profile owners explain and perceive their online appearance and intentions on Instagram?“

The research partners: Anna and Marie

Starting with the first research, this long-term research took place from April 2018 until July 2019. While the first interviews in 2018 were conducted in Anna’s and Marie’s temporary residences in Poland, the second round of interviews took place at their homes in the Czech Republic. I chose these two women because I was impressed by their profiles and interested in their handicrafts and artwork. Both produce different kinds of handicrafts in their free time and present their works through their Instagram profiles. While Anna has had three profiles, @tsarina\_fannitika, @jatozvladnu, and @so\_va\_di\_na, Marie has one profile, @mariepetraknits. There are some notable details about the profiles that I want to mention. The first interview with Anna is related to the profiles @tsarina\_fannitika and @jatozvladnu, while the second interview is about @tsarina\_fannitika and @so\_va\_di\_na because @jatozvladnu got hacked and deleted. She opened the new profile @so\_va\_di\_na later based on a new focus. Since Anna created three different profiles, she is a good example of the inadequacy of a transfer of a traditional identity concept, which refers to singularity and uniqueness, to self-presentation in virtual spaces. Marie installed Instagram only three weeks before our first interview, so she was very new to the application’s settings, technical structures, and functions. Another detail is that Marie does not use a smartphone to open the applica-

tion, despite being designed for mobile devices. She uses her laptop and another application called Gramblr that needs to be installed on the computer to be able to use Instagram without having a connected account on a smartphone. Marie knew about Instagram because she was an active user on the platform Ravelry, a community for knitting and crocheting. This is an excellent example of the difficulties that arise around researching social networking sites (SNS) like Instagram. People are not only connected within the platform but also beyond. Because applications and websites can be connected, it is hard to define the research range's concrete borders. Communication and interaction can shift between or depend on other social networking sites. Users set up different personal profiles and thereby represent themselves on various SNS.

### Web 2.0 and Instagram

Instagram is one of various SNS in the so-called Web 2.0, or „Net of amateurs“ as the media theorist Ramon Reichert names it (Reichert 2008: 1). I want to define some key terms and take a closer look at self-representation in the Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 means new digital media formats and communication technologies. It consists of user-friendly technologies, which follow „do-it-yourself“-strategies and empower every user to publish multimedia formats on the internet. Instead of being a passive content receiver like in the past, the users are now active content producers. But this practice of becoming active has a dialectic character. While everyone has the right to take part, present themselves, and speak out on the internet, no one has the guarantee to be heard or seen.

It is the social networking sites in the Web 2.0. that function as platforms for this active participation. Social networking sites are internet platforms where social networks are created. Members or users of these sites can create profiles and interact with others. They can keep up with family members, friends, or colleagues and create groups, upload pictures or videos and send messages to each other.

Today's media amateurs are well-versed in multimedia, they create their personal profile on social networks, they participate actively in forum discussions, and they use web content management to create a narrative about themselves. (Reichert 2008: 1)

As Koch showed, the extensive and diverse options and the repertoire of communicative actions in the different media genres define the various sites. On the one hand, we have the tools and possibilities that the specific social networking site offers for self-presentation and creation. On the other hand, every profile is the result of how the creator uses these possibilities. It depends on how they utilize the tools and what they decide to share on the profile. Here we have the double character:

It is up to the users to make decisions about being public and private, about intensity, time, and effort they invest. Hengartner goes even further and uses the term „virtual homes“ for self-created homepages:

Private homepages, on the other hand, often present themselves, quite literally, as a „virtual home“ with online diaries, photos, own texts and information about personal preferences, activities and hobbies. (Hengartner 2001: 204)

Even if he is talking about homepages, I see a strong relation to private profiles on social networking sites. The connection gets clearer if we transfer it to Instagram directly. Instagram was founded as an application and social networking service in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in San Francisco, California. The idea was to create a platform for photo and video sharing. It advertises with: „Create an account or log in to Instagram. A simple, fun & creative way to capture, edit & share photos, videos & messages with friends & family“ (Instagram 2019). Nowadays, it belongs to Facebook, Inc. At one point, it was only available for iOS and customers of Apple Inc., but it became available for Android in 2012. Instagram has gained a community of one billion users worldwide (Statistisches Bundesamt quoted from de.statista.com 2018). The users can upload pictures and videos, which can be edited directly in the application with various filters. It combines audio-visual elements with a personal blog. Every user creates his or her account or accounts. It is not necessary to upload anything or to follow anyone. Having an account allows one to see every public account and their posts. The account can be public or private, which dictates if the posts made on the account can be publicly viewed or viewed only by pre-approved followers. The user can follow other accounts and gain followers to his or her account. It is possible to tag other people in the videos and pictures or to tag locations. One can add a short text or description under the posts and use hashtags (#) to describe the posts and gain broader attention to spread the posts. It is possible to like posts of others and to subscribe to other accounts or to subscribe to hashtags. All this creates one's feed in the application. On the one side, there is the own page to be created, and on the other, the feed showing updates and posts from followed accounts and saved hashtags. To have a large number of likes on posts and a large number of followers opens new possibilities for the users, for example, to earn money by advertising for brands (Kreutzer 2018: 110-11). This part of social media marketing is called influencer marketing (Deges 2018: 1-3). There are many pages sharing tips and tricks online about creating a better account and gaining a big followership. For example, you can find many pages offering some basic tips for a more attractive feed. Since the service added an internal messenger, it is also possible to chat with others. Another feature similar to the instant-messenger service Snapchat, where you send

pictures and videos that only last a few seconds to your friends, is the „Instagram-Story.“ This extra post, picture, or video sequence is available for 24 hours in an extra sequential feed. There are different ways of uploading a picture, video, or story. Depending on whether the user wants to create a story or a fixed post, they use the „cross“-button above the home button or the camera button in the upper left corner. Just as every application is developing, Instagram is developing steadily too. They frequently install new functions, for example, the highlighted stories on the profile page. Between biography and uploaded pictures, there is a place where one can fix old stories as highlights. In this way, they are not gone forever, but archived and visible for others. Another possibility that came up shortly after my first research in 2018 was the possibility of „going live.“ To extend the duration of stories, which is limited to less than one minute for a short video, it is possible to do a live stream. The idea is to set up another way of „taking part“ virtually in someone else’s life. Following the founders Krieger and Systrom, their main goal is to create a place that captures the people’s creativity. Systrom says: „[...] Instagram has become the home for visual storytelling for everyone from celebrities, newsrooms, and brands, to teens, musicians and anyone with a creative passion“ (Instagram 2019).

As it is all about the user’s storytelling, creativity, and the sharing of personal things, I like the transfer of Hengartner’s definition of „virtual homes.“

#### Online and offline relations

To sum it up, the relationship between researcher and the field, in this case, was characterized by a duration of more than one year and can be seen as a steady process between online and offline connections that Anna, Marie, and I figured out together. Instagram offers its own communicative repertoire, with interpersonal and mass medial communication, public and private modalities, and synchronous and asynchronous communication forms. There is a difference between self-presentation and self-perception; both depend on different forms of influence, following the concepts of Gertraud Koch (Koch 2014: 370-71). I decided to work multi-sited and -sighted, that means field and case-oriented. This was exemplified through different ways of access to the „virtual“ and „factual“ world and my presence on Instagram through my personal account @sarahxshaya. The internet opens up new dimensions for passive and active observation, which will be presented in the data analysis in chapter five.

