

The WhatsApp Profile Photo: Identity Representation and Visual Rhetoric in the Digital Age by Nsima Stanislaus Udo

Abstract

The convergence of the camera and the phone has changed the way images are produced, appropriated and circulated. According to Mikko Villi, camera phone has shifted image accessibility and consumption from a future anticipation to a near real-time connection. With internet facilities on a camera phone, images can be transmitted almost synchronously between the sender and the receiver.¹ Photographs through the camera phone are able to transmit information to receivers which was intended by the sender in the form of —visual language. This essay examines —the social life [and agency] of photos² and how images used as WhatsApp profile reflect and bear witness to events, identity, people, experience and individual conceptions not recorded in words. Do images —write our past? Do they represent our feeling, our emotions and our sentiments? Does the image we choose to post as the WhatsApp profile reflect our philosophical and ideological standpoint? How do images as used on contemporary social media and messaging applications as status or identity profile reflect and evoke our identity? The essay tries to argue that though WhatsApp profile images are meant to authenticate the identity of the users behind the chat on both sides, these images also describe and illustrate important social and psychological details about the users in visual form. Thus, while images are meant to act as profile, they exude more of individual Identity representation, as well as a form of visual rhetoric in the digital age.

The convergence of the camera and the phone has changed the way images are produced, appropriated and circulated. According to Mikko Villi, camera phone has shifted image accessibility and consumption from a future anticipation to a near real-time connection. With internet facilities on a camera phone, images can be transmitted almost synchronously between the sender and the

receiver¹. Photographs through the camera phone are able to transmit information to receivers which was intended by the sender in the form of “visual language.” Drawing on Tina Campt’s exegesis on family photograph as a historical model for reconstructing the history of European blacks², this essay examines “the social life [and agency] of photos”³ and how images used as WhatsApp profile reflect and bear witness to events, identity, people, experience and individual conceptions not recorded in words.

Tina Campt asserts that a photograph captures a specific moment in one’s life with the intent of creating an image of ourselves as we want others to see⁴. Christopher Pinney also avows that photography can become the prism through which we consider and reflect the questions of identity, and historical (or ideological) consciousness⁵. Here, the profile photo on WhatsApp is meant to serve as a means of pictorial self-identity of users, “where people would have their statuses (expressed in the form of a photographic image) next to their names.”⁶

Image representation as a means of identification of self and profile has moved into the digital world. But WhatsApp profile photos have been appropriated beyond facial self-identification. It has become a point of social intersection, an embodiment of philosophical, ideological, aesthetics and affective discourse, and a

¹ M. Villi, “Distance as the New Punctum”, in J. Larsen and M. Sandbye (eds.), *Digital Snaps: The New face of Photography*, (New York: I. B. Tauris Press, 2014), pp. 47 – 66.

² T. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press 2012), Part 1.

³ *Ibid.*, Part 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Part 1.

⁵ C. Pinney, “Introduction: How the Other Half”, in C. Pinney and N. Peterson (eds), *“Photography’s Other Histories”* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 1-16.

⁶ WhatsApp Success Story, <https://successstory.com/products/whatsapp>, accessed 4th June 2017.

performance of sociality⁷. In other words, photographs have gone beyond the surface index of authentic self-representation, to generate some intrinsic messages that allude to the multifaceted sociocultural connotations of their users.

For this essay, interviews were conducted through oral recording and online chats with six friends and colleagues on WhatsApp. The questions asked centered on how my respondents use images on their WhatsApp profile column. What purpose does the users intend when posting a certain image or photograph as his/her profile? Do images write our past? Do they represent our sentiments? Does the image we choose to post as the WhatsApp profile reflect our philosophical and ideological standpoint? How do images used on contemporary social media and messaging applications as status or identity profile reflect and evoke our identity beyond facial outline?

One of my respondents uploaded a romantic sample of graphic art on her profile (Figure 1). When I interviewed her on why she chooses the art image rather than her portrait as her profile, she retorted, “Well, I love art and this appeal to me because I am romantic at heart. It is a representation of love to me”⁸. The image she uploaded on her WhatsApp profile conveys her affective mood, and serves as a means of expressing her amorous feeling within the particular moment. The image profiles the performance of her emerging social identity and feeling within that moment. The image becomes the expression of her infatuation in visual language.

⁷ J. Larsen and M. Sandbye, “Introduction: the New Face of Snapshot Photography” in J. Larsen and M. Sandbye (eds) *Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), pp. xv – xxxii.

⁸ WhatsApp chat interview with Robin King-Lee on 3rd June 2017.

