



# “I love this photo, I can feel their hearts!” How users across the world evaluate social media portraiture

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## Abstract

Portraits on social media are value-laden constructs. Whether documenting graduation or flexing in the gym, users express what they care about and present it for others to evaluate. Since “global” portrait genres are produced and consumed in different locales, their interpretation and evaluation may vary. We thus ask: *What values do people identify in different types of social media portraits? Which evaluative criteria do they use when judging them?* An analysis of 100 interviews with users from Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and the United States reveals that people consistently recognize genre-specific values in portraits and evaluate them through a narrow set of communication-related criteria. Such evaluations vary across cultures in ways that only occasionally match established comparative literature on values. We reflect on the relational character of the criteria adopted for the evaluation of portraits worldwide, highlighting its association with new modes of sociability in digital spheres.

**Keywords:** evaluation, globalization, portraits, social media, values

Social media facilitates new ways of seeing and being seen. From gym workouts to political rallies, people invite others—close friends, distant relatives, complete strangers—to peek into their lives. In this environment, photographic portraits become central arenas for communicating values. Each photo makes a public statement about what is worthwhile and, in turn, reaffirms broad socio-cultural frameworks through which objects are assigned value. Yet, despite the growing recognition of the importance of images on social media (e.g., [Leaver et al., 2020](#)), we know very little about the role of portraits in the social construction of values.

In the context of social media, the opportunity to express one’s values is bound up with the obligation to be evaluated by others and enrolled in complex systems of algorithmic valuation ([Bucher, 2017](#); [Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021](#)). Building on veteran value theories ([Hofstede, 2003](#); [Schwartz, 2012](#)) and recent conceptualizations of the term ([Heinich, 2020](#)), we adopt a dual understanding of values: first, as objects that are consistently assigned worth (e.g., family, art); and second, as the principles used to assign worth to objects (e.g., authenticity, loyalty). Hence, we refer to valuation as the process through which individuals assign value to objects and negotiate shared notions of what is worthwhile ([Heinich, 2020](#)). While recognizing financial valuation as an important aspect of social media platforms, we focus on the sociological aspects of the process and the criteria that people use to judge content.

Despite the abundance of literature on valuation metrics and how people imagine their role in social media platforms, systematic investigations of how users evaluate social media content are relatively sparse ([Hallinan et al., 2021b](#)). This gap is somewhat surprising given the evidence that vernacular evaluations of cultural products differ from expert

evaluations ([Mittell, 2003](#)). Moreover, the fact that “global” social media genres such as tourist selfies are consumed in various locales calls for the exploration of valuation in different contexts. To date, however, only a handful of studies have conducted systematic cross-cultural work on national repertoires of evaluation ([Lamont & Thévenot, 2000](#)), none of which has focused on social media content.

To address these gaps, we investigate the values conveyed through social media portraits and how social media users from five countries evaluate such content. First, building on relevant literature, we claim that the circulation of images on social media is a crucial part of the process through which we negotiate our collective understanding of what is worthwhile. Next, we describe our methodology: interviews with 100 social media users from Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and the United States, analyzed through constant comparison. We then present our findings regarding the values that interviewees associate with various genres of social media portraiture and the evaluative criteria that they adopt. We show that while users consistently associate different genres with diverse yet specific sets of values, they evaluate them based on a narrower set of principles related to good communication on social media. In the concluding section, we highlight the relational character of such evaluative principles, tying it to broader perceptions about the meaning and function of social media.

## Literature review

### Social media portraits as expressions of values

Together with the landscape and still life, the portrait has long been one of the most recognizable formats in visual

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culture. While the exact boundaries of the format can be tricky to identify (Maes, 2015), a portrait can be broadly understood as a posed representation of at least one person which conveys information about the subject’s character (Freeland, 2010). Photographic portraits are deeply implicated in social processes of value construction as they signal belonging to specific social groups and, in turn, alliance with class-based value systems (Bourdieu, 1990[1965]). As such, portrait genres may convey radically different information on the social classifications of their protagonists. For instance, mugshots record the face of an accused criminal (Tagg, 1988) and childbirth portraits celebrate the expansion of a family (Ribak & Leshnick, 2022). While social classification through photography often reproduces the cultural hegemony of the Global North, genres originating in the Global South renegotiate “Northern” ideas of what is worth portraying in light of local norms and vernaculars (Pinney, 1997). For example, the *quinceañera* portrait albums of young Cuban women celebrate their coming of age through traditional tropes of elegance that predate the revolution (e.g., long gowns) and sanction their newfound sexual agency through contemporary tropes of adult sexual appeal imported from the celebrity culture of capitalist countries (Pertiera, 2015). Relatedly, the holiday portraits of Indonesian “hijabers” rework traditional notions of Muslim femininity through the post-feminist frame of consumption-based visibility and empowerment (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018).

The ease of production afforded by smartphone photography grants people unprecedented control over their self-representation (Gómez-Cruz & Meyer, 2012), in turn popularizing novel genres and styles of expression. Academic investigation of social media portraiture has overwhelmingly focused on the selfie, generally understood as a picture that one takes of oneself with a smartphone camera. Despite diversity within the format, the selfie inevitably expresses something about “the self” and its values (Zappavigna & Ross, 2022). The selfie is also a social practice that deepens the link between photography, social media platforms, and human sociability (Frosh, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015).

We suggest that the above insights apply to other genres of social media portraiture such as family photos. Hence, we propose that the selfie belongs to the broader category of the “mediated portrait,” defined by Zappavigna (2016) as portraits that invite the viewer to engage with their content as if it encapsulates the photographer’s subjective experience and worldview. The mediated portrait exposes the inherently reciprocal character of vision as a process involving an imagined co-presence between the subject and the viewer (Berger, 1972). In this process, the presumed gaze of others directs the subject’s self-presentation (Goffman, 1963). Over time, commonly adopted self-presentation strategies coalesce into conventions defining what is photographable (Bourdieu, 1990 [1965]) or, more recently, Instagrammable (Tiidenberg, 2020).

Drawing on the above, we argue that social media portraits play a crucial role in the construction of values in digital spheres. We adopt a dynamic understanding of value as both *object* and *principle*. For example, one could “value” loyalty as an object (i.e., loyalty is a valuable quality) and also use “loyalty” as an evaluative criterion (i.e., I value my friend because they are loyal). This dual definition integrates established theories that see values as an internal moral compass (Hofstede, 2003; Schwartz, 2012) and recent theoretical

developments that foreground the role of social contestation in deciding what’s worthwhile (Heinich, 2020).