## 4.2 Research materials

During the one year of research, I collected many materials of different quality, quantity, and kind. My ethnographical set of methods included participant observation, especially in processes of designing the profile on Instagram, part-narrative interviews, and analyzing the profiles on Instagram with strategies of Visual Anthropology. This combination of methodological tools led to a wide set of research materials: photographic documentation of various uploading processes, field notes, picture and profile analysis, screenshots, and transcripts of interviews. The observation took place to a certain extent in the „factual“ but mostly in the „virtual“ world. The „factual“ observation took place during my stay at their homes. The „virtual“ observation took place through my smartphone. Through my personal account, I was able to act as an active and passive researcher online during the entire long-term research. I interacted with Anna and Marie through „likes“ and comments or messages that we exchanged. I was also able to follow them as a silent observer. I saw them uploading pictures or stories, reposting uploads from others through their account, or when they liked other posts. Of course, this silent observation is limited in its outreach. However, it was interesting to experience this kind of spontaneous observation that became part of my life and free time, too, because I had to react directly when I saw them acting. I tried to collect their actions through screenshots and field notes. I also screenshotted their profiles as a whole arrangement of pictures and the pictures as single pictures with the picture description, hashtags, numbers of likes, date of upload, tags of other people, locations, and the comments below. The function of the highlighted stories made the observation process a bit easier. In total, I conducted four interviews with Anna and Marie, with a total duration of six hours, and collected many screenshotted pictures and uploads. Some uploads are still visible for external viewers because they were actively included in the profile; some are now inaccessible for external viewers but part of my research archive. Of course, they knew that I was observing their activities, and everyone else who is following them has the same access. I was limited to this external point of view most of the time. I did not see which messages they wrote, which responses they got, or how many and which people saw their uploads. I did not focus on the number of followers they have and the people they follow. I did not observe the fluctuation of numbers because my focus lay on their perception and intentions, not numerical growth. Still, personal achievements were part of the interviews and can be analyzed in that way.

For this thesis, I chose an excerpt from the collected data. I focused on presenting the four part-narrative interviews, two „factual“ observations of picture uploading processes, and some picture analysis re-

sulting from my „virtual“ observation. The interviews were partially narrative in nature, which means that I prepared various questions to keep the conversation going. Simultaneously, I also always tried to be open and reacted flexibly to the participants' needs. The second round of interviews needed more orientation, as they were not sure if they could tell me something new. As it would have also exceeded the limit, I chose excerpts from the interviews too and tried to select the quotations wisely, so that most topics are represented. I decided to present both participants individually, structured after the survey period, and ordered after topics. Afterwards, the findings of their Instagram practices are reunited, compared, and theoretically contextualized. They will be set in relation to the theories of Shanyang Zhao and Jill Walker Rettberg in Chapter 6.

## 5 Digital self-representations

### 5.1 Anna

Uploading a picture and a story

I observed Anna uploading a picture and a story to her account @tsarina\_fannitika when we were sitting outside in the garden on June 15, 2018. First, Anna opened the application and pressed the „cross“-button above her home-button to start the process of uploading a picture. The gallery of pictures opened up in the application, and she chose a picture of her latest drawing. She chose one by touching on it. It opened up. Then she pushed the „next“-button. She did not add any filter or editing, so she pressed the „next“-button again. When she was requested to write a caption, she wrote two sentences referring to what is shown in her picture. Besides, she added @ + the name of the person at the end of her text: „Long time no see. That's why are glasses so great.“ (@tsarina\_fannitika, June 15, 2018). She used nine hashtags #tsarinafannitika, #portrait, #art, #freelancer, #artist, #stabilo, #markers, and #illustrator under the text. The whole process took around three minutes (field notes, June 15, 2018). Screenshot 1 shows the uploaded picture.

After this, she also showed me how she uploads a story to the same account. She pushed the „camera“-button in the left corner again. Then she turned her phone to the side and took a picture from her point of view. She pressed the big white button, and the picture was taken after one shot. Then she pressed the „send to“-button, and the next page opened. The application requested her to choose whether she wants to

send the picture to one or more person in the messenger or if she wants to share it. She chose the option of sharing it, the blue „share“-button. Then the story was uploaded. This process took around one minute (field notes, June 15, 2018). I think the way Anna uploaded the picture and the story is quite representative of how she handles the application and how she perceives herself on Instagram. She did not need to change a lot; she did not put any filters or spend hours choosing the right picture in the right position (field notes, June 15, 2018).



Screenshot 1, by author, August 5, 2019.

## Prologue

It is my big passion to draw, so I felt like I'd rather share what I do, than who I am.

-@tsarina\_fannitika and @jatozvladnu

In 2018, Anna described herself as an irregular user who does not spend too much time and too much effort on Instagram (interview, June 15, 2018). It was exciting to talk to her because she owned two accounts at the same time. The first account was named @jatozvladnu, which can be translated from Czech to English as: „I can handle it.“ She opened this account in 2016, and her activity there increased during her Erasmus+-semester in Poland. When she opened it for me in June 2018, her last active post was from November 2017. She described the idea of @jatozvladnu as follows:

And the idea is that the first one was supposed to be connected more with, me, myself as a person, and also it is like really this random kind of thing where you just see something, or you are doing something so you post it [...] actually the caption says: Anna, student, wilderness seeker, fighter with bipolar disorder, and then you have the blog link there. (interview, June 15, 2018)

Her account contained many different motifs, like pictures of Anna, pictures of food, pictures of architecture, her drawings and handmade toys, sometimes in a black and white edition and sometimes with many colors. Anna told me that she had tried to sell toys for kids two years ago before drawing more regularly and writing a blog. She used Instagram to share pictures of her handmade creations (field notes and interview, June 15, 2018). As she explained, there is a link in her account description that leads to this personal blog, where she tries to publish at least once a month (interview, June 15, 2018). Later in the interview, she summed it up again:

It is basically, if you would go from the beginning, you would see like the story of my life how I, I have started to draw and I, back then I had a dog and I was living with a guy on a farm [...] you see this is what I was doing in my spare time, I was baking bread [...], and I think there is basically picture from every time of my life I have been through so far. (interview, June 15, 2018)

Compared to her first account, the second one was quite new at our first interview. She launched it in January 2017 during her first time in Poland:

The second feed I have is like purely artistic, in air quotes, I guess, and it is called @tsarina\_fannitika and I am posting there just like things I am drawing, I am making, no stuffed toys anymore [...] but I have like myself in the profile. (interview, June 15, 2018)

Anna told me that she felt the need to share more of the drawings she produces as a passionate artist than to post about herself as a private person. She thinks this was also the reason why she was absent on @jatozvladnu for such a long time (field notes and interview, June 15, 2018). As Anna's account is about art, creativity, and self-realization, she spoke in the interview a lot about publicity, about how to become famous or how to share her own creations with other people. She reflected upon the profile's appearance and organization, about which tricks one can use to attract others or how to post frequently to stay present to others (field notes, June 15, 2018). We also talked about her new profile and how she wants it to look:



It is also old. Basically, like most of the things are old prints I did I think almost three years ago and then the two of it, the new ones kinda, are from now like this year. I try to find a way to kinda float from those really beautiful pics to this black and white. [...] nine old pictures and then those two are like basically beginning of the new one where I would like to be funky colours and white background so it would look more united. (interview, June 15, 2018)

Anna said she thinks it would be important to make the profile look organized, consistent, and appealing to followers and page visitors. She did not always think like this, but over time she changed her mind (field notes, June 15, 2018). Anna followed many people on Instagram:

Basically, almost all of them are artists. I think that they are either artists or baking bread, I would say, as you can see: artist, artist, artist, bookshop. (interview, June 15, 2018)

She said that it was not essential for her to have many followers, but she was selective about whom she follows. It was not important for her what profiles of others looked like, but she would always search for good illustrations that catch her attention. Her favorite pages were about illustrations, calligraphy, and linolprint (interview, June 15, 2018). She would always use the hashtag #tsarinafannitika, her own hashtag, under pictures, and at night, she often posts stories using the hashtag #latenightsketches to show some drafts (field notes, June 15, 2018). Anna mentioned friends that would invest more time in their Instagram profiles than her and would gather a lot of attention for their profiles. On the one hand, she did not want to spend too much time using the application, and on the other hand, Instagram was the only platform where she was actively trying to share her art and passion. In reflections upon her online activities, Anna found herself torn between gaining a lot of attention and letting the application take too much of her time and energy (interview, June 15, 2018). It was visible that she began to question her own activity. Anna told me that there were three months, between November and February, when she met her boyfriend, where she did not upload anything. She would not have felt the need, she said, because the relationship gave her the attention and good feeling she wanted, so she did not need the „virtual“ feedback (field notes and interview, June 15, 2018).