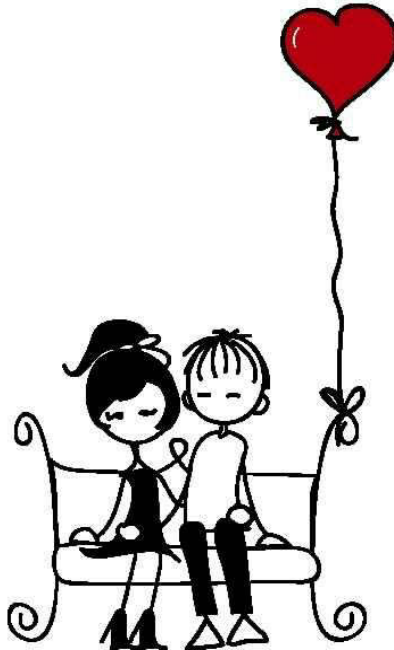


Figure 1: Graphic art: a representation of romance. Credit: Robin's WhatsApp profile photo, 4th June, 2017.

WhatsApp Profile Photo and Visual Language

The 21st century digital age accentuated the creation and invention of several instant messaging applications. And images have become a dominant form of online message dissemination. My focus here is how profile photos represent the diverse identities of the users on WhatsApp. Pictures and images have become some form of “visual language,” expressing the original or purported intent of their owners, and “speaking” to the now, how things are at present as well as the psychological moment of the user. WhatsApp profile photos have been appropriated by users to express all forms of self-identity, perception, ideals, and philosophical, psychological as well as cultural and political inclinations.

In studying the meanings embedded in advertising images of his time, Roland Barthes in his essay “Rhetoric of the Image” asserts that image use is significantly intentional, and as such, the rhetorical

meanings they convey are “frank and emphatic”⁹. I argue that WhatsApp profile images are intentionally posted by users to convey emphatic meaning in the form of visual rhetoric. Robin reaffirms that she does not only use personal snapshots as her profile because there are several parts of her life that she loves to represent on her profile. Thus, she tries to express her identity, and her multiple and changing social moments through her profile photos.

Gillian Rose has argued that family photos encapsulate mainly those celebrative and exiting and leisure moments¹⁰. This is also reflective on WhatsApp profile. There are several profile photos depicting and showing users in their celebrative and happy moments. Robin in one of the days uploaded photos of herself, her friend and her cousin, when they went out for leisure in an expensive restaurant in Cape Town, an opportunity that is rare and momentary.

⁹ R. Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image”,
<https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Barthes-Rhetoric-of-the-image-ex.pdf>, pp.269-285.

¹⁰ G. Rose, *Doing Family Photography. The Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiments* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), Chapter 2.

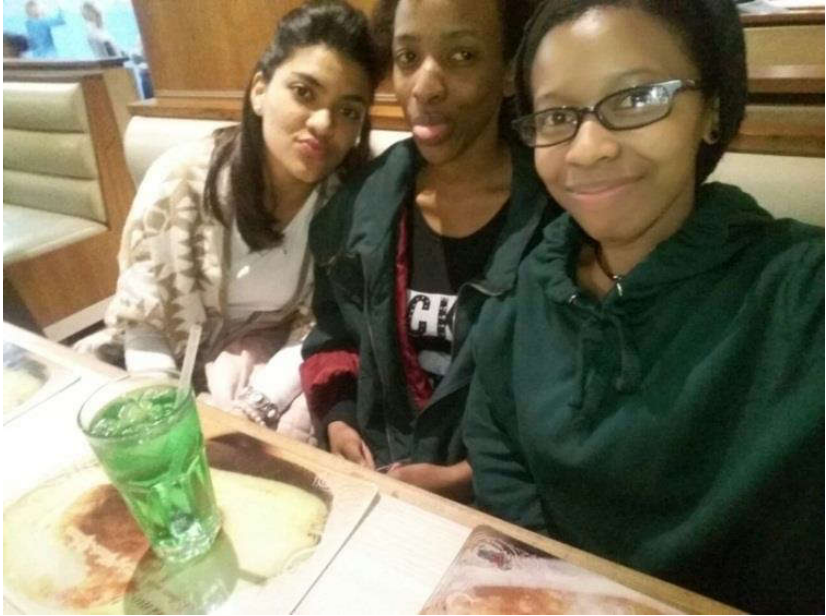


Figure 2: Robin with her friend and cousin in a restaurant in Cape Town. Credit: Robin WhatsApp profile photo, 2nd June 2017. 5

