

Iconic image clusters: Significance, structure, and analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of iconic image clusters and presents a method for analyzing them. It specifically focuses on compiling individual images into extensive image clusters, such as weblogs, photo series, or image galleries. The analytical interest in this topic is based on the assumption that the compilation and presentation of images are independent means of expression and presentation in visual media. Iconic image clusters can emphasize thematic aspects, highlight contrasts, create styles, or provide visual evidence. In other words, iconic image clusters reflect several communicative possibilities that arise from the technical reproducibility of images. Iconic image clusters belong to the subclass of contemporary hypertext/hyperimage phenomena in media theory and are manifestations of the human ability to generate meaning through relations of similarity and difference in communication theory. This article addresses how iconic image clusters can be analyzed validly. It discusses the communicative structure and functioning of such clusters and proposes a procedure for their analysis. The proposed method is illustrated with examples, including a photographic weblog.

Keywords

image clusters, hyperimages, figurative hermeneutics, visual communication, visual sociology

1 Introduction

The analysis of large amounts of image data may initially appear to be a problem of quantity. However, just as peeling 1000 pieces of fruit requires a different technique than peeling a single piece, analyzing vast amounts of image data necessitates a different approach than analyzing a single image.

When it comes to image analysis, there is a quantitative problem and a qualitative problem to consider. This is because images are not natural objects but products of human communication (Jonas, 1961; Schütz, 1962) embedded in specific contexts of use and meaning (Knieper & Müller, 2019). In other words, images are produced and presented as representations of something or for something. This also includes the possibility of arranging multiple individual images into image clusters for specific communicative purposes. Felix Thürlemann (2013), an art historian, has pointed out crucial “analog” modes of such clustering, such as museum or academic image collections, exhibitions, and image sections in books or magazines. However, we should also consider digital im-

age clusters found on photographic weblogs and other visual platforms, which can serve private or public contexts of impression management, advertising, or political demonstration.

Suppose we frequently face relatively large quantities of images in the scientific analysis of everyday social communication. In that case, we are dealing with a special form of the iconic, referred to here as *iconic image clusters*. In this case, an analysis must not only deal with a multitude of single images but also comprehend the iconic interplay of the individual images within the totality of a cluster.

Drawing on the problem and relevant previous work, I will describe the concept of “iconic image clusters” (Müller, 2016, 2020) and a procedure for analyzing such clusters. This concept and procedure address the examination of large numbers of single images and, as previously mentioned, the analysis of their interplay. The concept of iconic image clusters thus covers the diversity of iconic forms of which iconic clusters are a particular manifestation and the communicative



functioning of such clusters. It also implies and explicates a specific method of analysis.

Section 2 explains to what extent image clusters can be considered a particular iconic form alongside other forms such as gestures, body images, spatial images, or classical single images. Section 3 discusses the communicative functioning of iconic image clusters, resulting from the similarities and differences between individual images. Section 4 presents a procedure for empirical analysis aligned with the communicative functioning of iconic image clusters. Section 5 provides a systematic outlook, particularly explaining the conceptual delimitation made by the term iconic image cluster. It is essential to emphasize that not every image cluster acquires an iconic quality in a sense intended here. Images can also be arranged into clusters based on other communicative relevancies, such as place of discovery or time of production, or assembled based on narrative aspects. As not every image cluster necessarily develops the kind of iconic quality relevant and systematically elaborated in this paper, the preceding conceptual sections are complemented by a differentiation between iconic, narrative, and classificatory image clusters in Section 5.

2 The diversity of iconic forms

Allow me to pose a tentative question: What if drawings, paintings, and photographs were just *one* among many ways of communicating visually with the human eye? What if they were only one among various iconic expression and presentation forms? In that case, we would have to contemplate the possibility that image clusters such as weblogs, photo series, or image galleries are more than mere collections of individual images; they could represent a distinct form of iconic presentation.

