

## “Take Nothing but Photos and Leave Nothing but Footprints” (The Tale of a Rooftopper)

### Jangan Ambil Apapun Selain Foto dan Jangan Tinggalkan Apapun Selain Jejak Kaki (Cerita Seorang Rooftopper)

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#### Abstract

Urban exploration provides cultural studies researchers with a massive landscape of exploration site. Urban climbing or known as *rooftopping* is one of the worldwide phenomena performed by urban explorers and usually intended for social media fame. This extreme outdoor activity appeals to many young people although it is life-threatening. Previous research reveals that the number of new *rooftoppers* kept increasing and many *rooftoppers* cannot resist *rooftopping* despite the harsh punishments and heavy sanctions. This article examines the primary motives and principles of a professional Swiss *rooftopper* who has performed *rooftopping* for years in several countries. The data were collected through in-depth exclusive interview through WhatsApp text message, voice notes and audio call. Hermeneutics theory by Wilhelm Dilthey is employed to understand how he narrates his *rooftopping* experiences. Surprisingly, the study reveals that social media fame is not the primary goal but stunning cityscape photos and the ultimate freedom.

**Keywords:** *rooftopping, social media fame, urban climbing, urban explorer, urban exploration*

#### Abstrak

Eksplorasi perkotaan merupakan lahan penelitian yang luas bagi para peneliti kajian budaya. *Urban climbing* atau dikenal dengan *rooftopping* merupakan salah satu fenomena mendunia yang dilakukan oleh para *urban explorer* dan biasanya untuk mencari ketenaran di media sosial. Aktivitas ekstrim ini menarik bagi banyak anak muda meskipun membahayakan keselamatan. Penelitian sebelumnya mengungkap bahwa jumlah *rooftopper* baru terus meningkat dan banyak *rooftopper* yang tidak dapat berhenti melakukan *rooftopping* meskipun mendapat hukuman yang keras dan sanksi yang berat. Artikel ini membahas motif dan prinsip utama dari seorang *rooftopper* profesional asal Swiss yang telah melakukan *rooftopping* selama bertahun-tahun di beberapa negara. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam melalui

pesan teks WhatsApp, pesan suara dan telpon WhatsApp. Teori Hermeneutika oleh Wilhelm Dilthey digunakan untuk memahami bagaimana dia menceritakan pengalamannya tentang rooftopping. Penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa ketenaran media sosial ternyata bukan tujuan utama melainkan foto pemandangan kota yang menakjubkan dan kebebasan tak terbatas.

### **Introduction**

The vast development of cities and transportation in the world made people travel across cities and countries in much higher intensities. One of the consequences is the increasing number of tourism destinations. Each of them competed in promoting and representing its identities (Elfrida, et al., 2020).

Stunning cityscapes and the dynamic urban lives drive urban people to live their life away from that of rural people. The different terrain of urban culture has led people to conduct explorations of their environment in their way. In the west, many new hobbies emerged since the late 1980s by the time urban people in many big cities in the world got more prosperity. The life of leisure was filled with enjoying various entertainments and doing outdoor activities, such as exploring the cities and deserted remote regions. Therefore, several new hobbies such as *walking* and *hiking* emerged. These hobbies are particularly carried out in the rural areas, whilst in the urban areas, young people love doing *urban climbing* or more popularly called “rooftopping”, an activity of free climbing of skyscrapers, cranes, chimneys, bridges, or towers without harnesses in the pursuit of stunning photos. Such phenomenon began soaring in 2011 in many countries all over the world (Hope, 2017). A Canadian rooftopping photographer named Tom Ryaboi dangled his feet over the edge of a tall building in Toronto and took a picture straight down in 2011. He posted it on Flickr, Reddit, and 500px and then it became a viral hit. Ryaboi titled his image, “I’ll make you famous.” Nevertheless, the picture made him famous instead—and also helped to spread the phenomenon of rooftopping. In 2015 Ryaboi was arrested by the Canadian police while he was having rooftopping in Toronto. They wanted to publicize his arrest but that only made rooftopping more popular in Canada instead. Lastly, the police declined the charge (Elgan, 2019).