Mikko Villi argues that photographs sent or uploaded from a camera phone are closer to text than they are to printed photograph¹¹. Profile photos convey the temporality of the user's diverse identities. WhatsApp profile photos changes and are transient, depending on the disposition of the user. This is common with many users of WhatsApp Messenger. Within weeks, one of my respondents changed her profile photos (Figure 3). The first photo expressed the celebration of her new enrollment in our photography class, where she poses gallantly with her camera. This was followed by a photograph of her graduation ceremony. In the second picture (Figure 4), she poses very excitedly with a wide smile and facial mien

¹¹ M. Villi, "Distance as the New Punctum", pp. 47-66.

depicting confidence and accomplishment. Her mother, the second person in the portrait possesses a bold, confident and calm figure. The image speaks to her achievement, celebrating herself as she triumphed through the ivory tower of academia, and her family who has stood behind her during her study years. She is inviting her contacts to share in the fun through the image.



Figure 3: Zaiba posed with her camera after being enrolled for a photography class. Credit: Zaiba's WhatsApp profile photo, 7th April 2017.



Figure 4: Zaiba posed with her mother during her graduation ceremony: Zaiba's WhatsApp profile photo, 16th May 2017.

Others use WhatsApp profile photo to celebrate important and admirable personalities in their life. It could be a relative, a spouse, a model or a public figure which they admire and want to convey what they stand for and what they mean to them. In other words, profile photos are transcendental, communicating presence in the moment

of absence¹².¹² Akindele, a Nigerian postgraduate student left his wife, Bola in Nigeria to come to study in South Africa. He changes his profile photos intermittently with photos of his wife and daughter. As we discussed about his WhatsApp profile photos, he pointed to his profile photo:

Here is it, the photograph of my wife. The reason why I always placed her picture there is for her to know how important she is to me, and how much I love her. In short, I am showing my unbroken contact with her by using her photograph as my profile even though I am not there with her physically¹³.

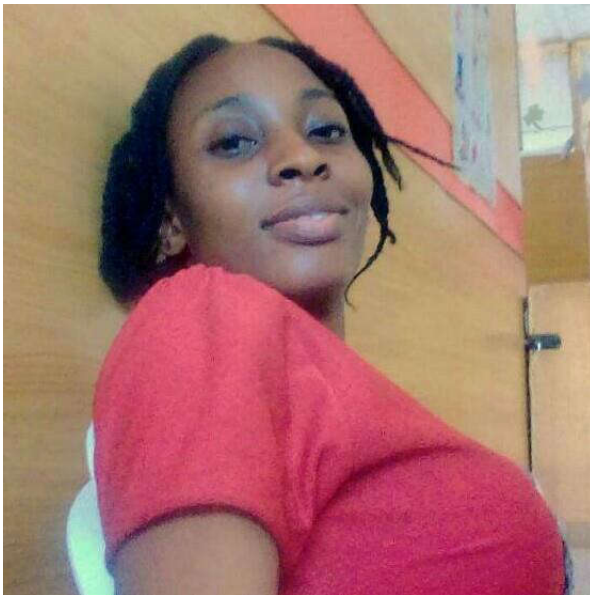


Figure 5: One of Bola's photos posted as Akindele's WhatsApp profile, 5th June 2017. Credit: Akindele's WhatsApp profile photo.

¹² M. Villi, "Distance as the New Punctum", pp. 47-66.

¹³ WhatsApp chat interview with Akindele on 7th June 2017.

How do these images impress on Bola and affirm the constant communication Akindele always have with her? The image seems to authenticate Akindele's claims of fidelity and commitment to his wife and family, even when he is not present with them: "the will to overcome absence in space".¹⁴ At the other end of communication, accessing the WhatsApp platform of her husband who is far away from her, and always seeing her photos as his profile, somehow connects the wife in constant keeping with the husband, and allays fears of dishonesty that distance could provoke in a filial relationship. WhatsApp profile photo becomes the agency for a sustained and well-preserved relationship. WhatsApp profile photos thus constantly remind the wife and authenticate her husband's vow of loyalty in marriage, saying: "see me! I am here for you, for better for worse." Thus, visual images on screen speak to, and provoke deep emotional connection between the poster and the viewer in familial range, promoting "unbroken contact" among families and friends.

WhatsApp profile photos also speak to and represent the philosophical, political and ideological conceptions of users. By engaging with an individual's WhatsApp profile image, one can easily decode what political and philosophical orientation the user stands for. Rubinstein and Sluis argue that image representation goes beyond viewing a picture, but foregrounds "a condition of possibility that allows one to grasp the world as an image."¹⁵ WhatsApp profile pictures allow one to communicate her/his world views in imagery form.