Many examples and discussions in the literature regarding different classes of iconic forms exist. For instance, Michael Tomasello highlights the significance of “iconic gestures” (2010, p. 66), which are iconic presentations produced solely with hands or pantomime without any technical media. Other forms of iconic expression or presentation include the adorned human body (Emmison, Smith, & Mayall, 2012; Goffman, 1969,

1979; Müller, 2022), artifacts, and architecture (Belting, 2001; Boehm, 2017; Leroi-Gourhan, 2000). These presentations transcend the picture plane and frame but still appeal to the eye with iconic visual values. Additionally, spatial images like panoramas, stereoscopes, or VR projections could also be considered.

Against this background, image clusters can be distinguished from other iconic forms as phenomena that arise from the arrangement of many individual images. Their defining feature is that they result from a complex media-technical evolution, presupposing the existence of proven image production techniques. Nonetheless, this does not obscure the fact that image clusters possess a visual value and communicative surplus that surpasses the qualities of individual images. Certain styles or lifestyles can be conveyed through suitable selection and arrangement of images. Private individuals, influencers, politicians, companies, or fashion brands leverage this feature by not simply uploading numerous images to their accounts but also (consciously or unconsciously) ensuring that only stylistically appropriate images are included to create a coherent, style-consistent overall image cluster. Appropriate selection and arrangement of images can also emphasize content aspects or demonstrate structural connections, as seen in exhibitions or family albums (Bourdieu, 2006; Breckner, 2018; Thürlemann, 2013).

The unique way image clusters develop their own expressive and presentational quality can be initially understood by comparing them to another highly technical medium: film. Films are renowned for not solely comprising individual shots; their visual expressiveness and presentational quality predominantly result from editing and montage, which link individual shots together. In addition to the generic means of photography, such as perspective, planimetry, and coloring, the montage technique is supplemented in film. The same principle applies to image clusters: They originate from montage as a distinct presentation means. However, the montage in image clusters differs from that in film, where shots and sequences are combined. Single images are brought together in image clusters, and montage work is performed differently. The linking of individ-

ual images does not occur in the linear succession of shots and sequences, as in films, but through the multilateral compilation of numerous single images presented simultaneously, forming a network structure. This difference is significant, among many others, between films and image clusters.

Iconic image clusters can be defined as multilateral compilations that utilize the montage of individual images as a means of expression or presentation, thereby achieving their particular iconic qualities and effects. Consequently, analyzing an image cluster is comprehending and accurately interpreting the corresponding structures and principles of image selection and arrangement.

3 The functioning of iconic clusters

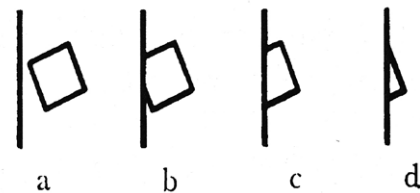
Like any valid analysis of text and image data or other artifacts of social communication, analyzing image clusters requires a fundamental understanding of the communicative functioning of the object of study (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010; Soeffner, 2004). In the case of analyzing image clusters, the question of how iconic clusters communicate and generate meaning must be of particular interest.

Thürlemann (2013), who uses the term “hyperimages” instead of “image clusters,” has provided essential insights into the communicative functioning of such clusters. According to him, when we view a single image, our gaze can move freely across it, but when we view a suitable combination of images, certain aspects that the images have in common are emphasized by repeating them. By comparing the images, the viewer’s gaze is directed to repeated aspects and gains clarity through repetition. The *Family of Men* exhibition from 1951 is an example of this effect. In the “Work” section of the exhibition, numerous images show physically working people. The interplay of the images highlights and emphasizes various recurring aspects, such as the hardness of the work, the synchronization of the bodies, or the same-sex nature of the workers. Through such repetitions and similarities, the exhibition creates a specific idea of work as hard physical work performed by stereotypical male people in a collective effort. What is important

to note methodologically is that these images “comment on each other” in their interplay, as Thürlemann (2013, p. 20) puts it: “The neighboring images show the viewer how to see a particular image.”