Griffiths (2017) argues that rooftopping is a “death-defying craze which sees young adults dangling off the edge of buildings – in the quest of social media fame”. In 2017 rooftopping grew and spread out very rapidly in Russia and the states of the ex-USSR. Russia’s vast territory possessed many industrial sites in which some of them were abandoned and vacant (Shevchenko, 2014). These provided rooftoppers with challenging scape and terrain for rooftopping actions. The notoriousness of rooftopping widely spread to all over Russia and this made the Russian government through the Interior Ministry to campaign on a safe selfie. The keep-increasing number of death due to rooftopping accidents from all over the world was inevitable.

Previous research reveals that rooftoppers hunt for jaw-dropping photos, film tricks and gymnastic stunts intended to become a viral fame (Griffiths, 2017). These rooftopping photos usually exhibit the rooftoppers standing on the edge of a skyscraper, hanging off the edge of a skyscraper or a super-tall crane (sometimes merely one-handed), doing a handstand on the edge of a skyscraper, doing a pull up on the edge of a skyscraper, riding a bike or a digital skateboard on the edge of a skyscraper, cityscape, etc. Such breathtaking actions are mostly well recorded in videos and still-pictures formats since they are intended to be uploaded to social media like YouTube and

Instagram for boosting the number of views and appealing more new followers and new subscribers. Ricky D. Crano, a lecturer at the Department of English at Tufts University in Elgan (2019) says that dangerous images posted on social media represent "a clear case of market forces driving high-risk self-advertising, a key model of personality for the digital age: the individual as an entrepreneur of one's own self." Risk-taking becomes a part of individual's own personal brand. "We've got to compete with others just to be seen – that's to say, for the algorithm to favor our post," says Crano.

Figure 1



Credit:@kirill\_oreshkin\_

Figure 2



Credit:@olegcricket

Figure 3



Credit:@olegcricket

Figure 4



Credit:@ascendity

Figure 5



Credit:AsiaWire

Figure 6



Credit:AsiaWire

Figures 1-6 show various breathtaking actions performed by several rooftoppers. One of the rooftoppers, Wu Yongning (Figures 5 & 6), passed away in a rooftopping accident in November 2017. Those pictures clearly show that a little slip made by the rooftoppers is very fatal and ends up with death for certain. However, such photos are proven to be able to boost up the rooftopper's profile on social media.

Moreover, the extreme contents posted on Instagram and YouTube can have a mighty influence on inexperienced amateur rooftoppers that might lead to a rooftopping incident. This is supported by the research findings of Kurniawan et al. (2020a) who researched Indonesian rooftoppers. He recruited 14 informants comprising of 13 male and 1 female Indonesian rooftoppers. It reveals that nearly all the informants knew rooftopping for the first time from Instagram and YouTube, particularly through the account of a senior Indonesian rooftopper, Arief Fandy (the first Indonesian rooftopper arising in 2015 who was called the Indonesian Spiderman)(Lazone, 2015). He was very famous for his breathtaking rooftopping photos uploaded to his Instagram account @arieffandy (Adelin, 2015). He said that rooftopping made him able to escape from the rushing daily routines though he had to frequently escape from the chase of security officers (Sooperboy, 2015). Arief quit rooftopping and his Instagram account was removed for unknown reasons. It was said that because he has accomplished his mission, namely climbing all the skyscrapers in Jakarta (Syafi'i, 2016). Furthermore, Kurniawan

(2020b) argues that rooftopping is ‘contagious’ among teens in Jakarta due to their exposures to rooftopping contents on Instagram and YouTube although it is proven deadly.

