



DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPH AS A METHOD OF EXPERIENCING, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND PIECES OF NETWORKED MEMORY

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Abstract

Photographs, intertwined with Modernism, rapidly turned into a groundbreaking phenomenon with multi-dimensional sociological and cultural repercussions shortly after it was invented in the 19th century, in which it was perceived as yet another scientific tool. The 19th century roles of photographs for documenting and keeping memories got transformed and the areas of use for photographs rapidly diversified as well as they become even more complex as a result of the dramatic changes that were brought about in the 20th century. Coupled with the digital infrastructure realized in the 20th century, photographs revolutionized the nature of communication, individuals' perception of identity and the method of keeping and remembering memories. Molded into the widespread tool of communicating experiences, expressing oneself and creating a visual memory by this digital shift in the 20th century, photographs also became a popular means of forging a digital identity via the Internet and social media. Despite the match between this circumstance and the individuals' desire for instant communication staying up-to-date, the ease of manipulation that the same digital shift resulted in also radically loosened individuals' control over their digital photographs. Even though this situation seems to have eliminated the role of photographs as memory, it only transformed this role due to the manipulation and the potential to construct a digital identity offered by the Internet and social media. Consequently, individuals' photographs of themselves or of the moments that they lived have started to turn up in unexpected circumstances at equally unexpected times. As such, it seems that the role of photography as memory has gone well beyond being individualistic and turned into a collective one thanks to the digital potential made possible by the Internet and social media. This study, which has a descriptive and exploratory qualitative method, investigates how a transformation of not only technological but also socio-cultural dimensions has come to reshape photography in general and digital photography in particular.

Keywords: Digital Photography, Identity, Social Media, Memory, Communication.

1. Introduction

In conjunction with the developments in technology, photography has undergone remarkable changes since 1839, when its invention was announced at the French Academy of Sciences. However, it is in the last thirty years that photography has changed significantly thanks to the radical digital capabilities of the new technological advancements. Despite the fact that the consequences of this dramatic change are concrete and abstract alike and that there are many dimensions of its complex uses, the depth at which digital photography has affected the nature of communication, the construction of identity and the creation of memory has been its most notable implication. This profound change has resulted in continuous interaction among and the transformation of all these concepts as well as how one sees, understands and reacts to the world. Thus, digital photography has emerged as the most effective method of communication, self-expression and memory.

To be more specific, due to the role of technological tools and developments like smartphones, the Internet and the spread of social media in our lives, photography has turned into a way of creating one's identity and a method of communication rather than a tool of keeping memories for recording one's photographic past, as it was once. It is now the language of a new generation of people who use it to form a 'digital' identity and to communicate instantly. This new set of users of digital photography 'live' in semi-virtual reality, taking countless photographs for which they pose fashionably, calculate the consequences of various angles and facial expressions. Such a circumstance could well be characterized as a transformation on both sociological and cultural fronts. This incessant use of photography for building and modelling one's identity perfectly matches the individuals' need to project a trendy image in instant communication. Yet, it is this ease of manipulation that poses a serious problem for people who use digital photography in the such a manner by undoing their control over the probable uses of their photographs in unpredictable contexts in the future. In contrary to the widespread belief, digital photography has not eliminated the memory role of a photograph. It has only transformed it in such a way that memory that a photograph creates and contains is scattered, or networked, over the social media and the ever-connected computers on the Internet. This article aims to investigate how all these changes has influenced and reshaped digital photography in the context of creating identities, communicating self-image and keeping memories.

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2. Digital Photography in Context

Thanks to the recent developments in technology that have been going on for more than a decade, digital photography seems to have entered a new and historical phase, in which the mind-boggling speed and inclusion of state-of-the-art audio-visual technologies into our lives has made it ever easier to manipulate and disseminate images. Naturally, this poses a risk both for the people in the images and those who commit this act of manipulation and circulation since it is not so easy to tell the difference between a doctored and non-doctored image. What is even worse is that the consequences of all this image manipulation and dispersion could well be more serious in the future.

As Williams (1974, 28) rightly argues, technology itself does not contain anything that relates to where it originates from or how it should be used, which means a new technological development could easily be adopted and used in several potential ways. People adapt or devise novel manners of usage for this new technology, which are rather difficult to predict, and these new uses also become rooted in the production and consumption of images.