Image compositions have a dual communicative and limiting function. On the one hand, they direct the viewer’s attention to relevant aspects by repeating similar motifs, forms, or strong contrasts. On the other hand, this repetition and highlighting of certain aspects also limit the viewer’s perception by pushing other possibilities into the background. Rudolf Arnheim illustrated this general psychological mechanism of perception, which may also occur in image clusters, with the help of Figure 1 shown below: When viewed in isolation, figure “d” can be recognized as all sorts of things. However, in conjunction with the other figures “a,” “b,” and “c,” “it probably appears to us as the corner of a square that is about to disappear behind a wall” (Arnheim, 2000, p. 52). The interplay of the figures limits the total number of possibilities of image perception while highlighting one particular possibility (“a square that is about to disappear behind a wall”).

Figure 1: Depiction from Rudolf Arnheim’s *Art and Visual Perception*



Source: Arnheim, 2000, p. 5.

The indicative and restrictive functions of image compositions are two sides of the same coin, resulting from a communicative mechanism that accentuates certain visual aspects through similarity or contrast relations between selected and assembled individual images. To systematically analyze iconic image clusters, it is necessary to determine what kinds of images are combined and what contents, themes, ideas, or aesthetics are being illustrated by a particular selection and composition of images. In other words, design principles, including selection and montage,

must be reconstructed analytically to understand a particular image cluster.

The reconstruction of a cluster's design principles is, of course, not an end in itself. Its objective is to provide empirically grounded information about which thematic accentuations are made through the montage of corresponding images. Depending on the case study and the question, the aim is to find out, for example,

- › which attitudes to life or ideologies are expressed by such accentuations or which typical groups of people or consumers are to be addressed by a weblog, an exhibition, or a photo *series*;
- › which self-conceptions or forms of self-thematization are developed and disseminated (e.g., in contexts of coping with strokes of fate or illness; numerous examples can be found here in contemporary social media) (Autenrieth & Neumann-Braun, 2011; Breckner, 2018);
- › how certain social issues are negotiated (e.g., by political groups or civil society movements)? The question of how montage techniques are important, not least for analyzing political propaganda (Aiello & Parry, 2020; Müller & Sommer, 2018).

Given the above points, it is important to maintain analytical awareness of the fundamental characteristic of iconic image clusters: Specifically, as argued earlier, through composition, we can identify both contents and forms, establish interrelationships, and realize symbolic meanings that go beyond the expressive possibilities of individual images.

4 The analysis of iconic clusters

In the following section, I will outline the individual steps involved in a potential method of image cluster analysis. Building on previous research (Müller, 2016, 2020; Müller & Sommer, 2018), I will emphasize practical research aspects and provide a detailed analysis scheme. It is worth noting that this scheme is not intended as a strict "recipe" but rather a conceptual framework that outlines individual work steps, which can be adapted or modified to suit specific empirical case

studies. To illustrate each work step, I will use components from an exemplary weblog analysis for demonstrative purposes only. It is important to clarify that the purpose of this section is not to present a complete analysis (see Müller, 2016) but rather to explain the underlying research strategy and principles of the analysis as a whole.

4.1 Preparatory work steps

In the first preparatory phase of analysis, the image phenomenon under examination must be captured and secured as data. This is far from a trivial task, as image galleries, photo series, exhibitions, digital weblogs, and other image clusters are complex visual artifacts that often comprise many images organized in complex spatial and / or temporal arrangements. To illustrate this complexity, consider weblogs, which lack clear boundaries in paintings or photographs. Where and how they end can often not be specified precisely by taking a simple screenshot of such a weblog due to the technically varying possibilities of scrolling, the alternative modes of presentation available (image tableau, photo stream, album format), more generally, due to the variable relations between what is currently visible and what is still not (yet) visible.¹