Using this lens, we argue that social media portraiture allows photographers to position themselves in relation to objects that they deem worthy. In turn, posting portraits to social media subjects them to evaluation. Unlike domestic photography aimed at private consumption (Spence & Holland, 1991) and mass media photography aimed at a large undifferentiated public, social media photography often targets a semi-private audience and comes with the expectation of engagement. In this context, photos are produced and consumed as part of the performance of intimate relationships in front of quasi-strangers who are invited to join the interaction and potentially become friends (Kaplan, 2021; Schwarz, 2010). Furthermore, with the increasing professionalization of social media, some users actively seek to grow and monetize their audiences (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021), optimizing presentation strategies for the algorithmic modulation of visibility (Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021). As such, the circulation of portraits on social media involves a constant process of human and machinic evaluation.

### Social media portraits as objects of evaluation

As with any cultural artifact, the evaluation of portraits depends on whom you ask. Many academic accounts consider social media portraiture from a societal perspective, linking it to the *zeitgeist* of late capitalism (e.g., Morelock & Narita, 2021) and assessing whether it is good for democracy (e.g., Kuntsman, 2017). Others adopt an individualistic orientation, investigating the motivations of photographers and debating whether social media portraiture is a constructive tool for self-narration (e.g., Abidin, 2016) or a symptom of narcissism (e.g., Weiser, 2015). Finally, some scholars approach social media portraiture through an aesthetic lens, investigating the impact of digital self-photography and social media on visual culture (Manovich, 2020).

Part of the challenge of deciphering the evaluation of social media portraiture resides in the duality of the portrait as a representation of its referent (a picture of *someone*) and as a digital artifact posted to social media (a *picture* of someone). Expert evaluation tends to enforce a distinction between the two, judging either the content of the mediated portrait or its social significance through moral, ethical, or aesthetic frameworks. However, whether the public adopts the same distinction and evaluative criteria remains an open question. Research on the vernacular assessment of cultural products such as romance novels (Radway, 1984) and TV talk shows (Mittell, 2003) suggests that consumers emphasize emotional responses and personal connections over the critical distance typical of expert reviewers (Alexander et al., 2018). Ethnographic studies of the experience of making and looking at social media images (Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009; Tiidenberg & Gómez-Cruz, 2015) propose that this tendency may also apply to mediated portraits. Indeed, users share content based on the evaluation they expect from other users (Uski & Lampinen, 2016) and algorithms (Bucher, 2017), coalescing into shared notions of what belongs on specific platforms (van Es & Poell, 2020) and the “appropriate” ways of looking at others and showing oneself therein (Tiidenberg, 2020).

Hence, despite the potential divergence between expert and user evaluative frameworks, the investigation of the specific criteria adopted by users to evaluate content is relatively

underdeveloped. Lobinger and Brantner's (2015) and Tiidenberg's (2018) studies of selfie-taking are prominent exceptions. Asking participants to sort selfies based on whether the protagonists "come across as who they actually are" (p. 1851), Lobinger and Brantner found that a selfie's perceived authenticity depends on a combination of depicted motifs (e.g., poses, facial gestures, editing, filtering) and assumptions regarding the circumstances of its production (whether the images looks "staged" or "taken in the moment"). Taking stock of several years of ethnographic research on Tumblr, Tiidenberg analyzed different tropes commonly used to describe selfies (narcissism, authenticity, quality, and empowerment), concluding that selfies "make us feel good or bad" (p. 97) depending on identity-related factors such as the style of self-expression, community-related factors such as the relationship between the viewer and the photographer, and platform-related factors such as community guidelines around nudity.

While not explicitly focused on the criteria that users adopt to evaluate content, Hallinan et al. (2021b) found that patterns of liking and disliking social media genres are tied to notions of what belongs on social media and what counts as good communication therein. We see their interpretation as close to what Shifman (2019) defines as communicative values: norms concerned not with *what* we say about the world but *how* we say it. Shifman identifies five such values associated with digital memes: authenticity, creativity, communal loyalty, freedom of information, and expressive egalitarianism. Building on similar premises, Trillò et al. (2022) identify affiliation, authenticity, demonstration, and persuasion as communicative values associated with ritualized social media genres ranging from tech reviews to mom vlogs. Thus, we assume that social media portraiture is also tied to a set of communicative values and, consequently, normative ideas about the meaning and purpose of social media.

### Global and local repertoires of evaluation

The transnational reach of social media platforms has dramatically accelerated global flows of content, with users located in different cultural contexts increasingly consuming "global" social media genres and producing "local" incarnations (Shifman et al., 2014). Social media portraits are no exception, with genres such as family vacation photos produced and consumed by people around the world. Therefore, analyzing the values of social media portraiture and its evaluation requires engagement with the transnational character of social media.

We find Lamont and Thévenot's (2000) notion of national cultural repertoires of evaluation a useful starting point. Such repertoires are defined as sets of criteria that groups of people adopt to assign worth to objects and justify such assessments. At its core, the notion of national cultural repertoires assumes that individuals assign value to objects based on pre-existing culture-specific "grammars of worth" (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000, p. 5). While grounded in a dynamic understanding of value as a measure of worth that emerges through social interactions, these findings echo mainstream theories postulating that cultural differences between nations amount to differences in values (Hofstede, 2003; Schwartz, 2012).

We critically engage with this perspective, suggesting that the transnational character of the internet troubles neat distinctions between national cultures (Miller et al., 2016). To be sure, local contexts continue to influence how people perceive

the affordances of social media platforms (Costa, 2018) and the content that circulates therein (Gómez-Cruz & Siles, 2021). This point is further supported by studies of emoticon use (Park et al., 2014), self-presentation (Yoo et al., 2011), and selfie-taking (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015). However, there is also evidence suggesting that values associated with social media, such as authenticity, have cross-cultural salience (Hallinan et al., 2021a; Kumar, 2021; Senft & Baym, 2015). Furthermore, the values of social media corporations permeate the policies and affordances of platforms, shaping user experience (van Dijck et al., 2018; Hallinan et al., 2022). Thus, long-standing dichotomies grounded in canonical value theories such as the differentiation between "Eastern" and "Western" cultures (see Hofstede, 2003) might not hold in digital spheres. For example, users from the supposedly collectivistic Japan and the supposedly individualistic United States were found to engage in comparable amounts of self-promotion on Twitter (Acar & Deguchi, 2013) and selfie posting on Instagram (Souza et al., 2015). Conversely, users from supposedly individualistic Germany were the most likely to include collectivistic goals such as environmental preservation in their New Year's resolution tweets (Hallinan et al., 2021a). Overall, the interplay between global and local vernacular is likely to result in unexpected convergences and divergences between the content produced by users in different locales and the criteria adopted to evaluate it.