It is noteworthy to point out that how digital photography functions and what role it plays when compared to analogue photography have changed drastically. Analogue photography was the main mode of keeping and recalling one's significant moments in life twenty or twenty-five years ago. All those photographs in thick and dusty albums and were regarded as the most dependable and useful way of remembering how life was once upon a time despite the fact that picturing and imagining have always been an inherent part of remembering while telling stories (Stuhlmiller, 1996, 183). How photography affected the creation of identity and what role it played in communication were not so emphasized although these notions were always understood to be latent in the nature of photography, as Barthes (1981, 106) and Sontag (1973, 76) highlights. However, with the ever-increasing progress and usage of digital photography on equipment like smartphones, photography has begun to be used as a means of instant communication and creating as well as 'curating' one's identity through images, which has led its role as a method of collecting and recalling memories to be regarded as secondary, as pointed out by several researchers like Schiano et al. (2017, 2), Harrison (2002, 100) and Garry and Gerrie (2005, 323). Yet, it should be noted that photography, in its digital form as well, is still an effective form of memory, which constitutes the main argument of this article.

To put things in a broader context, it should be borne in mind that using photographs for the purpose of communication and as the expression of one's identity have been inherent components of photography. As Schiano et al. (2017, 3) indicate, today's young people tend to employ their smartphone cameras or digital cameras more for instant communication and easy circulation over their social media accounts and less to saving photographs to look at later in their lives, which is a stark difference to their parents' preferred way of handling their own photos. Moreover, it seems that this use changing use of photography has not occurred due to the recent developments in technology. There seems to be a greater and intricate web of transformation that has sociological and cultural dimensions in addition to the obvious technological one.

Often pointed to as the master criminal behind the widespread belief that photography is no longer dependable as it was during the analogue era, digitalization is also essential to keep countless photographs, which were quite often modified even in the analogue form as well, as Öztuncay (2003, 33) puts forward. It is only that new digital capabilities of the cameras and smartphones allow for more flexibility and ease in 'editing' the photographs before sharing them. This is how the identity gets formed through the digital photography. Yet, with this identity communicated over the Internet via various means comes the question of what happens to the memory role of photography. It can be argued that memory is not erased at all from digital photographs of the sort mentioned above. Memory gets transformed and scattered over the wide web that covers all the world only to be saved for an infinite period in the virtual reality.

Taking all these into account, it could be argued that developments in technology, when considered together with the changes in the sociological and cultural atmosphere of our age, have deeply influenced the function that photography plays in the formation of one's identity and autobiographical memory. What lies beneath this idea is that digital photos can now be effortlessly tweaked thanks to the technological tools while they may also be doctored by people who have the sufficient knowledge and equipment. This dilemma regarding to what extent you can really control your digital photographs is also reflected in the way those digital photographs are shared over the Internet. Although instantly taken digital photographs are easily shared over the social media, this also means that they are quite open to illegal or unlicensed use, which means that the pictures 'live' almost forever on the Internet and pop up in unpredictable instances. In



summary, even though digital photographs can easily be modified, and this manipulability fits the endless desire to sculpt one's identity, it is the same ease that creates the absence of control which decreases how much those photographs can actually be controlled in the distributed virtual memory of the Internet.

3. Digital Photography as A Means of Communicating and Experiencing Memories

Originally emerged in the first half of 19th century as a tool of recordkeeping to aid scientists and travelers in their efforts to understand and categorize the world, photography steadily acquired a more personal form in the second half of the same century, which included people recording their experiences on a material like silver plates, glass or paper to refer to or remember with their friends in the future. Nonetheless, even in its first years, it could be claimed that photography also had these interpersonal uses, which, as early as 19th and 20th century, indicated that photography was also a phenomenon that had communicative and social aspects as too.

As anyone who has been to a place as a tourist for the first time would acknowledge, there is a constant urge to take photographs to share with friends later, which shows that photography is an essential part of creating a memory and experience. However, this social function of photography as a means of recording and remembering experiences has lost ground to more individual usage, communicative functions and sharing rather than saving experiences.