1 Although they comprise far more material than our sight can take in at a particular moment, this surplus is meaningful for the communicative unity of an iconic image cluster. Whether scrolling through a blog or strolling through an exhibition (to give two very different examples), perception is not merely receptive but also productively active to at least the same degree, connecting current visual experiences with previous experiences, and the corresponding expectations with communicative units of meaning. Rather than being defined by the external boundaries of a picture's self-contained surface area, these units of meaning are determined by the composition and montage of a series of visual objects, or by modifying such objects. Accordingly, through analysis we need to identify (and reconstruct) *the principles of composition and montage* which form the basis of selecting images for a cluster. These are the principles which the producers of an image cluster follow – not necessarily consciously, but probably with a structural goal in mind – when selecting and applying the appropriate images to build a compilation. Digital image clusters in particular are generally produced and reproduced by a

In research, various tools and strategies are available to generate suitable research data that is permanently accessible and, if necessary, archivable. For instance, researchers can film (i. e., record video-graphically) the interaction between recipients and image clusters with the help of screencasts and/or cameras (Tuma, Schnettler, & Knoblauch, 2013). Additionally, apps allow the download of entire web pages or transform complete weblogs into an image file. However, the latter option can be viewed only as a whole in sections. Finally, there is the possibility of saving (downloading, photographing, etc.) individual image elements of a cluster and documenting the assembly of these images in parallel, for example, through screenshots or panorama photographs. The appropriate procedure depends on the specific research question. The third approach (securing individual images and supplementary screenshots) was appropriate in the following example.

Example: Let us consider the analysis of a weblog from a follower of the neo-punk movement or moderate body modification scene, which is presented in detail in Müller (2016). To prepare the data for analysis, a sample of 108 individual images was collected by downloading the image data, and supplementary screenshots of the relevant sections of the Tumblr account were taken. Before this, the entire weblog was reviewed to ensure it was aesthetically and thematically consistent. As the weblog was found to be relatively homogeneous, the individual image data were collected sequentially from an arbitrarily defined point in the account without omitting any images. With this data, it became possible to analyze the blog operator's self-presentation and self-thematization through the composition of images. The analysis's primary focus was understanding the blog owner's self-expression through this particular image composition.

more or less continuous stream of new images (which are "posted," "reblogged," or "shared"). Thus, as far as their meaningful and communicative coherence is concerned, they have to be materially "almost limitlessly open" but structurally "(relatively) closed" (Soeffner, 2010, p. 88; translation by the author).

4.2 The first step of analysis – Identification of image types used

The initial step in the analysis involves determining the types of images that make up a cluster. Which particular images form the raw material from which a cluster is derived? This is accomplished through image comparison and category formation. By comparing the images within a given sample, we identify those with similar content or form. These images are then grouped by type and described categorically based on their similarities.

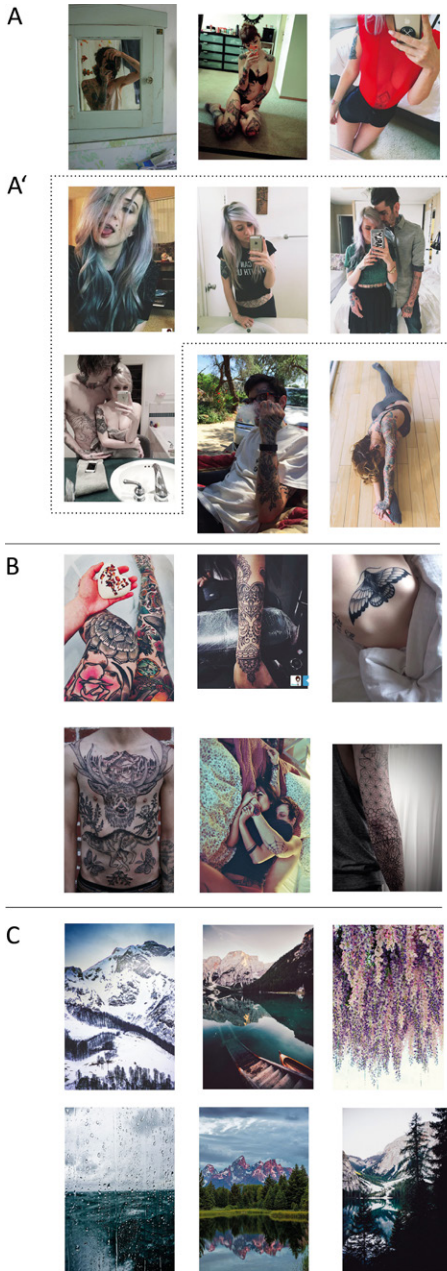
In the case of the exemplary analysis, several image types were identified. Category A (Figure 2) consists of portraits of people with tattoos and/or piercings. Subcategory A' includes images of the weblog's author and operator, featuring the same person repeatedly. Category B includes images of tattooed arms, legs, and torsos, not necessarily in the classical sense of head, chest, or knee pieces, but as representations of tattoos. Finally, Category C comprises depictions of landscapes or nature, characterized by a specific coloring (which can be recognized through the picture's composition) and a relatively high proportion of ornamental or fractal structures.