During our conversation, I learned two new things. Firstly, it is technically possible to have two accounts logged in simultaneously, so you can switch the accounts in the application without having to login and logout. Secondly, I learned that there are special tricks to save time and effort by using other applications. Some applications allow you to create a picture queue in advance. Therefore, the app will automatically upload your pictures in your chosen period (field notes and interview, June 15, 2018).

## Follow up in spring 2019

I am trying to perceive it as a gallery of things.  
- @tsarina\_fannitika and @so\_va\_di\_na

In 2019, Anna told in the interview that she would like to believe that she spends less than 30 minutes per day on Instagram but found out that it was around one hour. She uses the application when she is bored or waiting for the bus. She has still been following her favorite artists and bookshops as in 2018 (interview, June 15, 2018). Anna explained that she posted much more during her Erasmus+-time, as she felt more alone and therefore wanted to share more things with others, whether she got direct feedback or not. Instagram was less important for her in 2019 than it was in 2018. We talked about her relationship, and I asked her what impact it has on her attitude towards Instagram: „I think it would be different. I would try to fulfil myself with it.“ (interview, March 19, 2019)

The account @jatozvladnu was hacked in 2018. After she had been inactive there for a long time, it was hacked, and pornographic pictures were uploaded, so she had to delete it (interview, March 19, 2019). Anna sees her new job at an IT-company, which she started in summer 2018, as one of the reasons for her increasing concerns about virtual security aspects and her online activities:

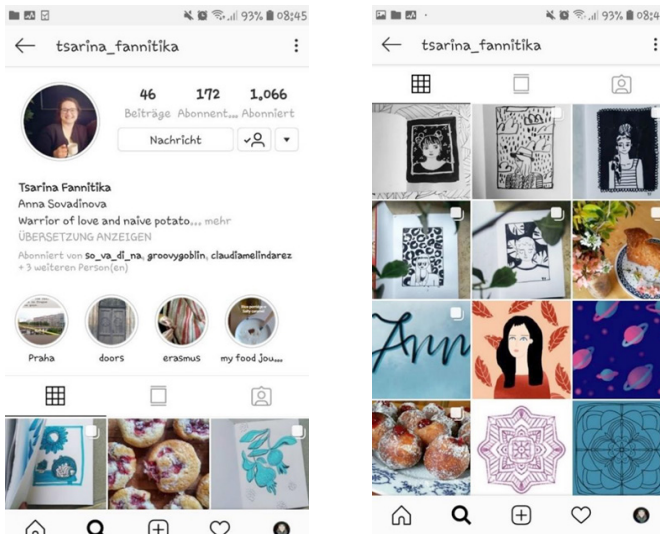
It remembers more than I do, isn't that scary. [...] I don't like that it is not mine, it belongs to other people. To the company. The thing is that I work in IT, and I know that you can always get access to something if you need it. There is nothing private; it is not like it is my picture. (interview, March 19, 2019)

She told me about security precautions; for example, she would never post pictures of the last bus stops or pictures around her house (interview, March 19, 2019). In 2018, we also talked about security aspects but at that time, not with the same intensity as this time (interview, June 15, 2018). Anna confirmed the impression I had gained during the past year in my participant observations, that @tsarina\_fannitika had become a more personal account:

I think that tsarina is becoming to be like my personal account, on the other hand I am still pretty torn between if I want to be that open on Internet or not. I still haven't figured it out, like since last year. (interview, March 19, 2019)

Anna was still oscillating between spending time on Instagram and not caring about the application, between preserving privacy and being public. She worried about fugacity and the future of the application, the sense and the meaning of the „virtual“ (interview, March 19, 2019).

It seems that she was torn and caught in a steady process of rethinking her appearance and the message she wants to spread all the time, between putting effort into gaining followers and not caring about numbers, that she was in a steady process of using Instagram for a while and quitting it for some periods. Anna said that her activity fluctuates and that the importance of Instagram depends on her situation and feelings in her „factual“ life (interview, March 19, 2019). She revealed that the application and using the application could function as a valve, to let things out. It makes her feel good and bad. It is a source of inspiration and hope, but also a platform for comparison with others (interview, March 19, 2019).



Screenshot 2 and 3, by author, August 5, 2019.

I chose two screenshots to give a short overview of the profile @tsarina\_fannitika, pictured below as screenshot 2 and screenshot 3. Screenshot 2 reveals a lot of information. In the profile picture, one can see a picture of Anna. The biography shows her complete name and a short description: „Tsarina Fannitika Anna Sovadinova. Warrior of love and naive potato. Self-care by art, art by heart.“ (screenshot 2, August 5, 2019). Anna has an e-mail address linked in the biography, which enables others to get in contact with her for cooperation or purchases, for example: „Open for commissions: anna.sovadinova@gmail.com.“ (screenshot 2, August 5, 2019). It is visible that Anna is following 1,066 pages through this account and that 172 follow her back. So far, she has uploaded 46 posts as pictures or videos, sometimes a single picture and other times a series. There are also the four highlighted stories: „Praha,

doors, Erasmus, and my food journey.“ Screenshot 3 presents Anna’s variety of art. There are the mandalas from Procreate and freehand drawings with a pen. In between, there is a picture of a self-baked cake.

Anna perceives her profile as follows:

They see the censored version of me. I do not post there everything. I am very careful about posting things, concerning my work, because some people from work follow me there. [...] So it is not authentic at all but it is authentic in some censored version of authenticity. (interview, March 19, 2019)

I asked her what she likes about Instagram, and she said:

The hope that people are spreading through Instagram, like some activists and artists. I am trying to perceive it as a gallery of things. It is like when you go to gallery and you are thinking, oh my god, I could have drawn this. (interview, March 19, 2019)

She sees her role as a regular user, and she tries not to post too much personal stuff. Anna describes her digital presence or self as:

I think it is quirky, like a bit strange, weird, but also charismatic. [...] I think I see myself as someone I would like to follow. Like someone who is, according to me, follow-worthy for bringing the unexpected. (interview, March 19, 2019)

The internet persona @tsarina\_fannitika would be less worried than the „real“ person. Anna rejects pressure and comparison one would have to face on Instagram and the lack of security (interview, March 19, 2019). In the interview, Anna often raised the theme of „authenticity.“ Her aim became to show random things from her daily life as they happened in reality. From time to time, she did things like posting polls in her story or livestreams, where people could watch her or interact with her:

I like authenticity. I made a voting questions like what are you looking for here? Are you looking for perfection or for authenticity? And I had five people voting. All of them voted for authenticity. (interview, March 19, 2019)

Through actions like this, Anna tries to do engaged art, push people forward, and to encourage others to think outside of the box. She thinks that social networking sites are good platforms for using art to make people aware of social problems. For example, Anna would like to start a 24-hour livestream as a kind of protest to generate awareness of the amount of time people spend online (interview, March 19, 2019). Screenshot 4, also below, is a screenshotted story that Anna did not put

in her highlighted folders, so it was only available 24 hours. It shows her working table, and I chose it because the written text says: „When someone asks what I've been doing this summer.“ (screenshot 4, July 20, 2019). It works as an excellent example of Anna's interactions with followers. It brings a personal level to the art account by referring to Anna as a student, the person behind the profile. It creates connections between „virtual“ and „factual“ life. The interactive character of Instagram's tool of the story even intends to facilitate, just as Instagram does in general, the direct and immediate communication between the person behind the profile and her followers. The story always includes the option „send a message“ through which followers can send their reactions to that particular story to the profile owner.



Screenshot 4, by author, July 20, 2019.