Departing from Lamont and Thévenot's (2000) account, as well as mainstream theories of cultural values (Hofstede, 2003; Schwartz, 2012), we hypothesize that social media facilitates the creation of geographically dispersed communities of users that retain "national" elements in their repertoires of evaluation, yet amalgamate such repertoires with new criteria influenced by "global" notions of what has worth in digital spheres.

Hence, we address the following questions: (1) *What values do people from different countries identify in popular genres of social media portraits?* (2) *Which evaluative criteria do they use when judging such content?* (3) *How are these criteria related to the overall positive or negative evaluation of portrait genres?* For each question, we explore the extent to which users across the globe express converging or culture-specific views in order to understand how patterns of valuation relate to perceptions of communication on social media.

### Design and methods

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first large-scale comparative investigation of user-generated repertoires of evaluation. We investigate such repertoires in five national contexts: the United States, Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea. These countries are characterized by large numbers of social media users, democratic regimes, and open policies for internet access. The United States was selected because of its importance in the production of popular culture and the dominance of English on the internet (Danet & Herring, 2007), while the other four countries were selected as representatives of cultures that canonical value studies (e.g., Hofstede, 2003) depict as diverging along the East–West divide. As outlined in the previous section, we critically engage with these notions, aiming to examine similarities and differences between cultures inductively.

Our analysis is based on 100 interviews with social media users from five countries (20 per country). Due to the travel

restrictions imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews took place via video-conferencing between November 2020 and January 2021. While conducting the interviews online presented several challenges, it also allowed us to interview geographically dispersed users within each country, enhancing the richness of our data.

We followed four steps:

*Phase 1: Recruitment of research participants.* We recruited the vast majority of participants through a survey administered by *Qualtrics* (with additional recruitment through university groups and social media when necessary). Respondents were asked about their social media use and basic demographics. We then selected from the pool of respondents a gender-balanced group of 20 interviewees per country (see [Table 1](#) for a breakdown).

Our interviewees represent a range of education levels (22 respondents with high school diplomas, 42 respondents in college or with a college degree, 34 in grad school or with a postgraduate degree, and 2 did not say). The age breakdown is close to that of social media users in the countries in our study (22 respondents aged 18–24, 32 respondents aged 25–34, 20 respondents aged 35–44, 13 respondents aged 45–55, 8 respondents aged 55–64, and 5 respondents aged 65+). Finally, we strove to represent a range of geographical locations in all the countries of the study selecting, for instance, participants from Costal and Middle America.

*Phase 2: Interview protocol.* Interviews were conducted in English, German, Italian, Japanese, and Korean by five members of the research team, each a native speaker of the relevant

**Table 1.** Demographic information of the interviewees

Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age	Education	Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age	Education
Brandon	US	Man	18–24	College-level	Giovanna	IT	Woman	18–24	College-level
David	US	Man	18–24	College-level	Martina	IT	Woman	18–24	College-level
Zach	US	Man	18–24	High School	Silvia	IT	Woman	25–34	College-level
Owen	US	Man	18–24	College-level	Sara	IT	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate
Hunter	US	Man	25–34	College-level	Benedetta	IT	Woman	25–34	High School
Gabriel	US	Man	25–34	Postgraduate	Francesca	IT	Woman	35–44	Postgraduate
Michael	US	Man	25–34	Postgraduate	Ludovica	IT	Woman	35–44	High School
Aaron	US	Man	35–44	Postgraduate	Valeria	IT	Woman	45–54	College-level
Pete	US	Man	45–54	Postgraduate	Daniela	IT	Woman	45–54	High School
Frank	US	Man	65+	College-level	Virginia	IT	Woman	65+	Postgraduate
Layla	US	Woman	18–24	College-level	Shun	JP	Man	18–24	Postgraduate
Taylor	US	Woman	18–24	College-level	Kenta	JP	Man	18–24	High School
Nicole	US	Woman	18–24	Postgraduate	Daiki	JP	Man	18–24	Postgraduate
Elizabeth	US	Woman	25–34	College-level	Ryo	JP	Man	25–34	Postgraduate
Jia	US	Woman	25–34	College-level	Tatsuya	JP	Man	25–34	Postgraduate
Rachel	US	Woman	35–44	High School	Daisuke	JP	Man	35–44	High School
Kat	US	Woman	35–44	Postgraduate	Kenichi	JP	Man	45–54	Postgraduate
Carol	US	Woman	45–54	Postgraduate	Hiroshi	JP	Man	55–64	High School
Stephanie	US	Woman	45–54	Postgraduate	Makoto	JP	Man	55–64	College-level
Wendy	US	Woman	55–64	Postgraduate	Shigeru	JP	Man	65+	College-level
Sebastian	DE	Man	18–24	College-level	Moe	JP	Woman	18–24	Postgraduate
Leonard	DE	Man	18–24	High School	Sakura	JP	Woman	18–24	Postgraduate
Maik	DE	Man	25–34	High School	Misaki	JP	Woman	25–34	High School
Timo	DE	Man	25–34	Postgraduate	Ai	JP	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate
Alexander	DE	Man	35–44	Postgraduate	Tomoko	JP	Woman	35–44	College-level
Jan	DE	Man	35–44	High School	Kumiko	JP	Woman	45–54	High School
Martin	DE	Man	35–44	College-level	Naomi	JP	Woman	45–54	College-level
Klaus	DE	Man	55–64	College-level	Yoko	JP	Woman	45–54	College-level
Lisa	DE	Woman	18–24	College-level	Yumiko	JP	Woman	55–64	College-level
Leonie	DE	Woman	18–24	Postgraduate	Kazuko	JP	Woman	65+	College-level
Julia	DE	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate	Minsoo	KR	Man	18–24	College-level
Jana	DE	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate	Chanhyuk	KR	Man	18–24	College-level
Sophie	DE	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate	Hyesung	KR	Man	25–34	College-level
Carolin	DE	Woman	25–34	College-level	Jimin	KR	Man	25–34	College-level
Johanna	DE	Woman	25–34	High School	Jinsoo	KR	Man	25–34	College-level
Vanessa	DE	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate	Yejoon	KR	Man	25–34	College-level
Anja	DE	Woman	35–44	High School	Sangwon	KR	Man	35–44	College-level
Nicole	DE	Woman	35–44	High School	Dongsuk	KR	Man	35–44	College-level
Melanie	DE	Woman	35–44	College-level	Doyoon	KR	Man	35–44	Postgraduate
Hannelore	DE	Woman	55–64	High School	Taewoo	KR	Man	35–44	College-level
Carlo	IT	Man	18–24	High School	Soojin	KR	Woman	18–24	College-level
Giulio	IT	Man	25–34	Postgraduate	Sohee	KR	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate
Salvatore	IT	Man	25–34	College-level	Hyeri	KR	Woman	25–34	Postgraduate
Alberto	IT	Man	25–34	High School	Sodam	KR	Woman	25–34	College-level
Claudio	IT	Man	25–34	Postgraduate	Yewon	KR	Woman	25–34	College-level
Piergiorgio	IT	Man	35–44	College-level	Minseo	KR	Woman	35–44	College-level
Luca	IT	Man	45–54	High School	Joohyun	KR	Woman	35–44	Undisclosed
Matteo	IT	Man	45–54	High School	Dayong	KR	Woman	45–54	Undisclosed
Armando	IT	Man	55–64	Postgraduate	Minjoo	KR	Woman	45–54	Postgraduate
Stefano	IT	Man	55–64	High School	Kyunghee	KR	Woman	65+	College-level