Many online news media report the case of death caused by rooftopping and other extreme selfies. Wu Yonging (26), the first senior daredevil from China plunged to his death from the top of a 62 storey skyscraper (Hauser, 2017). Ironically he unconsciously filmed his death since he put a DV camera on the other building (Pleasance, 2017). It was said that he attempted to obtain 100,000 Yuan from an unnamed sponsor. Wu Yongning produced more than 300 rooftopping videos (Connor, 2017). Jackson Coe (25) was found dead at the bottom of a building. New York police confirmed that he fell from a six-floor apartment building in the West Village of Manhattan, New York. He was a thrill-seeker who posted his rooftopping actions on Instagram (Polianskaya, 2018). Tyreek Riley, a fifteen-year-old boy playing with his friends on the roof of a four-story apartment building in Crown Hills, Brooklyn, attempted to leap across an eight-foot gap to the rooftop next door but he missed and fell to his death in a concrete alley (Semple & Surico, 2015). Again, a young man of twenty plunged to his death as he tried to take photos of the skyline from a catwalk above the roof of the Four Seasons Hotel in Midtown Manhattan in December 2015 (Mueller, 2015).

The list of the incidents did not make rooftoppers quit. Even more, that seems to challenge them to succeed in their goals without necessarily ending in fatality. Are all rooftoppers want to have social media fame? Or, are there other motives driving the rooftoppers? Those questions arise and therefore become the major issue to be discussed. Thus, the research question is what is the primary motive/s of the research informant to perform rooftopping?

## **Method**

A nineteen-year-old male professional Swiss rooftopper, Dimitri Siegrist, was recruited to become the mere participant for the research. He has been climbing skyscrapers, towers and cranes in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and Morocco since 2014. He has ever ascended some of the famous iconic buildings such as Messeturm in Frankfurt, Allianz Arena in Munich and Berliner Fernsehturm in Berlin. He was born in Zürich Switzerland (Personal communication with Dimitri Siegrist, December 16, 2019). I knew him unintentionally when I was browsing Instagram for informants of my research. I stumbled on his Instagram account due to some impressive photos. Some of them show his breathtaking actions while climbing a skyscraper and a telecommunication tower. Then, I texted him by Instagram Direct Messenger (IDM) and luckily he responded since it was not easy to contact a (pro) rooftopper. I contacted many pro world rooftoppers but only a few who responded. I managed to convince him that I am a researcher who was seeking a rooftopper to become my respondent. Eventually, he was convinced and willing to be interviewed. Afterwards, I asked for his WhatsApp number to make our communication run more smoothly.

While interviewing him, I applied what should be done in the ethnographic study as suggested by Spradley (1979) and Crang & Cook (2007), but it was done online or known as netnography (Hine, 2001). It is ethnography, which is conducted online. The interview did not begin until we knew each other and trusted each other very well first. It is very crucial in the ethnographic study since the informant was about to give off information in which many of them might be classified to a “stranger”. The data are my conversation

with Dimitri Siegrist, which are in the forms of WhatsApp text messages, WhatsApp voice notes and voice recording of WhatsApp voice call.

Hermeneutics theory by Wilhelm Dilthey (Dilthey & Jameson, 1972) is employed to interpret what the informant has experienced, since Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. Hermeneutics develops from Phenomenology, the study of conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first point of view (Smith, 2013). According to Sloan & Bowe (2014), phenomenology can be distinguished into descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology. For thinkers in the humanities, interpretation is especially important. Understanding a book, an artefact, including a cultural phenomenon such as rooftopping is the primary task of humanities. Dilthey suggests that what humanities study is what human beings think, feel, want, and so on. To understand others' works (books, paintings, actions, thoughts, etc.) requires *erlebnis* or *experience* because people experience the world in a certain way (Gijbers, 2018). Hermeneutics aims to go a step back and understand the experience that led to the expressions. Therefore, Dilthey uses *verstehen* (a special kind of understanding). It means we put ourselves in the place of the person who made the expression and experience what that person experienced while making that expression. Thus, the work of hermeneutics is "not to develop a procedure for understanding, but to clarify the condition of understanding" (Holroyd, 2007).