Anna made it clear that she knows how many people watch and follow her actions and engaged art projects. She noticed that the number is quite low; still, this does not stop her from doing and sharing her projects:

I don't see the fun in it, if you have to worry about getting numbers and doing things for the others. [...] I do things because I want to do them for myself. Not because I want for someone to appreciate me for clicking on the blue button. (interview, March 19, 2019)

Anna pointed out that her motivation is mainly her amusement, that she is doing it for herself. She told me that she „got hyped“ about

Instagram when it became more popular in her peer group in 2016. In her eyes, Instagram's idea is to create something virtual, that it is a „lifestyle“ application (interview, March 19, 2019). She told me about special tutorials where one can learn about doing specific Instagram make-up or taking pictures for Instagram (field notes and interview, March 19, 2019). We talked about the highlighted story function that was released in 2018. Anna used it to create collections of the things she had the most pictures of, Erasmus+-pictures or pictures of self-made food. When she went on speaking about her own perception, she started to worry if she is using the wrong platform for what she wants to express:

[...] like creativity, the art of beauty of the everyday life, like the not interesting details, my art, my thoughts, my writings, not the way I live or what I wear. Oh my god I am using the wrong app the whole time [laughter]. (interview, March 19, 2019)

She started to think about her outreach and realized that she maybe should use another application specifically for artists. That maybe no one knows about her profile because she uses the wrong platform (interview, March 19, 2019). I asked her about her intention to start Instagram, and she said:

Yeah like the thing behind this is to create somehow like a platform of people that likes what I do and then after some time they would be willing to buy things from me, so that I wouldn't have to find a real job for the rest of my life. But as we are talking I am realizing that actually it really could be that I am publishing on the wrong page. (interview, March 19, 2019)

Then she told me that she had created a new account for her digital illustrations in February 2019, @so\_va\_di\_na. Anna started to draw on her iPad by using the application Procreate. This kind of digital drawing was also visible on @tsarina\_fannitika, where she posted some mandalas she created on Procreate:

I have two actually because I wanted to make a completely new Instagram for my digital illustrations, because I wanted to make a thirty days challenge. (interview, March 19, 2019)

We looked on her second account, @so\_va\_di\_na, and she revealed that she quit her challenge after three days because she did not find the time for it. She only uploaded three pictures from February 19 until February 21 and then one picture on March 09 that had nothing to do with the challenge (field notes and interview, March 19, 2019). Laughingly, Anna called herself a „quitter.“ She said she must be the worst study material for me, as she is an irregular user and starts projects that she

quits after a while (interview, March 19, 2019). Until the publication of this thesis, she never uploaded any new story or picture on this account. We talked about the reason why she had never stopped using Instagram with her different profiles:

Because I am addicted to having the possibility to receive the likes and feel appreciated. That sounds bad. [...] I don't really understand my relationship to social media. But, I can't let it go. I don't know why. It just feels like it is so easy you know. Like if you want to complain, if you want to be proud of something and share it with someone you can just snap it and post it. [...] Just making you feel connected. On the other hand, it is very empty, because you do not get any reaction to it. [...] I mean, what is "thumbs up," I won't make dinner from thumbs up. (interview, March 19, 2019)

We talked about the importance of Instagram for her, and she said that it is not high enough on her priority list to become an intense content maker for social media (interview, March 19, 2019). Still, she will stay with Instagram until she finds another platform that suits her more (interview, March 19, 2019). Her conclusion after two years of Instagram was:

The conclusion is, that either I start to do it, or I quit. I think I just like really need to think deep and hard about if the platform is right for what I am trying to say. [...] In Czech we say, that you are crying on the wrong grave. (interview, March 19, 2019)

Anna's mode of self-representation on Instagram can be interpreted as an ironic way of self-representation. No matter which account, she always uploads pictures, videos, or stories that are against the „aesthetic“ mainstream way of posting „instagrammable“ things. On @tsarina\_fannitika, she focused on authentic moments of her daily life. On @so\_va\_di\_na, she started with digital illustrations. On her third profile, @jatozvladnu, she linked her blog and spoke openly about her mental illness. She plays with her followership, as they can expect everything but continuity. They can expect the unexpected (interview, June 15, 2018). All accounts are connected with the various passions she has. At the end of our interview, she told me that despite all doubts, she wants to stay with her two accounts, @tsarina\_fannitika and @so\_va\_di\_na, for now (interview, March 19, 2019). I learned something new again from Anna: There is an activity timer in the application, showing the user how much time he or she spends on Instagram (interview, March 19, 2019).

## 5.2 Marie

### Uploading a picture

I observed Marie uploading a picture on her Instagram profile when we were in her room in Gdańsk on May 6 2018. Marie's practices differed in many ways from Anna's. Instead of using a smartphone, she uses her laptop at home as an electronic device. She told me that it was necessary to install the Gramblr application first in order to be able to install Instagram without having a connected account on a smartphone. Before uploading the picture on her account @mariepetrknits, she opened her folders on the laptop storage to search for a knitting picture. She logged in to the Gramblr application. Then she took a picture from the folder to the application. It said, „select your media“ (field notes, May 6, 2018). After she selected and imported the picture, she cropped the size. She did not use a filter, but she edited the brightness, contrast, and vividness. She pushed the green thumb up button to move to the next step. The third part said, „write a caption and send“ (field notes, May 6, 2018). Then she wrote a long caption for her picture and added some hashtags. She wrote a long text about the hats shown on her picture and the story behind the process of knitting them: „I wondered how brioche stitch looks like with darker main color than contrast color. I love how this turned out. Some of my friends didn't believe this is the same design as the orange-grey Buttress hat! I will keep this slouchy variation for sure. During the last 7 days I used it 4 times when sleeping outdoors. This photo was taken in Kokořínsko – Máchův kraj“ (screenshot 5). The picture shows Marie herself, wearing the new hat. Compared to the editing, which she did very quickly, it took her a long time to write and correct the text. In the end, she added the link to her Ravelry profile. Then she added hashtags like #ravelry, #brioche, #briochehat and #buttresshat. Then she chose: „Upload immediately“; this option stands under the caption field. Then she pressed the green „send“- button. The last page showed a message: „Upload completed. Your picture will now appear in your Instagram profile.“ She then opened her Instagram profile online to see the upload and check again if the text and the editing matched. The whole process took her around five minutes (field notes, May 6, 2018). Screenshot 5 shows the uploaded picture.



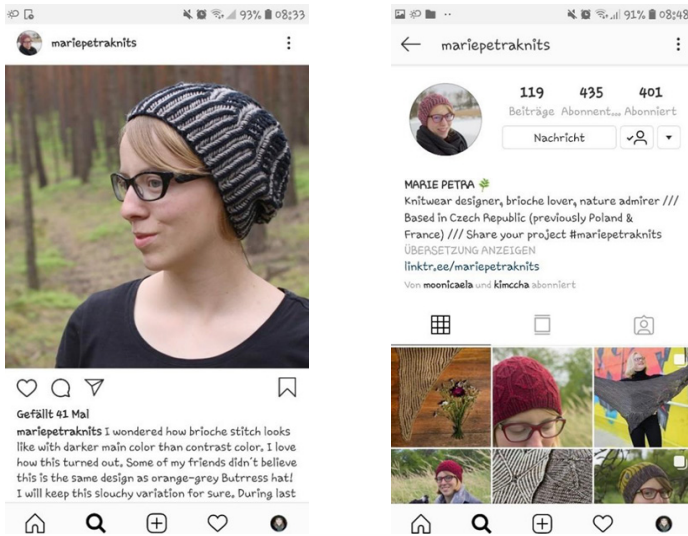
## Prologue

(...) well I don't use it as Insta, I use it as Archigram (...)  
-@mariepetraknits

Marie came to Gdańsk for her summer semester 2018. When I interviewed Marie the first time, she had been using Instagram only for three weeks. She was still in the process of understanding the application's possibilities. Marie's account is, as the name @mariepetraknits reveals, all about her passion for knitting. She has been knitting since 2016. Her Instagram appearance is strongly connected to the knitting platform Ravelry, a knit and crochet community launched in 2007 by a couple in the United States (interview, May 6, 2018). Marie has been part of this community of knitters, designers, crocheters, yarn sellers, and yarn dyers since November 2017. In her opinion, it is the biggest platform for knitting as of the year 2018. As Marie is designing her own patterns and written instructions in English and Czech, she is always trying to find a good way of marketing to find buyers and spread her work (interview, May 6, 2018). On Ravelry, she published eleven patterns. Two are for free, and the others can be bought. On Instagram, she shows pictures of her knitwear (interview, May 6, 2018). In May 2018, she explained to me how she came to Instagram:

I did it because so many knitwear designers do it and I know there is a lot of knit work and a little [...] but it makes sense you know, when you find my patterns on Ravelry you will see, that okay I write there all information like what type of yarn you should use, how big the needles should be, you know, the different options for different sizes, I write it there but what sells is the picture right? So it is very, it makes sense that the knitwear industry likes Instagram because it is all about pictures.  
(interview, May 6, 2018)

Central themes in the interview with Marie were aspects of marketing, the factor of time consumption, the value of likes, and feedback and, in general, the possibilities the digitally connected world offers. Marie even told me that she sometimes just follows other accounts not out of interest, but to gain followers or more attention of others to her own page (interview, May 6, 2018). For Marie, Instagram seems to be a good way to extend her outreach and presentation of handcraft, to shift it to a second platform. As she is always searching for some test knitters, Instagram could also help find people who knit her patterns and test the instructions (interview, May 6, 2018).