language. The interviews lasted roughly 90 minutes and employed photo elicitation (Harper, 2012) to understand how viewers make sense of visual material. Photo elicitation allows participants to take on the role of the expert, describing images with their own terminology and interpreting them through their viewpoints and personal values (Kolb, 2008).

We presented participants with several examples of social media genres, including a number of portrait genres with cross-cultural salience that represent different domains of life, ranging from public to private (e.g., political rallies, family holidays), and luxurious to mundane (e.g., luxury lifestyle, no-makeup selfies). Our selection is based on our published empirical work (Hallinan et al., 2021b; Trillò et al., 2022), including a systematic review of the content types mentioned in scholarly journals over 15 years, a transnational survey regarding the types of content liked and disliked by social media users in the countries of this study, and follow-up participant observation conducted on five platforms to identify relevant social media genres. Striving to account for local incarnations of the global genres selected for photo elicitation during the interviews, we presented users with examples culled from social media in the respective language, with one exception. As we were not able to find local examples of the *Cancer narrative* genre from South Korea and Japan, interviewees in these countries were presented with the examples prepared for their American counterparts. We retrieved examples of the genres through targeted searches in the five languages of the study and discussed the selection in a series of group meetings to ensure consistency.

Our interview protocol included four core questions. We asked interviewees to (1) describe what the examples on the slide have in common (e.g., “luxury”), (2) list three values they associate with the genre (e.g., “wealth,” “appearance,” “self-esteem”), (3) explain what prompted them to name each value (e.g., “that is an expensive car”), and (4) express their opinion on the genre (e.g., “I don’t like it because it is fake”). Throughout the interviews, we instructed the respondents to evaluate the genres as if they came across such pictures on their social media feeds. We developed the protocol collectively in English and then translated and tested it in mock interviews with native speakers.

All interviewees (N = 100) were shown three core portrait genres representing different realms of social life: *Family vacation*, *Luxury lifestyle*, and *Public protest*. Five additional portrait genres were discussed with at least 25 interviewees from all countries: *Gym selfie* (n = 25), *No-makeup selfie* (n = 30), *Cancer narrative* (n = 31), *Graduation day* (n = 35), and *Politician with constituents* (n = 34). While three of our genres (*No-makeup selfie*, *Gym selfie*, and *Cancer narrative*) are native to digital spheres, the others have longer pre-digital traditions tied to private or mass media photography, an aspect to which we return in our conclusions. Figure 1 contains an artist’s depiction of the eight portrait genres we used.

*Phase 3: Inductive coding and analysis.* Between January and March 2021, a team of five research assistants transcribed the interviews and translated them into English. Afterwards, the core team analyzed the interviews through constant comparison, following the principles of grounded theory (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

For the perceived values of portraits, we engaged in a fully inductive coding process. Based on a close reading of the values explicitly invoked by the interviewees, five core team members coded over 1,100 values. In extended meetings over

two months, we constantly compared our coding to ensure the robustness of our decisions. In a second series of meetings, we inductively grouped the individual codes into 60 higher-level value categories for further analysis. For example, the value codes “companionship” and “connection” were bundled together under the higher-level category of “togetherness.”

We then moved on to systematically detect and compare evaluative criteria using a two-step process. First, the relevant native-speaking member of the team summarized the main arguments invoked in each genre evaluation. Next, we met and used the summary to infer the specific evaluative criteria adopted by the interviewee and assign a positive, negative, or neutral valence to the evaluation. For example, a summary stating “I like these pictures because they are beautiful” was interpreted as a positive evaluation guided by the value of “aesthetics.”

While inferring criteria for positive evaluations proved to be relatively straightforward, analyzing negative evaluations required us to engage more closely with the data. This is because interviewees commonly expressed negative evaluations by discussing what they disliked without saying what they would have liked to see instead. For example, negative evaluations such as “I don’t like these images because they look staged” were fairly common in our data. To solve such cases, we chose to remain close to common definitions of values as *positive* principles according to which people assign worth to objects. Thus, we coded the above statement as a negative evaluation guided by the positive value of “authenticity” rather than the negative evaluation of “staged.” This process resulted in an inductively derived list of 75 evaluative criteria.