As an indispensable part of a one's social life, Sontag (1973, 23) argues that photography has always been a tool of belonging to a certain group, and since the beginning of 21st century, the individual has slowly moved into the center of this social life. As Harrison (2002, 90) argues in her study, the presentation of oneself has become the more important function of digital photography, rather than reminiscing the past experiences with family. This profound change signals that digital photography has been moving towards a process of creating and molding identities, in which photographs are employed for the assertion of one's personality, experiences and interpersonal relations. In a shift which has been more forcefully felt since the start of the 21st century, digital photographs have been serving as a means of communicating daily experiences more than they are used for commemorating memories. Despite the fact that this is partly due to the developments in technology that have brought about considerable comfort in our everyday life, sociological and cultural aspects of this transformation cannot be ignored.

Today's users of digital photographs differ greatly in their preference for the use of these photographs. Having experienced the analogue era in photography, adult users mainly seem to be sticking to the recording and remembering function of photography for their family experiences, even in its digital form, while young users, who are already quite familiar with the electronical and digital image tools, prefer using digital photographs to share and communicate their daily experiences as well as to join social groups (Liechti and Ichikawa, 2000, 233; Schiano et al. 2017, 3). Such a difference also presents itself in how young people manage their digital photographs. As indicated in Schiano et al.'s study (2017, 3), today's youth use digital photography as a means of social interaction and communicating experiences by sharing their photos through their social media accounts or looking at such photos of others rather than going over the numerous photos collected on their smartphones or cameras by themselves like their mothers or fathers. This clearly shows that photography has begun to play a more active role in social circles like schools, friend groups and clubs, which means that digital photography has turned into a new kind of visual language to express one's identity.

This transformation partly results from the widespread availability and ever-increasing popularity of digital tools like smartphones, tablets; social media applications like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or instant messaging programs like WhatsApp. All these technologies and software have a dramatic effect on how people, especially young people, socialize and spend time together. With the recently added features like various kinds of vignettes and filters, images or 'stories' disappearing after a certain amount of time determined by the user, completely original uses and rules have also appeared. People all perform these 'rituals' and abide by the rules without even knowing when they casually take a selfie and post it on Instagram or share like a story on Snapchat after carefully editing it through some filters built in these applications.

Young users of digital photography are more active regarding this aspect, unlike their parents, who took and stored their photos in albums to look at them some day in the future. It seems that they are more enthusiastic about sharing their experiences through digital photos rather than keeping them as objects on their phones. The digital technologies mentioned above apparently reinforce this trend in digital photography for experiencing and communicating memories or messages. This situation causes digital photography to acquire a social function, which serves to communicate or 'connect' with others rather than



'save' memories. Therefore, it could be argued that digital photographs used in this manner are now momentary notes rather than long-lived memories.

As noted in Lehtonen et al. (2002, 71), digital photographs which are spiced with some captions on smartphones and posted over social media or instant messaging tools have turned into 'postcards', which serve the function of social connection above. In this new mode of social interaction mediated via digital photography, those words added to the photographs shared over the social media clearly represent our instinct to communicate and the function of photography regarding this new mode of saying 'right here, right now'. Therefore, it seems that digital photographs have turned into visual means of experiencing and communicating those experiences instantly as if they are words uttered from out mouth, which are not for saving but consuming.

It is certain that a profound change has been going on regarding digital photography for the last decade and this change is even more obviously visible among young users of digital photographs, who prefer to use their digital photographs as a tool to connect socially within their friend circles. However, this phenomenon does not exactly stem from today's improving digital technology. It is also the consequence of a wider shift which includes cultural aspects as well. In this transformation, the individuals and their experiences are at the core, often to the point of exclusion of family, and digital photography is merely a component of this widespread change of perspective, in which not saving photographs for the future but posting and/or exchanging them via digital technology has become the mainstream method of creating identity.

4. Digital Photography as A Means of Constructing and Shaping Identity

Employed as a method of experiencing and communicating memories, digital photography has also been an influential tool in creating and shaping identity as it enables people to 'tweak' their images. This is not to say that manipulating or tweaking photos has only become possible with digital photography. As Öztuncay (2003, 39), Terpak and Bonfitto (2015, 23) point out, photographs have always been 'edited' somehow even in analog photography for various reasons. Unnecessary or undesired parts were removed or retouched on glass plates to make the image more desirable in the eyes of the photographed person or the patron of the photographer. Therefore, camera has long been a tool of constructing identity through editing images.

