



Portrait photo sessions as a method in youth work

Developing one's own identity is an essential part of one's development in one's youth: there is so much that changes - how do young people deal with the change of their bodies, the transformation of their roles and role expectations?

They keep wondering:

"Who am I?" (self-perception)

"Who do I want to be?" (ideal conception)

"How do other people see me?" (perception of others)

The photo studio is an attractive setting outside the young people's everyday world and it offers many possibilities and advantages for media education. Because: the photo studio is a stage - and identity work needs a stage.

Media are a stone pit full of identity building blocks, and we can pick up stone after stone and compare them, adapt them, relate to them, use them in our identity puzzles. There are lots of stones that are images of unachievable ideals or that are in conflict with our role expectations. Social media platforms (e.g., Instagram) are places for identity work, but what you do there will have consequences... an important reason for carrying out photo studio experiments in youth work in media education: a space in which what you do will only be of little consequence allows for courageous experiments! The photo studio is a place that invites young people to experiment with their own image, expressions, clothing, and poses. Having fun together in front of and behind the camera and receiving constructive feedback and encouraging words help young people to appreciate themselves and their own appearance. Ideals of beauty and body norms which are usually conveyed via the media are very present in photo projects, whether they are expressed or remain unspoken.

Planning

group: We recommend working in small groups of 10 to 15 people of the same gender with one to two youth workers.

room: You do not necessarily need a photo studio, a private room that can be used as a studio is fine. There should be a neutral background and a light source.

time: 2 to 3 hours



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Phases of a photo session

Arriving at the studio

Even if young people have never entered a photo studio before, they are already familiar with the situation thanks to casting shows on TV.

A photo studio is a stage and it is a special situation, inviting people to act. In the studio setting, all the attention is focused on the person in front of the camera. Make it easy for the group to arrive in the studio, sit down together and make a short round of introductions in which everyone can participate (e.g.: What was the last photo taken of you and how was it taken? Of what do I take the most photos?) Now it's time to build a bridge from taking photos in everyday life to portrait photography.

Warm-up games to get to know the camera

This intervention allows to break up known authority structures (the person behind the camera gives instructions, the person in front of the camera follows them). Making the participants take pictures of each other and rotating their roles is an essential prerequisite for successfully using portrait photography as a resource for youth work. How does it feel when someone gives me instructions? How does it feel when I am the one who gives instructions to someone else?

Mirror game (a warm-up game)

Getting to know the camera, getting used to the studio setting ...

In this exercise, roles are rotated: One person is behind the camera, a second person is in front of the camera as a "model" and a third person shows the model the pose to assume in the photo like the model's mirror image. After having taken a picture, the participants switch roles until all participants have experienced every role. The person behind the camera explains to the next person how to use the camera (Where is the shutter release?, How can you zoom?, etc.).

This exercise can be repeated several times. Our experience has shown us that the participants enjoy it, because they can hand over the responsibility for finding a pose to someone else, thus getting used to the studio setting by just acting like a mirror image. This helps to relieve stress at the beginning.

Young people know the standards and poses of glamorous photography very well, but they rarely feel confident enough to try these poses themselves in front of a camera, but if they have to imitate someone, it's easier for them to try these poses. The best known model poses, blueprints of masculinity and femininity, usually come first, and this is a good setting to experiment with them.





What does my face tell you? (Mirror game variation with emotion cards)

Recognizing the variability of facial expressions, communication competence exercise at the level of visual expression

Emotion cards: Write different emotions and words describing emotional conditions on little cards, put them in a box, so they can be picked by the participants. Use many different words to provide the participants with a repertoire of expressions to describe their feelings (from angry to worried, from amused to wild).

How do I appear to other people? How does my facial expression work? Can I express what I'm feeling right now? Also works as an empathy and attention training: learn to "read" facial expressions of others, how are they feeling right now?

Variation of the mirror game: Guessing game for the other participants who are not on stage right now. The person in front of the camera picks a card and tries to come up with a way of expressing the word with their face and body posture. The photographer counts in a countdown, the person in front of the camera shows the expression, a photo is taken: Is the group able to "read" the emotion?

Time to take pictures of each other

After the poses in the warm-up game that were determined by someone else, the main focus of the photo sessions now moves on to making the participants experience free photography, taking photos of each other: How much trust does it take to show myself in front of the camera?

And speaking of trust: it is vital to have clear arrangements in the studio! There is only one camera for taking pictures and that is the studio camera. No photos and live streams must be taken with a mobile during the time in the studio. Everyone must have full control of his/her own pictures!

Who's going to take pictures of me? What do I want the pictures to look like? The person in front of the camera can give clear instructions to the person behind the camera: I want a picture that shows only my eyes, I want a picture in which...

Keep an eye on the atmosphere while the group is taking pictures of each other in pairs or in small groups and make sure that everyone gets the same amount of time during the photo session.

View the pictures

Our feedback culture seems to be increasingly determined by online feedback options: thumbs up, hearts, laughing emojis,... In the studio situation, it is all the more important to moderate this feedback, to allow for feedback in a pedagogical way: constructive, encouraging feedback is what we are trying to achieve. As a youth worker, pay attention to the words you and the group use: the pictures of girls are not automatically cute or pretty, nor are the pictures of



boys automatically cool. Talk about the images, the composition and effect of the images and do not judge the bodies in the pictures. In this situation, it is important for the young people to receive appreciative feedback that helps them to appreciate their own images and bodies. If someone does not feel comfortable with a photo, delete the picture immediately. Distribute the pictures taken in the photo session to the young people and make sure that they only get the photos that show themselves.

Conclusive reflection

It is advisable to deliberately leave the "stage" of the last hours (switch off light sources, set camera aside) and to look back together: Does everybody feel okay after the photo shoot? Are there concerns or fears about the photos?

Using pictures in a responsible way - responsible towards oneself and others - becomes comprehensible through the work in the photo studio setting: Who gets the photos? What is the right regarding the protection of one's own image? What do the young people need so that they can leave the studio with a good feeling and control over their pictures?

Recommendations for photo sessions

- ✓ work in small groups (10 to 15 people)
- ✓ we recommend same-gender groups
- ✓ you may use any room as a photo studio (nice background, light source and a camera)
- ✓ make it comfortable for the participants to arrive in the photo studio
- ✓ use a round of introduction to find out about the photo preferences of the young people
- ✓ start with a warm-up game
- ✓ make clear arrangements with the group: there is only one camera for taking pictures, namely the studio camera. No paparazzi pics or live streams.
- ✓ make sure that everyone has about the same amount of time in front of and behind the camera
- ✓ allow for enough time so that all pictures can be viewed together
- ✓ act as a moderator in the shared feedback situation
- ✓ pay attention to the words used when reviewing the pictures
- ✓ talk about the pictures and not about the bodies shown in the pictures
- ✓ discuss how the pictures can be used fairly and make collective fair-use agreements

Which other contents may be transported in photo sessions?

- ✓ imitate and recreate popular images, campaigns
- ✓ slip into different roles and break up stereotypes
- ✓ What is typically female? What is typically male? How can these rigid images be softened?

Do not overburden the fun part of taking pictures with too much content 😊