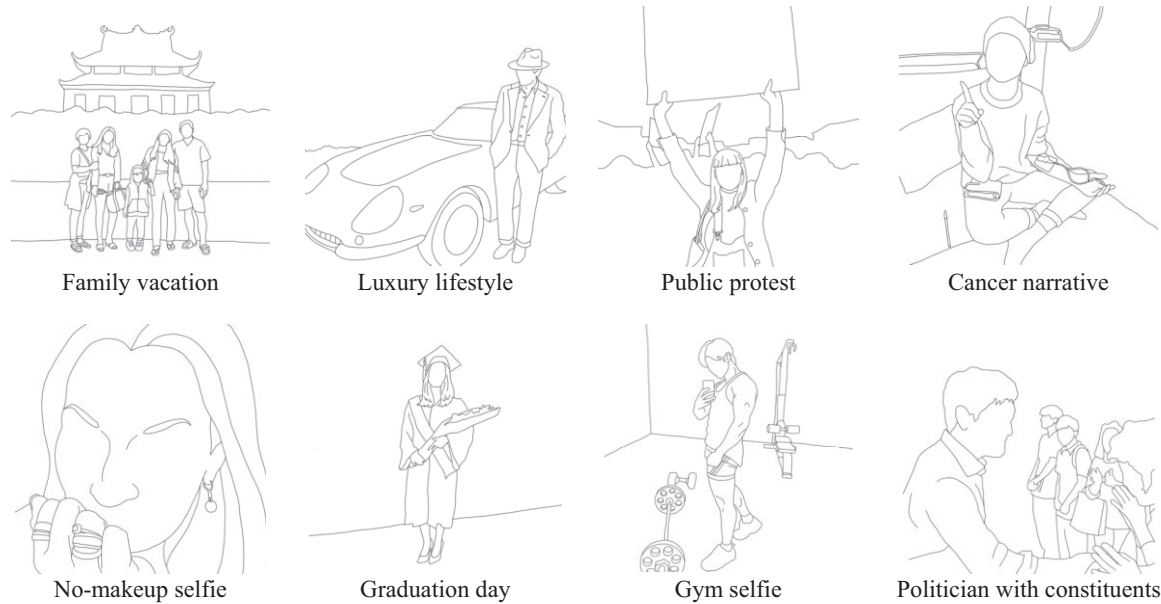
*Phase 4: Summary of the coding.* The lead author streamlined and cross-tabulated the output of the coding to identify patterns in the values that users associated with portrait genres, the criteria that they adopted to evaluate them, and the valence of their evaluations. The results were then discussed among the core team members. Following established research practices for the analysis of large bodies of qualitative interview data (Aharoni et al., 2022), the main focus of our discussion is on the cross-cultural similarities found in the data. While we do make note of some cross-cultural differences, we refrain from making sweeping statements regarding their generalizability. We treat these variations as springboards to reflect on potential socio-political causes, gesturing towards the need for further investigation.

## Results

### Perceived values

In all five countries, interviewees were surprisingly consistent in the values they associated with different portrait genres. Specific values emerged as core to each genre, mentioned substantially more than others. In what follows, we describe our genres in terms of such values, supplementing our analysis with the voices of our interviewees.

The genre of *Family vacation* features a group of people from multiple generations posed in an outdoor setting (often in front of a landmark or an “exotic” site). Participants in all countries associated these images with the values of togetherness and happiness. For example, David (US), commented that “it looks like . . . they enjoy each other . . . that’s what they’re trying to say: we’re having fun together on vacation.”



**Figure 1.** Artist's impression of the portrait genres (the order of presentation follows the description in the article). Art provided by Blake Hallinan.

Invoking the value of happiness, Makoto (JP) explained: "The sky is a little cloudy and a little gloomy but the family's smiling faces . . . are a contrast of darkness and brightness."

*Luxury lifestyle* portraits feature a person posed with objects (e.g., sports cars) or in places (e.g., hotel suites) commonly regarded as markers of high social status. Interviewees primarily associated these images with the values of wealth and fame. For example, Sangwon (KR), observed that the people in the photos "are trying to impress others by showing off their wealth." Similarly, Martin (DE) commented that the images "convey a need for recognition, in order to bring a certain lifestyle over to the followers."

*Public protest* portraits feature people holding banners or signs with protest slogans, often with other protestors in the background. Participants primarily associated these portraits with the values of civic engagement and justice. Linking the two, Stefano (IT) commented that protest portraits voice the "values of justice and their opposition to . . . the rulers who do not fully understand the needs of the population." Relatedly, Leonie (DE) said that "demonstrating is an important right we have, but you have to . . . have the courage to stand up for the values you have and to take to the streets for them."

*Cancer narrative* portraits feature a patient documenting the experience of chemotherapy, recognizable through physical attributes such as hair loss and cues such as medical equipment. Participants typically associated this genre with the values of strength and positivity. For example, Claudio (IT) said that the people depicted in the genre "want to show that they are stronger than what they are living through" while Shun (JP) commented, "there is a lot of positivity . . . a strong impression that they are recovering."

*No-makeup selfie* features a close shot of someone's natural-looking face, often paired with the hashtag #nomakeup. Interviewees associated the genre with the values of aesthetics and self-esteem. Pointing to the first value, Hannelore (DE) argued that the genre conveys "beauty, true beauty, natural beauty, regardless of age." Referring to the value of self-esteem, Hiroshi (JP) commented, "I think they know they are

beautiful. They can show their face so openly and honestly. In general, all three of them are beautiful. They know it well themselves."

*Graduation day* portraits feature at least one person dressed in graduation regalia and/or holding a copy of their diploma or dissertation. People associated these images with the values of commitment, achievement, and pride. Drawing from her personal experience, Valeria (IT) commented that getting a degree "requires a lot of sacrifice . . . in terms of time devoted to it." Referring to specific examples, Rachel (US) commented: "the young lady over there: she's celebrating her accomplishment with her family. And the gentleman over there, he's right outside displaying proudly what he's achieved . . . definitely very inspirational."

*Gym selfie* features a person wearing athletic gear using a mirror in a gym to take a self-portrait. Participants associated these portraits with the values of commitment and fame. Referring to the former value, Alberto (IT) commented that "to obtain certain types of results, you have to commit more than 100 percent." Referring to the latter value, Hiroshi (JP) told us that the protagonists "want you to look at them and praise them."

*Politician with constituents* features an elected official posed with at least one constituent in a public context. Users did not converge as strongly in the values they invoked for this genre as they did with the others. Care was the only value mentioned in at least four countries, mostly regarding the intentions of the protagonists. For example, Hunter (US) argued that the protagonists of these portraits "care about people . . . They have different values, sure. But at a basic human level, they're trying to help." Similarly, Ludovica (IT) commented that politicians intend to say, "I want to listen to you because I want to talk to you. . . I am here, I am available."