Screenshot 5 and 6, by author, August 5, 2019.

In Marie's case, I also chose two cross-sections of her profile to give an overview of her practices on and with Instagram. Screenshot 6 presents her basic data. Her biography says: „Knitwear designer, brioche lover, nature admirer /// based in Czech Republic (previously Poland & France) /// Share your project #mariepetraknits“ and there is a link that is connected with the platform linktree, where you can go to four different pages and see her knitwear or join a Ravelry group (screenshot 6, August 5, 2019). As she explained in the interviews, most of the pictures show her knitwear, while some other pictures show landscapes that inspired her for her patterns. Marie's face is visible in the profile picture; most other pictures do not show her face. Marie had uploaded around twenty pictures at that time (interview and screenshot 6, August 5, 2019). Marie took pictures of her knitwear together with her boyfriend, using his professional camera. They did some photoshoots when they went for a walk. She told me that she never took the pictures for Instagram, rather for Ravelry, but of course, it was useful to have them for her Instagram account too (interview, May 6, 2018). Marie spoke a lot about the process of taking the pictures and how to present the designs. Most of the pictures were taken in Poland during her semester abroad (field notes, May 6, 2018).

She even informed me about a special occasion that happened shortly after she had created her account. Her idea of using the platform as a second mainstay seemed to be successful even after a short period:

And already it happened, like two days after I made my Instagram, a woman knitted my shawl and she how to say, she just wrote my name, my Instagram name in her Insta so I could see that and I saw her shawl which was like my design and then she made it for some yarn shop in Canada and they put it on their Instagram as well so if this actually, it is an ad for me because they already speak about me and when people just press the button to click, to see my button the first thing you can see is just the link to my Ravelry. (interview, May 6, 2018)

In Marie's opinion, Instagram is a good platform for knitters, because:

It is maybe much easier for the Ravelries to use Instagram because it does not need as much information as Ravelry [...] how much of this yarn, which needle size, how long did it take you but on Instagram you just put a picture right, it is so much easier I think. (interview, May 6, 2018)

With her personal link in her account description, she aims to inform people about her work after a picture might have looked appealing to them. She makes it also possible to buy the pattern to knit the design (field notes, May 6, 2018). Marie was using Instagram, mostly in the evening, for around fifteen minutes at a time (interview, May 6, 2018). She reflected upon the time consumption and addictive factors social media platforms would contain:

I felt that I would be more addicted to a cell phone if I had it more time or longer, so I decided to not get it fixed [...] I do open it every day since one week I think, but I, I want to make it less [...] because it is time consuming and still you can use that time for writing patterns or watching movies or going for a walk [...] but it is getting more and more and I can feel it, the need that I would like to spend there more time which is really frightening for me, so I just say: please don't behave like that. (interview, May 6, 2018)

Marie cared much more about good marketing and publicity; still, she also worried about the fear of getting addicted and the effect of wasting her life online. Marie described watching other knitters and their work as her main activity as well as paying attention to the numbers of likes and reactions her posts get (interview, May 6, 2018). She described the handling as easy and fast, made for everyone. But she was unsure whether she likes the application or not:

You know even if you open it, the first thing you see is to upload a photo and you can start. Just you know press one button and then you have your picture there [...]. (interview, May 6, 2018)

Do I? Do I like anything? No I am still wondering if it is the way for me or if it is not. I don't know [...] but I like, that well I don't use it as Insta, I use it as Archigram and I think [...] what I like, I think it is a good marketing yeah and what I don't like is that I feel that I could get easily addicted to it which is not what I want [...] It is a shitty feeling right? Okay it is good

but I mean what does it mean like that someone liked your picture, does it change anything for you, does it? (interview, May 6, 2018)

Marie sets her focus on the marketing of her patterns and does not want to share anything private except for her identity as the designer behind her work. The term Archigram shows that she perceives her profile as a digital archive. Marie could not imagine creating a personal account. Firstly, because she did not know that it was possible to have two accounts, and secondly, she was not sharing private pictures on any other social media source in general. She did not feel the need to change this (interview, May 6, 2018). She said that if she wants to send private pictures to family and friends, she sends them by e-mail or Facebook messenger (interview, May 6, 2018).

Follow up in spring 2019

I am like a small fish in a big sea.  
- @mariepetrknits

In 2019, Marie told me that she was checking Instagram every day for around ten to fifteen minutes in the evening between 5 and 9 P.M. She found out that these late hours have a higher activity frequency, so she got more likes on her uploads (interview, March 23, 2019). Marie imagined that she could spend forty minutes per day on Instagram, even if she said that fifteen already seemed a lot to her. Nevertheless, in order to feel comfortable investing the forty minutes per day, she would need the security of knowing that it pays off. And the past had already demonstrated possible negative consequences:

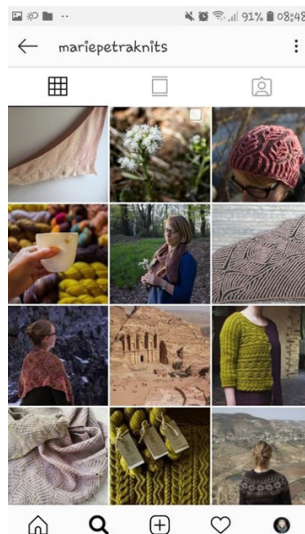
My Instagram is so much connected to my Ravelry and I decided that I spend so much time making the patterns, trying to self-promote them somehow, to be visible, that I got a little bit burned out. (interview, March 23, 2019)

In March 2019, Marie still did not own a smartphone, but she also did not need to use Gramblr anymore as she programmed her computer in a way that it treats Instagram as an application without the connection to a smartphone. Still, the computer was not able to use the messenger, upload videos, or post stories. Therefore, she sometimes used her boyfriend's smartphone (interview, March 23, 2019). She told me that she realized that the profile and the pictures look completely different on a smartphone, which she had not been aware of before (interview, March 23, 2019). Since our first interview, she has started to use other applications, where she signed up with the same name and where she links her Instagram account. Through that, Marie aimed to become more visible in general, and she started these activities in the same spir-

it as she had started Instagram earlier: she just wanted to try it, so she started it (interview, March 23, 2019). The example of Marie's practices also shows an interconnected knitting scene on various platforms. Marie developed strategies for the design of her profile:

I've got three sources of pictures. One is photo shooting that we do for my designs. Then I take some of the pictures by an old camera [...] It is again the Archigram, sometimes the pictures are even two years old. [...] And then the third category are the pictures I just take for Instagram, that could be the house or a picture of my design, where I just want to show, yes I wear my designs even in normal days. (interview, March 23, 2019)

Marie's design philosophy for her profile is guided by practices like trying to avoid posting two black and white pictures in a row, orienting her content based on the seasons (as she consistently draws inspiration from nature), or ensuring that she does not upload three pictures of knitwear in a row (interview, March 23, 2019). Screenshot 7 shows this mixture of pictures. Compared to our interactions in 2018, Marie has now uploaded many pictures where she wears her knitwear herself and shows her face. That mirrors her new concept of showing more personal details (screenshot 7, August 5, 2019).