Vuyani Sokhaba a former student President of the Student Representative Council of University of the Western Cape in trying to represent his Socialist and Marxist-Leninist political ideology and his anticipation for a completely free and united Africa in post-colonial and post-apartheid Africa, posted a photograph of President Kwame

¹⁴ M. Villi, "Distance as the New Punctum", pp. 47-66. 8

¹⁵ D. Rubinstein and K. Sluis, "The digital image in photographic culture: algorithmic photography and the crisis of representation" in M. Lister (ed) *The Photographic Image in a Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 22-40.

Nkrumah of Ghana and Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia at the first OAU meeting in Addis Ababa, in May 1963 as his profile photo (Figure 6). For Sokhaba, “the unity that was displayed at that meeting sealed Kwame Nkrumah’s hope of having a Pan African continent that worked together towards its own development through the leftist ideology of Socialism.”¹⁶



Figure 6: President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia at the First OAU meeting in Ethiopia. Credit: Vuyani Sokhaba’s WhatsApp profile, 15th March 2017.

Though the Nkrumah dream has not yet been fulfilled, Sokhaba’s expectation of a completely decolonized and a socialist Africa is

¹⁶ WhatsApp chat interview with Vuyani Sokhaba on 7th June 2017.

embodied, and represented and expressed within the WhatsApp profile he chooses to post. WhatsApp becomes the agency for airing ones political philosophy, and a contestation against the status quo within a limited space.

Another fascinating representation on WhatsApp profile photo is the use of graphic arts as poetic images and metaphors. When I encountered these images on WhatsApp profile, it suggested to me the kind of identity that the users possess. Thus, metaphoric images surreptitiously profile the identity of the user. Art works sometimes possess allegorical persona that leave viewers to grapple with.

Samuel, a friend, uses metaphoric graphic images as his WhatsApp profile, and I engaged with him to break the ice about it. The first image he posted on his profile is a piece of graphic art that shows a tiny headed blacksmith raising his brain-edged sledgehammer high up to smash a hot-tong-clamped heart already scorched red in the fire and smoking profusely (Figure 7). I first grappled with what message Samuel is passing through to his contacts. When I interviewed him, he responded: “*Pelo e Iwana le makutlo* (the heart is fighting feelings).” He says the image depicts a jazz song by Budaza, “at times when you *wanna* do something your heart says no”¹⁷. So, the brain wants to beat the heart into order to agree with its intention. This is a metaphor of human reality depicted in visual language: reasoning fighting emotions. Samuel seems torn between responding to his emotions or attending to what is reasonable.

Samuel’s next image (Figure 8) in the following weeks mirrors his reconciliation with his tensions after the supposedly unsettled weeks indicated by the previous image (Figure7). Here, he uploaded a graphical image where the heart leads the brain somewhere, with the caption, “me and you need to go somewhere quiet where we can talk and agree on things”. He seems to find ways of balancing his emotional turbulence with reasonable actions. These fluctuating experiences of Samuel are depicted through his changing WhatsApp profile images.

¹⁷ WhatsApp chat interview with Samuel on 17th May 2017.



Figure 7: *Pelo e Iwana le makutlo* (the heart is fighting feelings).
Credit: Samuel's WhatsApp profile, 23rd March 2017. 11