4.3 The second step of analysis – Reconstruction of thematic accentuations

In my previous explanation, I highlighted the communicative impact of image clusters, where specific themes, ideas, or aesthetics are emphasized and brought to the forefront through the interplay of individual images. The second step in the analysis involves reconstructing these accentuations and interplays within the image cluster under examination. We must compare the various image types for significant similarities or strong contrasts to accomplish this. What is the relationship between certain types of images and other types? Are they in a state of tension concerning the content, theme, aesthetics, or other factors? Do they represent logically opposing views, thereby alluding to a pressing issue in the real world? Or do they complement each other? Are particular themes, ideas, or concepts highlighted by repeating specific motifs or forms?

By comparing categories A and B in the exemplary case analysis, as shown in Fig-

Figure 2: Compilation of single images to categories



Source: Analytical compilation by the author (Müller, 2020).

ure 3, we observe clear similarities between the portraits in category A and the tattoo photographs in category B, particularly regarding the representation of tattooed bodies or the observation of one’s own tattooed body. The crucial aspect is that such similarity relations emphasize certain ways of perceiving and understanding these images while other interpretations are diminished. For instance, tattoo photographs are not used as promotional tools for tattoo studios or as cautionary tales warning against tattoos. Instead, by assembling portraits and tattoo photographs, references are made to actual people who can be identified repeatedly within the blog’s structure and who are depicted as members of a particular style community.

Another significant accentuation arises from the interplay between the images in categories B and C, as demonstrated in Figure 3. Analyzing the images in these categories reveals aesthetic similarities between the tattoo photographs in category B and the nature depictions in category C, particularly regarding recurring ornamental structures, motifs, and predominant color families. These similarities are also evident in the screenshots displayed in Figure 4, where irrelevant images have been covered in white.

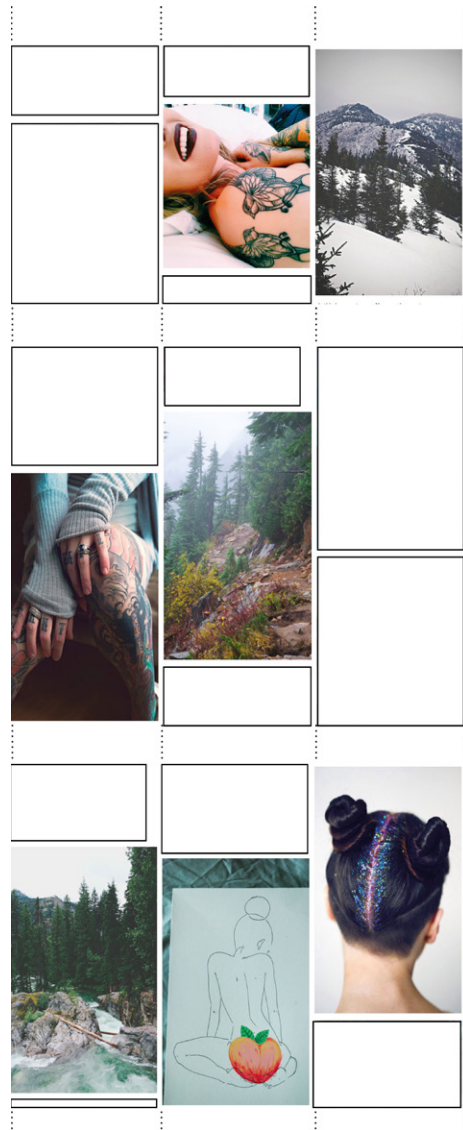
Crucially, this interplay also accentuates certain possibilities of image perception and understanding while downplaying others. The tattoos shown should not be interpreted as self-stigmatization, as is common in other contexts with gang members, prisoners, sailors, or followers of radical movements. The data material contains no indications of this. Instead, a different aspect is elaborated visually: the elective affinity of the tattoos shown (and other body adornments) with aesthetic phenomena found in nature. Social observers may or may not comprehend such a composition. The important aspect regarding the blogger’s self-presentation is that she establishes this connection between body adornment and nature aesthetics through the selected and montaged images, thus demonstrating a different understanding of what such tattoos say about their wearers. In this presentation, they are not a sign of social exclusion or self-stigmatization but symbols of a devotion to nature of any kind.