Screenshot 7, by author, August 5, 2019.

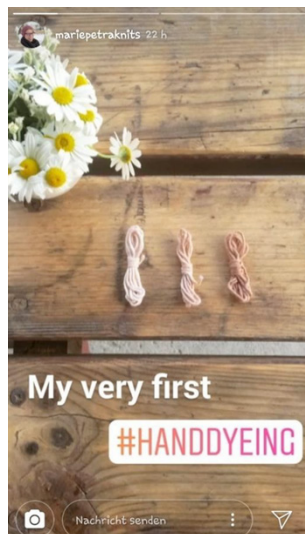
I asked Marie about the hashtag #shareyourproject in her biography and she answered:

It is when you knit one of my designs, you can put this hashtag there. And yes it is good. People do it, or they often use also the name of the design. (interview, March 23, 2019)

Marie shared her idea to put her Instagram name under her written patterns so that the buyer can start to follow her online (interview, March 23, 2019). We talked a lot about other accounts in the knitting scene and how they act on Instagram. Marie mentioned a specific style many knitters would use:

During one year, she got like 5,000 followers, that's incredible. But she is using the same filter and she makes many pictures like this, that's very common for knitting Instagram. [...] From above and you got like many small stuff there, like scissors, a walnut, your knitting project, a cup of tea.[...] The secret might be, that she sometimes also shares personal stuff, she has a new baby now. (interview, March 23, 2019)

Screenshot 8 shows a story where Marie presented her first hand-dyed yarn. She used a hashtag in the story and arranged some flowers beside the yarn. This arrangement reminds me of the pictures on the other big knitting accounts we looked at together when she told me about this specific style of the knitting scene (screenshot 8, August 5, 2019).



Screenshot 8, by author, August 5, 2019.

Marie thinks that it would be important to be funny and to look „super cool.“ She stayed with the opinion that she would never use Instagram only for personal stuff; without Ravelry and knitting, she would not need it. Marie still sends her pictures to her friends per e-mail (interview, March 23, 2019). We spoke about the importance of humor on Instagram postings and the variety of functions the application offers:

I try to get visible. [...] It is still about knitting. I find it difficult sometimes to find the good words for the posts, I think it is also because I am not a native English speaker and I am not that cool funny person [laughter]. (interview, March 23, 2019)

I know maybe one percent of it. I don't know how to make Insta-stories. [...] I do not know how to be cool [laughter]. I think it is a long process. [...] Maybe that is what I like about Instagram. [...] I am learning it, it is a process, but if I find out by learning that for big success I would have to change my identity, or just put one filter on every photo [...] I would say fuck it, I don't want that success. (interview, March 23, 2019)

I asked her about the meaning of likes, referring to her statement from 2018: „It does when there is a big number [...] It is a message for me, that I should make more pictures like this too“ (interview, March 23, 2019).

Still, she told me that her profile is also a place for her nature photos, even if they do not get many “Likes”. Instagram is a big source of inspiration for her too, but while she observes the doings of others, she still does not follow the big accounts:

Then I have a very bad mood, because I see how successful they are. They have some kind of magic in what they do and I don't see it in my things and I am like a small fish in a big sea. So then I really feel like a loser, so I don't follow big stars. (interview, March 23, 2019)

Marie still described Instagram as a platform that could give her more sales. She would be happy to earn at least two euros per hour in order to continue working as intensively as she did in 2018. Marie explains that without the internet and the platforms, she would not sell anything, and she would never have started to promote her work in that way (interview, March 23, 2019). She described her aim for the future as follows: „The small stars, and I would be completely satisfied with this category, they have 5,000 to 8,000“ (interview, March 23, 2019).

Marie started a giveaway and became active on Instagram. She wrote to other big accounts and gave them her patterns for free to gain more publicity. They knitted it and linked her account on the pictures of the product. Even if Marie called herself a small fish, she told me surprising news about collaborations she established through Instagram and the recognition she has received in the „factual“ world because of her online presence:

In Prague, it happened in Prague. A woman—she saw me and said oh aren't you Marie Petra? And I said yes I am. It was a nice meeting and she knew my designs, from Ravelry and Instagram, I don't know. (interview, March 23, 2019)

Marie told me that she would also meet a Danish girl in Prague, whom she knows from a yarn sharing platform. It was interesting to see how the „factual“ and the „virtual“ world are connected and how cooperation emerged.

We talked about her self-perception and her idea of a digital self:

I like it. I am proud of myself. Maybe it doesn't get many followers, for reasons that I don't know, but I like the way it looks. It is my work, and I can see it behind it. I like how I work with the colors, with the details and with the bigger pictures, I am satisfied. [...] I cannot imagine life without any digital self. But I think that every digital self is just digital self, it is not a reflection of a real self. You can create anything, you can be anything almost. [...] That's what I like about my digital self, that I try to pick parts of my life, knitting and walks in nature and then I put it there. I don't share the rest but I still feel that this is me, no fiction. (interview, March 23, 2019)

We talked about what she does not like about Instagram, and if it is still Archigram for her:

When you upload a picture and I think about which picture I will pick and what kind of text I will write, it will disappear. [...] They can give a like to it, but no one will go to your three months old pictures. [...] That's why its Instagram maybe, it will disappear as your memory goes away. (interview, March 23, 2019)

„Partly it is. It stays Archigram, but as I take some pictures just because of Instagram then it is a little bit Instagram for me [laughter]“ (interview, March 23, 2019).

I asked her, if she found an answer to her question from 2018, if Instagram is a platform for her and if she got addicted:

It is what it is and you can use Instagram for sharing nice pictures, some thoughts, some personal stuff. It cannot do the whole job for my knitting career but it is a big part of it I would say. [...] And I did not get addicted [laughter]. (interview, March 23, 2019)

As with Anna, I saw a reflection of the own practices going on in Marie's thinking during our interviews. She knows that it is a kind of game and that not everything is predictable. She pointed out that she likes the application but also sees it critically. Even if she is spending the same amount of time on Instagram, I would say it has become more important to her and her daily life. It is not only Archigram anymore. She is actively taking pictures and she necessarily puts more effort into her Instagram profile. If she thinks about which picture or object, which section of nature would suit her profile pattern, she starts to look through with an „Instagram view“ in her daily life.



## 6 Digital Selves

After presenting Anna and Marie's practices on and with Instagram, the following chapter aims to discuss differences and similarities in their practices, and to contextualize their practices with sociologist Shanyang Zhao's concept of „digital selves“ in addition to some considerations of digital culture scholar Jill Walker Rettberg on digital self-representations.

Anna and Marie showed different motivations to start using Instagram. Anna intended to create a personal account, and her art account followed later, while Marie only set up her profile to spread her knitting practices and crocheting practices. They differ in the fact that Anna has set up various accounts in the last years, which she is using synchronously, while Marie only has one. Even if both aim to be seen and followed, it needs to be pointed out that Anna's way of self-representation includes an unexpected, discontinuous style, which she perceives as a characteristic part of herself. At the same time, Marie tries to keep the profile and the feed continuous and appealing. Marie pays attention to colors, arrangements, and sometimes uses typical styles as orientation. Anna does that too, but in a more fragmentary manner. In contrast to Anna, Marie was new to the application. She quickly learned a lot about it and its handling. Besides the fact that Anna and Marie use different electronic devices, another difference is the perception of Instagram's addictive character: Anna says that she is addicted. The good aspects of Instagram predominate, so she does not leave. Marie recognized risks but says that she is not addicted. Like Anna, Marie seems to be torn between different feelings towards Instagram. She will stay with it, but it seemed like she had already decided for herself that she would never change for the application. Still, there is a flame of hope in her to reach many followers one day, which makes her stay. Furthermore, Anna thinks it is rather scary that the application collects and remembers moments in the past that she does not even remember herself. She does not perceive it as a positive archive. For Marie, it is the other way around; she appreciates Instagram's memory function, as she sees it as „Archigram.“ In contrast to Anna, Marie would not use Instagram only for personal reasons.