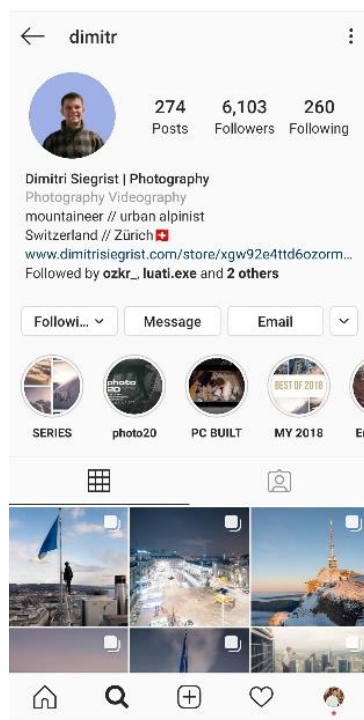


Figure 7  
The Instagram profile of Dimitri Siegrist  
Source: Instagram

## Result and Discussion

### Result

Climbing up human-made concrete or steel, i.e. skyscrapers, bridges, chimneys, towers and cranes without using any climbing tool and harness for stunning photos or



social media fame is considered very stupid and law-breaking according to many. Our life is not worth a photo or even fame in comparison to the death risk that may occur due to falling from the high height. To make such a decision requires a very strong persistence because one must devote a large amount of attention, effort, and time to spend. Rooftopping cannot only be considered a trivial hobby. One must embrace it as if someone embraced a faith, especially if he/she wants to become a professional rooftopper. Or else he/she will remain an inexperienced unskilled amateur rooftopper with no gain and no fame. Therefore, to people in common using common sense, rooftopping is probably considered a stupidity that may end up with the death of the perpetrator if he/she slips though just a little.

Although rooftopping has emerged since as early as 1900 (Young et al., 2011; Williams, 2011), it became more popularly known worldwide after social media got more developed and smartphones were no longer a novelty in 2011. The two factors indirectly contributed to the proliferation of extreme selfies, rooftopping, particularly after Tom Ryaboi posted many of his rooftopping photos on social media (Elgan, 2019). The issue appeals more attention and deserves to be discussed since more and more teenagers and young people perform rooftopping for more various reasons and inevitably adds up the list of the deceased due to rooftopping accidents.

Based on the research by Kurniawan et al. (2020b), it reveals that not all rooftoppers chase fame on social media. Nearly all of his informants state that they seek unlimited freedom by being on top of skyscrapers. This is reinforced with another finding that although they ever had harsh punishments and sanctions from the security officers and even their Instagram accounts and rooftopping photos were deleted they insist on doing rooftopping. Moreover, most of their Instagram accounts do not pose rooftopping photos. In short, they do not seek fame but freedom of enjoying stunning cityscape from hundreds of meters above. To understand this is not easy for people in common. In this study, I am going to reveal the other primary motive/s of rooftoppers besides seeking social media fame as suggested by many.

Dimitri shares his rooftopping tale for this study through convenient in-depth interview. He started by introducing himself. He was born by his parents who are great mountaineers in Switzerland. He says that he started climbing mountains since he could walk, meaning that he was introduced to wild nature in his very young age. Later when he was a teenager he commenced his mountaineering career himself. When I interviewed him, Dimitri was nineteen and he has conquered many mountains in both Switzerland and other countries, i.e. Austria and Morocco. He has ever climbed mountains in different seasons, from winter to autumn. To Dimitri mountaineering is half of his life. His parents taught him how to use harnesses, how to escape from an avalanche, how to survive bad weather and other technical knowhow in mountaineering. Thus Dimitri is undoubtedly very skilful in climbing mountains.