Figure 3: Accentuations resulting from the interplay of images from categories A and B as well as B and C



Source: Analytical compilation by the author (Müller, 2020).

Figure 4: Extracts from screenshots



Source: Analytical compilation by the author (Müller, 2020).

However, how images within a cluster set specific thematic accents cannot be examined solely as described above. In principle, there are two possible approaches. Firstly, as we have just done, we can investigate the repetition of certain motifs or forms between different types of images and examine these repetitions more closely. Secondly, it is also possible, in principle, to examine contradictions, ambivalences, or nuances within individual types of images in terms of content, theme, or aesthetics (i. e., to form subtypes and interpret their interplay) (Grittmann, 2018; Mey & Dietrich, 2016). The most promising approach depends, among other things, on the complexity of the already established types and categories.

The second approach can be illustrated using the advertising book or catalog publication of the pocket brand “Freitag” from 2001 (Müller, Küng, & Spinatsch, 2001). The unique feature of this advertising publication was and still is, the use of a montage technique involving an immense number of over 1000 photographs as a means of image building, even before the widespread use of digital media. What distinguishes this image cluster from the current media performances of the brand on Facebook or Instagram is, structurally speaking, only the fact that the 2001 image cluster is not presented as a digital weblog but in analog catalog form.

Within the analysis of this image cluster, the image type “Die Freitags” has been identified (Figure 5). Images of this type show the Freitag brothers in persona, their names, or both.

Figure 5: Compilation of single images to a category



Source: Compilation by the author.

Upon closer examination of the images in the second step of the analysis, it was found that two subtypes could be distinguished. Several pictures depict the Freitag brothers sitting at sewing machines or contemplating practical solutions to problems. These pictures belong to subtype A (Figure 6). They show the “simple workers” and “tinkerers” versions of the Freitag brothers. In contrast, other pictures depict the brothers as the brand owners or feature their name as a (real or supposed) brand name. These pictures belong to subtype B and present the brothers as “millionaires.”

Figure 6: Accentuation resulting from the interplay of categorial subtypes A and B



Source: Analytical compilation by the author.

By integrating contrasting images and combining them in a loose sequence, the cluster highlights a theme that would not be as vivid as if each image were taken on its own. As a montage of images, however, the cluster presents the Freitag brothers as both “simple workers” and “tinkerers” and presumed “millionaires” at the same time, effectively translating the idea of the self-made man (or men) into concrete images. When one hears the name “Freitag” today, one might think of a bag brand or a clever business idea, but the image montage in the advertising mentioned above publication adds another facet to the brand image: that of the self-made men.

After examining all the images and image types for possible repetitions, contrasts, and thematic accentuations during the analysis, the final step is to reflect on and discuss the respective partial results in relation to the

research question. This is a typical step in other analytical procedures.²

The following list summarizes the individual steps of the image cluster analysis procedure presented here:

4.4 Summary of analytical steps

The process of analysis is structured in the steps (1) Fixation of the image phenomenon → (2) Categorical identification of image types → (3) Reconstruction of thematic accentuation → (4) Discussion.