### Evaluations and evaluative criteria

Thus far, we have demonstrated that social media users across the globe associate distinct values with portrait genres, invoking a broad range of genre-specific values to describe them. Yet, when we asked users how they evaluated these genres,

the map of results changed in two ways: there was less genre-specificity, with interviewees invoking the same evaluative criteria across multiple genres, and there was greater variance between cultures. In what follows, we group the genres based on their overall evaluation (positive, mixed, and negative) and discuss the most frequently mentioned cross-cutting criteria as well as cultural differences in evaluation.

### Positive evaluation

The only genre that interviewees unanimously liked was *Cancer narrative*. Inspiration was the main criterion given for these positive evaluations. For example, Sohee (KR) praised the “inspirational” intentions of the protagonists, stating that “these people know there are other people out there who are sick. . . they wanted to reach out to them and encourage them with a message like ‘let’s do it together!’” American interviewees were particularly likely to reference positivity in their evaluations. Referring to the pose of one of the protagonists, Elizabeth (US) said that “the woman wearing the pink top is literally being like a muscle man! So yeah . . . they do seem positive and hopeful.” German and Italian interviewees also spoke highly of the portraits as a way to raise awareness. For example, Leonie (DE) pointed out that “it is really good if . . . awareness is created through posts that also show the not-so-beautiful sides of life.”

*Family vacation* portraits were evaluated positively by interviewees in all countries except Japan. Resonance and togetherness were the most frequently invoked criteria for this favorable assessment. The trend was best captured by three Korean interviewees, who said that the genre allows the viewer to connect with the protagonists and “feel their hearts” (Sohee), “feel they are happy” (Jinsoo), and “feel warm” (Yewon). Interviewees from other countries expressed similar views. For example, Salvatore (IT) felt “empathy towards the subjects of the photos” and Minseo (KR) commented that “these pictures are about people spending time with people they are close to. . . I feel good about these pictures.” Unlike their counterparts in other countries, Japanese interviewees had a mostly negative view of the genre due to privacy concerns. As articulated by Moe (JP), “I don’t like the idea of posting pictures of people’s faces that can be identified . . . I’m not sure if it’s OK in terms of personal information. . . I don’t want people to reach the real me through social media.” German interviewees seemed to share some of these privacy concerns but ultimately expressed a positive view of the genre.

*Graduation day* portraits were liked by interviewees from all countries except for Koreans, who mostly refrained from offering an explicit opinion on the genre. Similar to family photos, interviewees invoked emotional resonance as the main reason for liking the genre. For example, Alexander (DE) explained that people post these portraits “to share the information that you have made it and are happy and proud of yourself. And that all the people who know you can read along, know about it, and can be happy too.”

*No-makeup selfie* was also liked by a majority of the interviewees, but we found a split between the appreciation expressed by American, German, and Italian interviewees and the indifference expressed by Korean and Japanese ones. Authenticity was the only value invoked in at least four countries as a criterion for a positive evaluation. In explaining why they liked the photos, Anja (DE) commented that the protagonists “show themselves for who they are. . . they are not afraid

or ashamed of themselves.” Similarly, Giulio (IT) said that the portraits are laudable because “nowadays . . . it is rare to see photos . . . so clean, in which you show yourself for what you really are, without makeup, without filters.”

### Mixed evaluation

In aggregate terms, the genre of *Public protest* portraits was met with mixed evaluations from our interviewees. However, we found cross-cultural differences in the reception of these images. German and Italian interviewees mostly liked the genre, while interviewees from the United States, Korea, and Japan expressed contrasting views. For interviewees in all countries, a crucial factor driving the evaluation of the genre was alignment: whether the content of the protest aligned with their political views. This trend was epitomized by Layla (US), who commented on examples of right- and left-wing protest photos:

when I first saw [the slide] from my left side, I was, like, ‘that’s the stuff I like to see: activism.’ And then looked on the right side and I was, like, ‘oh, there’s the hate.’ I hate seeing that stuff . . . I don’t want that kind of negativity around me.

Beyond personal alignment, interviewees in all countries assigned positive value to the awareness-raising work performed by the genre. For example, Martina (IT) commented that such portraits “make it clear how much social networks should also be there to inform [the public], to make people understand what is happening . . . it is a good way to share news.”

Negative evaluations were driven by frustration with the polarizing character of public protest, especially when shared on social media. In other words, interviewees perceived such photos as undermining the value of social unity. For example, Aaron (US) commented that “politics have become very, very divisive. . . . These days, people are just so extreme if you view something as contrary to what they believe in.” Relatedly, Taewoo (KR) expressed a negative view of public protest and argued that sharing such pictures would make users “feel more uncomfortable and even make them fight each other.”

*Politician with constituents* portraits also generated mixed evaluations. American and German interviewees were relatively positive about them, Korean and Japanese interviewees voiced a range of opinions, and Italian interviewees overwhelmingly disliked the genre. Positive evaluations were usually mild in tone and mostly motivated by reference to the value of awareness raising. Carolin (DE) told us that “when I now see these examples . . . it is made clear again that these topics are, or at least should be, important.”

Users that expressed a negative view of the genre mostly justified their dislike in terms of a perceived lack of authenticity. This opinion was mentioned across contexts but was most vehemently expressed by Italian interviewees. For example, Virginia (IT) said that the genre represents “a wounded society” insofar as it portrays “politicians who act their part very well, and they promise, they promise, they promise, but people always remain sidelined.” Interviewees in other countries voiced a similar opinion in less evocative terms. For example, Soojin (KR) said that “I just feel they are hypocritical.”

## Negative evaluation

The overall evaluation of *Luxury lifestyle* portraits was negative in four of the countries, while in South Korea it was mostly positive. Materialism and “showing off,” which we interpreted as criticism of a lack of humility, were frequently invoked as the main objections to the genre. For example, Klaus (DE) spoke negatively of “the personal privileges that are displayed” and commented that these portraits are “rather inappropriate” as they “flaunt something that . . . most human beings cannot afford.” Similarly, Ryo (JP) expressed disapproval of the staged character of the genre, stating that its protagonists “are trying to make themselves look good by being connected to money and other luxury things . . . they are trying so hard to show themselves.”