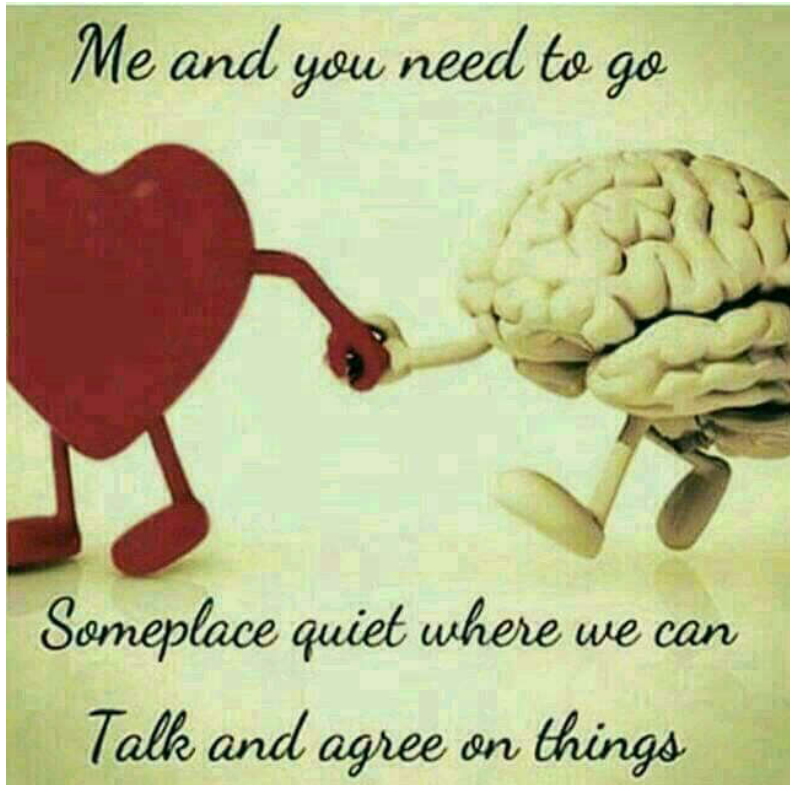


Figure 8: A red tensed heart leading the brain somewhere for amicable negotiation. Credit: Samuels WhatsApp profile photo, 7th April, 2017.

Satirical and metaphorical images are common place on WhatsApp profiles, and there is need to engage them and their meaning. Ozzman one of my student colleagues downloaded a satirical photograph of people pushing their mobile zinc-built shacks on a wheelbarrow, with the caption, “the bank said I should bring proof of residence”(Figure 9). Ozzman said he has been unhappy with the unrealistic social policies of the government of South Africa that have not alleviated poverty in the country. His WhatsApp profile image, though satirical becomes an avenue to express his

political activism against unreliable governmental policies. The caption is a mockery of sometimes unrealistic and unreasonable banks' conditionality for loans and other commercial transactions, without consideration to the housing challenge prevalent in the country. At the same time, the image portrays a humanitarian photography depicting the level of poverty among blacks in the country.



Figure 9: A satirical profile photo. Men pushing their zinc-build shack with a wheelbarrow. Credit: Ozzman's WhatsApp profile, 15 March 2017.

Given the multiplicity of ways photographs and images are appropriated as WhatsApp profile photos, and given the limits of this essay, I will conclude with two ways that images are represented on WhatsApp profile. Despite the ubiquity and unimaginable proliferation of image production since the era of digitization and slick camera phones, some contacts still choose to maintain one single photo or image as their profile, while others choose not to present any image. The single monopolistic profile photos over a long period lacks aesthetic appeal and are monotonous to the viewers. The image simply profiles the user's identity which cannot be mistaken. Their experiences, thoughts and other forms of identity are kept outside the photographic domain. The second category here is those that do not upload images at all. For want of interest, some people tend to be "photophobic", not as a medical condition but from a lack of interest in the freak of photographic hyperactivity prevalent in today's digital era. Their WhatsApp profile photo facility has not been utilized, at least not for a very long time. Having no image at all still represents photographs; these are those profile photos which represent emptiness, and which can be classified as "empty photographs,"¹⁸ and thus challenge the expectations of those whose contacts they belong to and who always expect to see something new.

Conclusion

The amalgamation of digitization, the internet and the camera phone has dramatically changed the way images are produced, appropriated and circulated. Photographs and photography have come a long way. From the times of the daguerreotype to analogue photography up until the digital age, images remain meaningful, representational, evocative, affective and complementary to other forms of communication in the everyday lives of humanity. As the internet expands into

¹⁸ P. Hayes, 'The uneven citizenry of photography. Reading the political ontology of photography from Southern Africa' in *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 89, Winter 2015, p. 189.

multiple usages, instant message applications have appropriated aural, textual and visual messages as a means of communication and social interaction among people. The WhatsApp Inc. founded in 2009 has created a facility on its instant messaging platform for which users could upload their photos as a way to speak to their identity and profile.

Consequently, different users have appropriated this facility to communicate their various identities, experiences, sociality, philosophical and political ideology etc. to their contacts and viewers. These are done through the framework of “visual language,” communicating one’s thoughts, expectations and intentions through the medium of the visual. WhatsApp profile images express users’ affective mood, establish unbroken contacts among relatives and showcase celebrative moments among their familial range and other viewers. Profile images have gone beyond physical identity specifically, to incorporate frames of individual world views in imagery form which challenge political inefficiencies and the status-quo. When engaged with, WhatsApp profile photos can reduce tension, incite laughter and relieve stress when satirical and comical images are posted, and at the same time open up new areas of engagement for viewers within limited space. WhatsApp profile photo facility has become a channel through which users represent their various identities and vent their thoughts through images, at least to their nearest constituency who share in those intriguing moments: those familial or close contacts that are in their WhatsApp contact lists, enabling “sociality from a distance.”

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