(1) Fixing the image phenomenon

In the first preparatory phase of this study, the image phenomenon to be analyzed must be recorded in data form for further analysis. Depending on the objective of the analysis, it is important to record and document the quality and type of individual images, as well as their two- or three-dimensional spatial arrangement (including any necessary temporal structures or hypermedia links).

(2) Categorical identification of image types

The first step of the analysis involves identifying and categorizing the different types of images included in a cluster. The goal is to record the pictorial elements and visual forms used to communicate information in the elaboration and presentation of the cluster. It is important to note that identifying corresponding types of images can be based on motifs and aesthetics.

(3) Reconstruction of thematic accentuations

In the second step of the analysis thematic accentuations resulting from the interplay of different images or image types in a cluster are recorded and interpreted. Analytically, repetitions of certain motifs or aesthetics between different image types can be of interest, as well as motif-related or aesthetic contradictions, ambivalences, or shadings within individual image types. Once all the specific types of images in a cluster have been identified and all ac-

centuations reconstructed, the principles of selection and montage can be determined. This is because it becomes clear which types of images are used within a cluster and which themes or ideas are highlighted by the montage of images.

(4) Discussion

The final phase of the work involves discussing the significance of the analysis results concerning the overarching question of the study.

4.5 Quantitative aspects

As it should be clear, the presented procedure aims to determine the principles of compiling a cluster (i. e., its underlying *Gestaltungsprinzipien*) in practical terms. The qualitative approach of this procedure has significant implications for dealing with large quantities of images. For instance, how can we manage photographic weblogs that accumulate several thousand images over the years? Three aspects are noteworthy in this regard:

1. If during the first analytical pass through the data one assumes homogeneity of a cluster concerning its underlying design principles, the cluster's size, i. e., the number of images it contains, does not play a restrictive role in the procedure. Even if the analysis starts with a limited number of images, such as 30, and reaches the practical and cognitive limits of what is feasible for humans with 100 or 200 pictures, it will eventually reach a state of "theoretical saturation" (Strauss, 1987, p. 21) after analyzing a certain amount of data. This means that additional images from the cluster will not reveal new image types (or relations of similarity or differences) beyond a certain point in the analysis, and no further variants of underlying design principles can be reconstructed. In short, to analyze the design principles of a cluster, evaluating a limited number of images is sufficient as long as the assumption of homogeneity can be justified with good reasons.
2. The validity of an analysis is limited when the homogeneity assumption mentioned above is called into question. For instance, stylistic disruptions in the temporal devel-

² The analysis of the above-mentioned blogger's weblog, for example, shows that we are dealing here with a form of stylization of one's own person that is typical of modern lifestyles. Such self-stylizations reveal both the affiliation to a distinct community and a specific attitude to life (Müller, 2016, pp. 115, 117).

opment of a weblog suggest that the homogeneity assumption cannot be maintained. Similarly, random examination of a weblog (i. e., an attempt to systematically falsify an analysis) may require abandoning the homogeneity assumption. When breaks or changes in the design of a cluster or differences between the designs of different clusters are discovered through systematic searching or accidental discovery, further iterations of the procedure described above are necessary.

3. Combining research logic from quantitative image type analysis or digital methods could be promising (see other contributions in this Thematic Section). Quantitative image type analysis, in particular, should be useful for detecting changes or differences in the repertoire of image types of clusters with the help of suitable software solutions (Pentzold, Konieczko, Osterloh, & Plöger, 2020). This approach could enable the systematic identification of differences between similar weblogs, for instance, in the impression management of brands or public institutions. However, software-supported comparative analyses are unlikely to replace manual reconstruction of differing or changing design principles. Instead, I anticipate its potential in the framework of the procedure presented here to lie in the falsification of research results and in detecting deviating, i. e., new cases.