In 2014 he began to climb cranes but he did not know that in urban exploration it is called 'rooftopping'. He took it more seriously since 2016 and began to document his adventure and share with the audience. Dimitri knew this urban exploration from a friend of his. Then he learned more about it from Instagram and YouTube. He is interested in it since it is less complicated than climbing mountains but it provides him with attractive scape for climbing and photography so that he can do it when he does not have time to climb mountains. Climbing a mountain requires some climbing tools and equipment, such as sufficient food & drink, some cooking utensils, rope, axe,

harness, etc. and other specific outfits and footgear for mountaineering. Meanwhile, rooftopping does not necessarily need such specific tools and equipment. One may only wear an ordinary outfit like t-shirts and usual pants and carry a smartphone. Since he loves photography Dimitri always carries his DSLR camera and drone.

According to Dimitri rooftopping is far less challenging and less dangerous than mountaineering. In mountaineering, a climber might be encountered with many unexpected things that may become latent jeopardies, such as avalanche, steep deep canyon, and blizzard. One does not have control in mountaineering but one does in rooftopping (Personal communication with Dimitri Siegrist, December 23, 2019). Accordingly, Dimitri finds rooftopping more easily carried out. One thing that makes him feel bothered in rooftopping is security officers since they hate rooftoppers. Dimitri confesses that he feels very alive and free on the rooftop. "I feel very alive and free at the top of a rooftop and it's similar to mountaineering; you also get rushed when you made it to the top" (Personal communication with Dimitri Siegrist, December 27, 2019). I questioned him about his true motivation since many rooftoppers chase social media fame. He emphasized that he performs rooftopping only for the sake of freedom and photography, not for subscribers nor attention (Personal communication with Dimitri Siegrist, June 3, 2019). Dimitri knows exactly that the number of Instagram followers correlates with the amount of money he receives. He received a few hundred US dollars a year. The amount which is not much for a senior rooftopper compared to a celebgram posting sensual contents who can have tens or even hundreds of thousands of followers with hundreds of thousands of dollars revenue. Occasionally Dimitri exhibits his rooftopping photos at an exhibition and sells photos' copyright to a newspaper (Personal communication with Dimitri Siegrist, January 18, 2019).

However, he is not attracted to that. He acknowledges that his rooftopping photos and videos may appeal more likes and new followers to view them but he does not make it as his priority, such as adding some hashtags (#) helping people search him. In his every post on his Instagram account, Dimitri does not use any hashtag. He joined Instagram in December 2016. His Instagram followers were 6,103 per June 8, 2020). The number could have been doubled if he wanted to be famous since his rooftopping posts are quite stunning and breathtaking.

To Dimitri, being on top of high height on a skyscraper, crane, or tower can give him a feeling of true freedom enabling him to escape from the rush of everyday chores. Moreover, he loves shooting the cityscape and his rooftopping actions to be shared with viewers on Instagram. Dimitri usually goes rooftopping with one or two friends of his for ease if taking pictures or videos and operating the drone. He and his team members always profess the codex of rooftopping, namely "Take nothing but photos and leave nothing but footprints" (Personal communication with Dimitri Siegrist, June 3, 2019). The codex means that he and his friends never do any vandalism during the rooftopping. After he takes pictures he leaves the venue without leaving anything except footprints. When I asked him about the acrobatic actions performed by other rooftoppers, such as Oleg Cricket and Angela Nikolau from Russia, Dimitri argued that they seek attention from audience and fame on social media but he does not. "I think it's stupid to risk your life. I don't risk my life. I never go close to the edge, and if I do I wear harness" (Personal communication with Dimitri Siegrist, December 27, 2019). If a rooftopper wants his pictures or videos to be viral, he will not wear or use any safety equipment to boost up the likes on Instagram or the views on YouTube.



Figure 7  
Source: @dimitr

Figure 7 exhibits Dimitri who was climbing a telecommunication tower in Zürich, Switzerland. His two feet are stepping on an iron bar while his arms are stretched out to show his liberty. He looks wearing a harness to hold his body from falling behind. He is one of several rooftoppers who wear harnesses in rooftopping since most rooftoppers do wear harnesses or use any other safety equipment.