In contrast, some Korean interviewees invoked materialism as a criterion for positive evaluation. Expressing appreciation for the genre, Yewon (KR) commented that “I don’t think it’s showing off. It’s just to show how they are living. . . . They are buying with their money whatever they want. . . . I feel I also want to have them [luxury products] when I have money.” Similarly, Yejoon (KR) commented that the protagonists of these portraits “are focused on showing their material possessions . . . and they are expressing themselves through these materialistic things, which suggests to me that they have a huge love for themselves.” They concluded that “I feel jealous, to be honest, and I feel that I want to post these pictures too if I buy them [luxury products] one day.”

Following a similar trend, *Gym selfie* portraits received negative or mixed evaluations in all countries but were met with more approval by Korean interviewees. Among the interviewees that disapproved of the genre, a lack of authenticity and humility was frequently invoked as criteria for negative evaluation. Expressing the former value, Carol (US) said “that’s not realistic to me. . . . sometimes you get something that looks so unrealistic or unattainable that you’re like, ‘no, I’m not even going to try.’” Referring to the latter value, Giovanna (IT) said that “one thing is, let’s say, to have a healthy diet. That means loving yourself. but . . . the feeling that the people who upload these photos give me is just wanting to show off.”

In contrast, a minority of the interviewees appreciated the genre, discussing it as a form of self-care and a source of inspiration. For example, Sohee (KR) commented that “these people are really taking good care of themselves” and explained that “when you work out, you feel proud of yourself for overcoming the laziness and actually working out.” Hyesung (KR) also approved of the genre, commenting that “when I see a body like this, I feel jealous and motivated to work out harder.” Hyesung further articulated that the people depicted “seem to enjoy not just looking at their own bodies but also at how other people may react to their beautiful bodies.”

## Discussion

This is the first large-scale cross-national exploration of the values that people associate with genres of social media portraiture and the principles they use to judge them. Our results suggest that social media genres are not only defined by their shared form, content, and interpretive expectations (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994), but also by a set of core values recognizable to people from different cultural backgrounds. For example, *Family vacation* portraits convey the values of

togetherness and happiness, *Luxury lifestyle* portraits signal wealth and fame, and *Public protest* portraits promote civic engagement and justice. The strong recognizability of the values embedded in different genres demonstrates the efficiency of the mediated portrait (Zappavigna, 2016) in prompting the viewer to see the world through the eyes of its protagonists, unambiguously expressing what they deem important in life.

Interestingly, however, users only occasionally referred to these core values when evaluating the respective genres of social media portraits. In many cases, they judged portraits according to communicative values—ideas about what counts as good communication on social media (Shifman, 2019). Such ideas extend beyond the specific features of any image or genre, and their relevance is evident when examining our results in aggregate terms. Out of the 75 evaluative criteria invoked during the interviews, only 10 were mentioned more than 25 times by interviewees. Amongst these, four criteria stood out as particularly overarching, applying to many types of portraits (at least four genres) with cross-cultural appeal (named at least three times per country): authenticity, resonance, alignment, and inspiration.

These four principles help explain patterns of evaluation. Our interviewees appreciated the genres that they perceived as **inspiring**, emotionally **resonant**, or **authentic** (*Cancer narrative*, *Family vacation*, *No-makeup selfie*, and *Graduation day*). Conversely, interviewees in most countries disapproved of genres perceived as less **authentic** forms of self-promotion (*Luxury lifestyle* and *Gym selfie*). Finally, political genres (*Public protest* and *Politician with constituents*) gathered mixed evaluations, as people favored content that **aligned** with their views but feared the consequences of political disagreements and doubted the sincerity (i.e., **authenticity**) of elected officials. Some interviewees directly invoked these values when juxtaposing genres they liked and disliked. For example, Layla (US), praised *Family vacation* by comparing the genre to *Luxury lifestyle*:

This is real people . . . showing people that they love their family . . . they’re on vacation, but not the extreme luxurious type. . . . They don’t need that . . . type of luxury to be happy. And that’s what most people are actually like. It’s what I like to see on social media.

Beyond these shared principles, we detected some cross-cultural differences in the valence of interviewees’ evaluations as well as in their substance. First, we found cross-cultural divergence in the propensity to express indifference or neutrality. Interviewees in the United States, Germany, and Italy almost always expressed either a positive or negative view of the content they were asked to comment on. Japanese interviewees typically expressed a balanced view of the genres (which we coded as “mixed” evaluation) or claimed to be indifferent to the content being presented. Finally, Korean interviewees frequently refrained from expressing any opinion at all. These patterns of evaluation may be related to cultural differences in the value of self-expression (Kim & Sherman, 2007), with East Asian respondents being comparatively less invested in voicing personal preferences when explaining their choices. Relatedly, indirectness has been observed as a common face-management strategy in East Asian countries, where people are expected to preserve each other’s public identity (Ting-Toomey, 1988).



Second, while the communicative behavior of the interviewees themselves can be tied to established theories about “Eastern” versus “Western” styles of expression, the opinions they voice seem to challenge other established value-related dichotomies. For example, Japanese and Korean interviewees diverged in their evaluations of content that celebrates materialistic pursuits (*Luxury lifestyle*) and exposes private aspects of people’s lives (*Family vacation*). Additionally, Japanese and German interviewees expressed strikingly similar privacy concerns regarding *Family vacation* portraits while Korean and American interviewees aligned in criticizing the polarizing character of *Public protest* portraits.

Thus, we suggest that while veteran theories of cultural values may help explain some of our findings, others may be more readily explained in terms of situational socio-political factors. A full account of these findings is beyond the scope of this research, yet an initial reading may tie them to disillusion with different facets of late capitalism. For example, the approval voiced by Korean interviewees for *Luxury lifestyle* portraits might be connected to the disenchantment of young Koreans with their socio-economic prospects and an escapist wish to “effortlessly” make money online by emulating influencers (Lee & Abidin, 2021). The strong dislike expressed by Italian interviewees for *Politician with constituents* might reflect frustration with the endemic populism characterizing the country’s political system (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Finally, the distaste voiced by Korean and American interviewees for *Public protest* portraits might be an effect of the high level of political polarization in the two countries, especially in digital spheres (Urman, 2020).

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of interviews with social media users from five countries, we sought to uncover the values that users identify in social media portraiture as well as the criteria that they apply to evaluate such content. We found that different genres of portraiture efficiently express the worldview of their protagonists, as users consistently associated the portraits with distinct genre-specific values. Yet, when the same users were asked to judge the photos, they applied a narrower set of evaluative principles mostly related to what constitutes good communication on social media. Based on these findings, we present three overarching conclusions pertaining to the discrepancy between the values that interviewees identified in the genres and the criteria that they adopted to evaluate them, the relational character of these criteria, and how such criteria reflect new modes of sociability on digital platforms.