5 Concluding remarks

So far, only iconic clusters have been discussed. However, this is not meant to obscure the fact that there are other forms of image clusters as well. Specifically, a distinction can be made between iconic, narrative, and classificatory image clusters. It is especially important to differentiate between iconic and *classificatory image clusters*. This is because, in classificatory clusters, images are compiled according to a logic of subsumption using conceptual or numeric criteria. The relevant individual images are compiled based on their nominal affiliation with a particular theme or event (e. g., “profile pictures,” “holidays”) or simply according to date (e. g.,

“pictures of 2023”), independently of all other characteristics.

In contrast, the interplay of images in terms of content is crucial for *narrative clusters*. This is the case, for example, when depicting the trajectory of a social or political event or a biography through a kind of picture story. The compilation of images is then based on criteria of sequential coherence concerning the temporal and meaningful course of an event or development (see the narrative image cluster “May 1, 2011” on the Flickr page “The White House,” discussed in Kauppert & Leser, 2014; Pilarczyk, 2014).

For *iconic clusters*, like narrative clusters, the interplay of images is crucial, but the composition itself develops an iconic quality. While the sequential arrangement of images in narrative clusters serves a storytelling function to illustrate the course of events, the arrangement of images according to iconic aspects of similarities and differences generates a new, superordinate visual whole. In this way, social or ideal orientations can be symbolically visualized. An iconic cluster not only collects images, as a narrative cluster would do, but is also an iconic entity *sui generis* – an “image made from images” that contrastively juxtaposes the things, events, or people depicted and interprets them within an iconic framework of similarity and difference. As mentioned earlier, we are dealing with a distinct form of the iconic.

It is important to note that the distinction proposed here between classificatory, narrative, and iconic clusters is theoretical or “ideal-typical.” In empirically found image clusters, all of these structural principles may overlap. This is why special attention should be given to large image data sets’ quality, formation, and inner organization, not just the number of images.

Hans-Georg Soeffner has argued that social science studies must consciously and purposefully adapt their methods to the “natural standards and routines of communication” to avoid losing sight of the complexity of human problem-solving. More technically, an investigative procedure can only claim validity if it is “appropriate to the empirical facts, to the phenomenon at which the research effort is directed” (Soeffner, 2004, p. 70). Therefore, the above analytical procedure should

not be understood as a standardized approach. Instead, implementing the principles of data fixation, categorical identification of image types, and reconstruction of thematic accentuations in concrete research designs must be adapted to the medial structure of the object of investigation and the respective research interest. For example, if a cluster has a significant narrative structure or if a cluster is to be examined in its contextual references, a combination with serial-iconographic or context-analytical procedures (Knieper & Müller, 2019; Pilarczyk & Mietzner, 2005) may be appropriate, depending on the case and research interest.

It should also be noted that iconic clusters, as discussed above, represent a specific form of visual communication that can be used in conjunction with other presentational techniques, depending on the empirical case (Emmison et al., 2012). For personal self-presentation, for instance, recourse to iconic clusters (photographic weblogs) is just one of several registers of image formation that can be used in principle. Depending on the case, this register can be complementary to, or in tension with, vestimental and habitual self-representation. Therefore, how and when to use the suggested method of analyzing iconic clusters must be decided within the framework of a specific research design.

The unique visual and communicative quality of iconic image clusters not only presents methodological challenges as mentioned above but also highlights a methodological fact that, in my opinion, applies to other qualities of image data. Suppose one assumes that image data in social science investigations are available as physical objects and as meaningful results of communicative action. In that case, the single image can only be considered a genuine object of investigation to a limited extent. When images are prominent as single images in everyday communication (e.g., portraits, icons, and *Schlagbilder*), they are certainly of interest as single images. However, arrangements of images, such as those discussed here, as well as the language-like (idiomatic) use of images, the hypermedia presentation of images in discourses, and other forms of visual social communication are also important. Such phenomena characterize everyday commu-

nication with images and thus still present many methodological challenges.

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Conflict of interest

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