Both share their art and passion through Instagram. Both use their profiles to follow other art pages and as inspirational sources. Both know about the importance of sharing additional personal details, and both show themselves in the profile picture. Through the years, Anna shared more pictures of trips, thoughts, and information about her studies. Marie shared more pictures showing her face. Also, they follow the same aim: to gain a community and followership, as both want to share their art or sell it. Both stressed the authenticity factor, and they upload pictures that they perceive as authentic representations, even if

they know that they will get fewer Likes for it. On the one hand, both use less filtering and editing, even if both know about special tutorials or specific successful styles. On the other hand, especially Marie spoke about a changed perception of her environment when she described walking around and taking pictures directly for Instagram, as if she is walking around with an adapted aesthetic „Instagram“-view. Again, they seem torn between authenticity and artistic performance.

Anna and Marie are good examples of what media theorist Ramón Reichert conceptualizes as „media amateurs,“ people interacting in Web 2.0 (Reichert 2008: 1). Through their personal profiles, they use Instagram as a social networking site for self-narration and self-presentation. They act as active content creators, participants of virtual networks and are well versed in multimedia (Reichert 2008: 1). To get more attention and become more visible, both started their own projects by establishing their own hashtags, participating in challenges, or doing interactive projects like giveaways, cooperations, and meetings in real life. Anna and Marie enjoy the feedback they get online, feedback from the „E Audience“ (Altheide 2002) or „the others in telecopresence“ like sociologist Shanyang Zhao calls the disembodied and anonymous others in the online world, where interaction takes place without physical copresence (Zhao 2005: 359-91). Referring to David Altheide, Zhao differentiates the self that emerges from face-to-face interaction with others, from the „digital self“ that emerges under the influence of this „E Audience.“ Here „E Audience“ also means online interaction that follows its own linguistic communications, for example, digital, nonverbal feedback (Zhao 2005: 395-96). Zhao wanted to point out which impact the virtual others have on the formation of the digital self, especially to teenagers' personality development, so he treated self and digital self as separated entities in his study (Zhao 2005: 387; 395). I did not do this in this research, as I wanted to see how the participants perceive their online presence themselves, without me pushing them in this specific direction of an isolated „digital self.“ In addition, „factual“ interactions play an important role in Anna and Marie's case, too. Nevertheless, I oriented on his differentiation between presentation and conception:

To study the self in cyberspace, it is therefore necessary to differentiate between the presentation of self and the conception of self. [...] Whereas how we present ourselves to others is influenced by whether we believe, others can directly see us or not, how we perceive ourselves is influenced by the extent to which we are able to directly see others and how they respond to us. (Zhao 2005: 389)

In the interviews, Anna and Marie both discussed these direct and indirect forms of feedback. Zhao distinguishes between three kinds of people we interact with online: people we do not know, people we know

online and offline, and people we know only online (Zhao 2005: 391). Especially in Marie's case, we could see how interaction arose online and how online and offline worlds merged. Furthermore, Zhao describes the digital self through four characteristics: firstly, as inwardly oriented, so focused on feelings and the inner world, which we saw in the case of Anna's profile, secondly, as narrative in nature, as an actively constructed „narrative of self-identity,“ as we need to describe ourselves through text online to explain who we are. We saw this in the biographies and all text-based postings of Anna and Marie. Thirdly, as retractable, a digital self can be rebuilt in a new version without a person relocating to another place; online an old self is just erased, and a new one is made up (Zhao 2005: 395-97). We saw this in the case of Anna. Also, the fourth characteristic was visible through Anna's various accounts, too: multiplicity. The World Wide Web seems to have made the whole world available and brings the freedom to experiment with multiple versions of ourselves (Zhao 2005: 400). The digital culture scholar Jill Walker Rettberg opens up her study „Seeing Ourselves Through Technology“ (Rettberg 2014) with a look at the pre-digital history of written, visual and quantitative self-representation, as I already quoted at the beginning of this thesis:

[...] self-representations have always been part of our culture. We have drawn, carved, sculpted and painted images of ourselves for millennia; we have kept diaries, scrapbooks and photo albums; we have sung ballads and told stories about ourselves. (Rettberg 2014: 2)

Rettberg understands blogs, written status updates, pictures, and selfies as digital continuations of diaries, memoirs, painted self-portraits, and more (Rettberg 2014: 1). With the aspect of „multiplicity,“ Zhao states that social media provide us with possibilities to create multiple versions of digital selves. Rettberg points out that no matter how anonymous a blog would be, the factual person behind it will always be present in the digital self-representation: „Anonymous blogs may [...] expose nothing of the author's identity, yet still express a personal experience of life“ (Rettberg 2014: 7).

I want to transfer this statement about blogs to profiles on Instagram at this point and refer again to Anna and Marie's statements that their profiles all actively show parts of their selves: Anna sees her digital self as authentic, with a restriction: as a censored version of her authenticity due to security precautions and other reasons. Also, Marie describes her digital self as „real“ or authentic, not fictional. It contains chosen parts of her „factual“ life and, therefore, would represent her as a person. If someone would meet her in the „factual“ world, Marie explained, this person would get the confirmation of the digital impression that she thinks her profile creates. Marie described her digital self as not just a reflection of a „real“ self, but as a digital self that stands for

itself while it consists of parts of the real self at the same time.

We already heard that Anna and Marie rated the memory function differently. According to Rettberg, self-representation with digital technologies is by necessity also self-documentation. We also record life-moments for ourselves (Rettberg 2014: 11). We set up an archive, referring to Marie's Archigram. Compared to Zhao, Rettberg stressed the fact that social media is not only about communication with others, but also about reflection upon ourselves: „[...] our targeted audience is not just our friends, but also ourselves“ (Rettberg 2014: 12). This, like Zhao's distinction of presentation and concept of self, is a key factor for researching one's digital self-perception. These factors played an important role in this research with Anna and Marie. Still, it is questionable how to decipher them in the process of understanding the formation of the digital self completely.

Finally, Anna and Marie both share the thought that Instagram alone is not the ultimate platform to share their art. They share a negative perception of Instagram as an unpredictable, uncontrollable mechanism and view negatively the risk of steadily competing with and comparing themselves with others. Both question the meaning of Likes. Anna said she will not make dinner from thumbs-up, and Marie said it is good, but asked what it means to a person. Even if both see it critically and with concerns, both want to stay with their accounts, and they rate the options the application offers as positive. All in all: they share an ambivalent attitude towards Instagram as a platform and towards their practices there.

## 7 Reflection, conclusion and outlook

### Reflection

I already mentioned it briefly in the previous chapters, but I want to explicitly point out some difficulties, critiques, and reflective thoughts now, starting with my own role as a researcher. As Anna and Marie already knew me in private, my access to the field and data generation process was different, and this needs to be taken into account. In the sense of scientific work, this relation between researcher and research subjects needs to be reflected upon even more because it was difficult to switch from the familiar level into the research situation. It was difficult to differentiate between my private online activity and the passive observation in a scientific sense when they uploaded things on Instagram. Something that always surprises me is how insecure people can get when they are asked to do interviews or to become a subject of research. This is, of course, understandable, but it leads to unexpected insecurities. I want to pay attention to the fact that the participants were

unsure whether their answers can help me with my research, whether the answers are the answers I expected and whether they are interesting enough in their activities to become a research subject. It is a sharp line between people speaking openly and freely and people speaking under pressure to say the right things when they are presented in a public study under their real name. This has a huge, but a nearly uncontrollable influence on the generated data. Here, the personal level that we had may have made some things like access, trust, and acceptance easier, but it definitely brought insecurities. Referring to Geertz, the question remains to what extent a description can be neutral and how much of my subjective perspective went into the data analysis. Simply, the choices I made and what I present in this thesis is only an extract of the whole. Also, the methods need to be critically reflected upon, for example, audio recording: „Recording therefore potentially disembeds the ethnographer from the setting [...]“ (Hine 2015: 76). It enables the researcher to defer the analysis to a later point.