Figure 8  
Source: dimitr

Figure 8 is the photo when Dimitri climbed Messeturm, one of the iconic skyscrapers in Germany. The rooftopping was intended for a mission to fight against capitalism since the building was fully occupied with bank and insurance offices, the symbol of capitalism. After reaching the top he flagged a flag with injustice symbol. The video became a viral on YouTube having been seen over 14,000 times (per June 10, 2020) since its publication on July 2, 2019 on the link <https://youtu.be/SDPmoG7tv5Q> under the name of Blurred Motion channel.

## Discussion

As it is defined that rooftopping is intended to seek social media fame or material pursuit. As everybody knows that the number of Views, Like and Followers are identical to material compensation. Thus, whatever one does, then recorded and posted on social media such as Instagram or YouTube must be expecting one of the two major reasons above. Therefore, the finding of the research surprisingly reveals that there is a senior rooftopper who is not seeking fame nor material from posting rooftopping pictures and videos on Instagram.

This has created a new debate to some extent that most probably many people won't believe what the rooftopper acknowledged. Let's now try to validate whether Dimitri tells the truth about his motive in doing rooftopping. Seen from the number of followers on his Instagram Dimitri is considered not popular. He is still much beaten by Vitaly Raskalov (@raskalov) or Tom Ryaboi (@roof\_topper) who have obtained thousands of followers with nearly similar extremity and quality on their pictures posted on Instagram.

If Dimitri lies that he merely seeks stunning photos and ultimate freedom, I don't think he keeps doing rooftopping and posting his rooftopping pictures and videos. Until this article was written, Dimitri's Instagram account is still active and the last post was on September 30, 2020 and having been liked by more than 400 Instagram users. Moreover, Dimitri is even a true rooftopper in my opinion since he was raised by his parents who were mountain climbers and he was taught how to climb snowy mountain since he could walk. It means that Dimitri has been well and thoroughly-trained to climb mountains, canyons, hills and valleys and to survive in the worst climate.

Although he shifted to rooftopping recently it doesn't mean that he quit mountaineering. He said that it's a matter of time. Recently he was busy and he



compensated his missing to mountaineering with rooftopping. We can still see his mountaineering pictures on his Instagram account.

To produce high-quality and stunning pictures requires a high-qualified camera, so did Dimitri. He said that he could purchase an advanced latest SLR camera by means of selling his rooftopping pictures to several newspapers' publishers. He also received some money from Instagram but it was not much. More importantly, that doesn't drive him to be materialistic or turn to be calling out for attention on social media.

Though this study merely involved an informant, the result may reveal something that many do not ever thought. Many suggest that rooftopping is aimed at appealing attention on social media; seeking *likes* and *followers*, which implicate on material reward. This study reveals that the informant did not perform rooftopping for either social media fame or material reward. This can contribute to further research to consider nationality and cultural background in conducting research on such topics.

## Conclusion

Research on selfies was just conducted in 2013, but only few on extreme selfies, more particularly on rooftopping. This paper is a novelty in extreme selfies research. The novelty includes theoretical, methodological, and place. Many previous research on selfie adopts psychological theories, such as narcissism and self-esteem. In methodological term, the previous research is mostly quantitative. Less number of previous research use a qualitative method and only several research on selfie extreme rooftopping. Moreover, it is probably the first researched article employing a qualitative method, using hermeneutics phenomenological approach with ethnographic methodology to a single Swiss informant.

The paper concludes that fame on social media and revenues from Instagram and YouTube are not solely the primary motives of rooftoppers. The research reveals that freedom and stunning photos of cityscape are the (other) ultimate goals of rooftoppers. Accordingly, this should become the consideration for the future researchers that not all rooftoppers are obsessed with fame and wealth.

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