First, as we point out in our results and discussion, there seems to be a discrepancy between the values expressed in social media portraiture and the principles adopted to evaluate it. *Graduation day* portraits were seen as expressing achievement, commitment, and pride but were appreciated because of their resonance with interviewees’ past experiences. *Gym selfies* were seen as expressing commitment and fame but were disliked for their lack of authenticity. This discrepancy is rooted in the duality between values-as-objects and values-as-principles outlined by Heinich (2020). Interviewees easily identified the objects foregrounded as worthy in the context of each image. However, when tasked with evaluating the images, they often appealed to a narrow set of principles. Among these principles, the most cross-cutting ones represent

communicative values (Shifman, 2019) insofar as they refer to widely shared ideas of what counts as good communication on social media.

Our second observation relates to the relational nature of these communicative values. The evaluative principles described above do not neatly map onto established theories of national values and do not follow the logics of evaluation typically adopted by scholars. Indeed, our interviewees hardly ever judged a genre based on moral criteria such as “good vs. bad” and only occasionally based on aesthetic notions of “beautiful vs. ugly.” Instead, they primarily evaluated social media portraiture based on questions such as “are they showing me the truth?” (authenticity), “do I agree with what they are saying?” (alignment), “can I recognize my own experience in theirs?” (resonance), and “am I moved to emulate their actions?” (inspiration). Overall, the communicative values adopted to evaluate social media portraiture point to a *relational* framework of evaluation. This framework blurs the line between the evaluation of what’s in the image and the evaluation of the image as a digital artifact, freely alternating between the two. As exemplified by the title of our article “I love this photo, I can feel their hearts!,” interviewees liked photos featuring relatable, seemingly authentic content that respects the norms of what belongs on social media.

This leads to our final observation, namely that the relational character of the communicative values used to evaluate social media portraits reflects new modes of digital sociability. This is particularly evident when reflecting on the provenance of the genres surveyed in our study. Genres such as *No-makeup selfie*, *Gym selfie*, and *Cancer narrative* are native to digital spheres. Others, however, are photographic genres with long pre-digital traditions that have been reconfigured for social media: *Public protest* is associated with news and documentary photography, *Politician with constituents* bridges photojournalism and campaign photo ops, *Luxury lifestyle* images borrow from celebrity advertising, and *Family vacation* is connected to private photography. Once relocated to social media, these portrait genres no longer operate according to the private mode of the photo album or the mass consumption mode of photo reporting. Rather, they operate according to the network mode of social media (Schwarz, 2010), where the photographic encounter creates intimate forms of visual co-presence between users (Zappavigna, 2016) grounded in the logic of turning strangers into friends (Kaplan, 2021). The communicative values associated with social media portraits emerge from the complex conditions of this encounter, reflecting new expectations and demands of the viewer.

Hence, we postulate that the relational framework of evaluation outlined above emerges from an intensified demand for viewer identification typical of social media’s network mode. A *Public protest* portrait on Twitter places a higher demand for personal approval of the photographer’s political opinions than a similar photo on a news website, making alignment a far more consequential evaluative criterion. Similarly, *Luxury lifestyle* may be seen as glamorous or distasteful when encountered in gossip magazines but its critique usually remains impersonal (“it looks pretty,” “it’s consumerist propaganda”). Yet, when posted by an acquaintance on Instagram, such photos demand levels of identification that can make their staged character (i.e., their inauthenticity) intolerable without a strong cultural tradition that sees displays of wealth as a source of inspiration. Conversely, *Family*

*vacation* and *Graduation day* photographs have been criticized by scholars for their idealizations of family and life-cycle events (Spence & Holland, 1991). However, the social media logic of turning strangers into friends creates new demands for "mediated public intimacy" (Kaplan 2021). Hence, the "authentic" self-disclosure performed in these genres produces an emotional resonance that results in positive evaluations.

Before concluding, we wish to point to some of the limitations in the scope and contextual detail of this study that we hope to address in future work. First, we only cover a small number of genres. Exploring other types of content could shed light on a wider set of criteria that users adopt to evaluate social media content. Second, while we used robust protocols and coded the data through constant comparisons, the generalizability of our findings is limited by the qualitative character of our study. We hope that future research will build on the insights generated by this work for large-scale comparisons. Third, even though our study is strengthened by its transnational character, the perspective emerging from our data is inevitably that of social media users located in the Global North. Therefore, research that directly investigates how users from the Global South evaluate social media portraiture and other formats could greatly enrich the findings of this project. Finally, our study focuses on national culture as the main axis of comparison, backgrounding other demographic factors such as race, gender, generation, or political affiliation. Future studies could investigate how identity-related factors interact with the vernacular evaluation of social media content.

For what concerns contextual detail, a limitation of our project is that it represents a survey of *all* evaluative criteria that social media users adopt when evaluating content. We are already invested in follow-up studies that operationalize the expression and perception of specific values that we consider to be core to social media, especially authenticity and resonance. Our initial findings demonstrate that, while these values are shared across cultures, they are expressed in divergent ways. Secondly and connectedly, our interview design did not explicitly address the crucial role of emotions in the vernacular evaluation of social media content. Hence, we encourage follow-up studies that deliberately foreground this aspect of evaluation, asking interviewees more direct questions about their feelings when consuming various genres of social media. Finally, we chose to embrace the duality of the mediated portrait as both a representation and a digital artifact, specifying that vernacular evaluation, unlike expert evaluation, commonly blurs the lines between the two. Nonetheless, we welcome future research designed to disentangle the two aspects through questions that specifically address one or the other.

Limitations notwithstanding, this article makes several theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions. Theoretically, we inductively develop higher-level value categories that privilege bottom-up perspectives over the top-down approach of canonical value studies. We also identify cross-cutting values driving evaluations of social media images that follow a *relational* understanding of what content should be valued. Methodologically, we offer a protocol for cross-cultural qualitative research using open-ended data. Empirically, our findings challenge assumptions about cross-cultural differences, charting a nuanced map of the global logics driving evaluation in digital spheres as well as its culture-

specific articulations. Beyond national borders, the perception of digital portraits as "good" or "bad" is constructed by shared expectations about social media and the imagined relationship binding those seeing and being seen.

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## Data availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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