It is a challenge and an opportunity. Especially in the recursive design, I think it is a chance to go through old data again. The fact that I have already had an internet identity, and my personal account meant that I have already had access to the field of Instagram. I have already made choices about my profile and appearance, and I have already had specific knowledge about the application.

Still, my research data depended on Anna and Marie’s skills and the decisions they made. It depended on which tools they used and with which intensity they used Instagram. Neither deleted pictures from their profile, but they had the chance to. The validity still needs to be examined critically, but I think the fact that they uploaded pictures in their free-time and not in a definite research situation is a positive influence on data validity.

Many limits to my research arose. The „factual“ observation and documenting of a process were especially difficult, as it went very quickly. The participants performed so many actions automatically and routinely so that it was hard for me to keep up watching and taking notes. That is why I worked with video sequences, so I would be able to review the actions repeatedly. But also the „virtual“ observation was difficult. It was nearly impossible to observe their activities online all the time. Firstly, because it could have been a massive amount of data in more than one year, as there are nearly no limits in uploading things every day. Secondly, I could not continuously spend every minute on Instagram, only to observe them. And thirdly, I could only see from an outside perspective. I had no access to the messages they wrote or their interactions that were not shown in public. I was not able to see how their uploads looked, and even if they would have told me what they meant by uploading a particular picture or why they started following a specific page, no one could ever be sure how their friends

and followers or other unknown recipients received these uploads and information (Hine 2015: 3). It is never possible to be omniscient and omnipresent. Through an „ethnographic view,“ I tried to look at the (subjective) well-known platform of Instagram through Anna and Marie’s eyes. I stepped away from my perspective and treated the field as something unknown, while I still had to rely on my knowledge and skills with Instagram. This was especially difficult when I interviewed Marie for the first time. As she was completely new to the application, she could not answer my questions about functions because she did not even know them. Therefore, the interview revealed many insights to her. In the end, the „ethnographic view“ was necessary to perceive the „ethnographic experience.“ Both participants revealed new dimensions and perspectives to me. As I collected many different research materials, I found it challenging to choose which ones I would present in this thesis. For a complete analysis and interpretation, it is necessary to evaluate all the collected data and that would have exceeded the scope of this thesis. Therefore, I would like to clarify once more that the presented data is only a small part and that it could serve as an outlook and foundation of another upcoming work.

#### Conclusion and outlook

This study examines the practices of self-representation of the two research partners Anna and Marie. It provides deep insights into their modes of using and designing Instagram to promote themselves and their art or craftworks. It shows their motivations behind the designs of their profiles and reflections upon the use of Instagram and social media in general. It followed the research questions: „What does ethnographic access to the virtual, self-created Instagram profiles of the two students Anna (@tsarina\_fannitika, @jatozvladnu, and @so\_va\_di\_na) and Marie (@mariepetrknits) look like?“ and „How do the profile owners explain and perceive their online appearance and intentions on Instagram?“

Therefore, this study combines two research interests. It started with an interest in developing modes of Digital Anthropology and Ethnography on the internet to gain access to digital self-representation practices on Instagram of the two research partners, Anna and Marie. It further developed towards the aim of understanding the practices on and with Instagram of these two research partners.

Since European Ethnology aims to discover human everyday lives, not only in their „factual“ but also „virtual“ dimensions, the discipline already provides various ethnographic strategies for studies in digital spaces of the internet and especially social media. The subdiscipline of Digital Anthropology especially points out the chances and difficulties of transferring traditional methods to virtual research fields. The methodological plurality of this thesis gives an idea of how much potential

research at the intersection of online and offline spaces offers. It underlines one factor: speed. On the one hand, observation of uploading processes and the terminals' operation is fast, and on the other hand, the application is steadily developing, so the access to the digital selves is subject to constant and rapid evolution. Also, doing silent observation from a distance all the time requires significant endurance, flexibility, and speed.

Marie achieved her goal of becoming more visible to others through Instagram. Even if she started to connect her account more to her personal being, she seems to know how she wants to present herself and where her limits are. In Anna's case, the digital self-representation seems to be more open or less distanced to her private life than in Marie's case. Also, Anna perceives her „digital self“ as less worried than her „factual“ one. Finally, Anna and Marie's digital self-representations are interpreted as „digital selves“ based on the concept of sociologist Shanyang Zhao. This thesis shows that „digital selves“ or digital self-representation practices cannot be perceived or studied as separated from „analog selves“ or analog dimensions of lifeworlds. Therefore, this thesis aims to emphasize that ethnographic research on digital selves always has to approach practices in digital spaces as intertwined with „factual“ everyday worlds. After more than a year of research, my conclusion is that people may not really know what they are exactly doing, or why they are acting the way they act through their digital selves on Instagram. But it became clear that the virtual actions are strongly connected with their „factual life“, and that online activity is an essential part of everyday life. That is why European Ethnology should take the constant intersection of the virtual and factual world much more into account and perceive lifeworlds, in general, more as spread over factual and virtual dimensions that again should not be positioned as separate worlds.

Thank you, Anna and Marie, for letting me take a look behind the scenes of your Instagram appearance and for sharing your thoughts with me.

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## 8.2 Research materials:

### Interviews:

- Anna, (student from Czech Republic), interview by author, Gdańsk, June 15, 2018.
- Anna, (student from Czech Republic), interview by author, Prague,

March 19, 2019.

Marie, (student from Czech Republic), interview by author, Gdańsk, May 6, 2018.

Marie, (student from Czech Republic), interview by author, Těptín, March 23, 2019.

Field notes:

Field notes by Sarah Schmittinger, June 15, 2018.

Field notes by Sarah Schmittinger, March 19, 2019.

Field notes by Sarah Schmittinger, May 6, 2018.

Field notes by Sarah Schmittinger, March 23, 2019.

Pictures:

Screenshot 1: Anna (@tsarina\_fannitika), Instagram. August 5, 2019.

Screenshot 2: Anna (@tsarina\_fannitika), Instagram. August 5, 2019.

Screenshot 3: Anna (@tsarina\_fannitika), Instagram. August 5, 2019.

Screenshot 4: Anna (@tsarina\_fannitika), Instagram. July 20, 2019.

Screenshot 5: Marie (@mariepetrknits), Instagram. August 5, 2019.

Screenshot 6: Marie (@mariepetrknits), Instagram. August 5, 2019.

Screenshot 7: Marie (@mariepetrknits), Instagram. August 5, 2019.

Screenshot 8: Marie (@mariepetrknits), Instagram. August 5, 2019.


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Bouwman, Vanessa. "Global Digital Report 2018." Published January 30, 2018. Last updated on August, 2020. <https://wearesocial.com/de/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018>.

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Facebook, Instagram, Twitter & Co. Soziale Medien sind in den letzten Jahren ein wesentlicher Bestandteil des Alltags vieler Menschen geworden und als solcher nicht mehr wegzudenken. Es erscheint selbstverständlich über verschiedene Endgeräte als aktive Prosument\*innen im Netz zu agieren. Wir erstellen persönliche Profile in unterschiedlichen sozialen Netzwerken, tauschen uns mit anderen aus, vernetzen uns, nehmen Teil am virtuellen Geschehen und vor allem: gestalten wir dieses aktiv mit.

Als eines der beliebtesten sozialen Netzwerke gilt die Foto- und Video-Plattform Instagram. Seit 2010 bietet der Onlinedienst seinen Nutzer\*innen die Möglichkeit der persönlichen Selbstentfaltung und Raum für Kreativität. Die eigenen Profile dienen daher nicht nur der Teilhabe, sondern auch der Selbstrepräsentation.

Abseits des scheinbar Sichtbaren, stellen sich Fragen nach der Selbstwahrnehmung: Wie erleben und bewerten User\*innen ihre Aktivitäten im virtuellen Raum selbst? Wie nehmen sie ihr Handeln zwischen Off-line- und Onlinewelt wahr, und wie verflochten sind diese Sphären tatsächlich? Über einen ethnographischen Zugang stellt diese Arbeit den Versuch dar, hinter die Selbstverständlichkeiten des digitalen Selbst zu blicken. Dafür wurden zwei Instagram-Nutzerinnen über mehr als ein Jahr begleitet.