Barthes (1981, 80) argues that there is a strong relationship between identity construction and photography. According to this connection, photographs are instruments that calls us to contemplate our own past, current and future selves, continuously evaluating our images. Therefore, whenever we have our photograph taken, we tend to model our image to match the ideal collection of those past, current and future selves. Taking this connection into consideration, photography has an active and complicated impact on the process of identity construction since this process includes not only a visual but also a cultural and semiotics aspects as well.

Barthes (1981, 81) also adds four distinct dimensions to having a photograph taken, which could be summarized as "the one that I think I am", "the one I want others to think I am", "the one the photographer thinks I am" and "the one the photographer makes use of when exhibiting his art" (Barthes, 1981, 13). These aspects are often at play with each other whenever we pose for a photograph so that it fits the ideal self that we have in our minds, only to realize that they almost never fit together as Barthes (1981, 81) argues. The fact that we pose conscientiously, putting on our best smile and trying to look pleased during the shooting and then choose the best photographs for editing on the phone or on the computer and delete the undesirable ones shows all this interplay of the aspects that constitute the construction of identity through photography. In short, what was once the domain of expert visual artists is now the ability of any person who has a smartphone or digital camera and can operate it with relative ease.

Nevertheless, it should clearly be pointed out that this digital capability of editing or manipulation is not only applicable to digital photography. Despite being singled out as the main difference of digital photography from its analog counterpart, tweaking and manipulation has already been present in analog photography as well, as Özendes (2013, 19), Öztuncay (2003, 33), Terpak and Bonfitto (2015, 23) explain. However, digital photography has more latent flexibility to go through and edit photographs whose subject is oneself, thus controlling one's public image, which is more difficult, though not impossible, when those photographs are on a film roll. Therefore, it has become more appealing in digital photography to individuals to 'improve' how they look via a variety of digital software. To put it differently, tweaking one's digital photographs is now an indispensable and common component of one's photographic life experiences.



This brings another idea to the mind, which is the fact that this tweaking of individuals' photographs has become quite the norm. In fact, it is such widespread practice that people tend not to question whether the photograph that they are looking at has any visual integrity when compared to the original person. This common situation is also reflected in our accepting attitudes to the photographs in magazines, advertisements on the Internet and TV, which are almost always 'improved' via various editing tools to polish the image. In short, digital photography allows people to play with almost anything in their photographs and there is a widespread acceptance of this manipulability, which has become well-integrated into one's digital autobiography. Unlike 'stationary' analog photography, such a powerful combination makes the digital photography the perfect method for the construction and re-construction of one's digital identity and memory. Therefore, it can be argued that a new and different kind of socio-cultural environment in which manipulability of and individuals' control over digital photography is increasing more is coming into being.

5. Digital Photography as Networked Memory

After taking the reflections above into account, it seems quite normal to conclude that digital photography has now become a method of experiencing, communicating and constructing identity as opposed to the original role of photography as remembering. Nonetheless, this new situation has not undone the primary role of photographs as medium of recollection despite digital cameras being used for experiencing and identity formation more and more with novel social uses. In fact, function of digital photographs as memory lives on in a different social shape in the distributed yet connected reality of our age. What causes this new mode of memory is sharing, which means that digital photographs shared over social media or the Internet to communicate experience or to construct identity are stored for ever in the distributed yet connected memory, popping up at unpredictable instances and times.

The notorious photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners are a famous and crystal-clear example of the networked memory that digital photographs are stored in. After their appearance in the press in 2004 and spreading via the Internet, one year after the start of the US war in Iraq, these repellent and shocking photographs of torture and abuse of the Iraqi detainees by the personnel of the US armed forces remain an undeniable indication of the power of photography over prose. Informally taken by as a casual sign of military bonding, conformity within the 'mission' and souvenirs of victory, these photographs, as Sontag (2017, 2) rightly points out, are "a recent shift in the use made of pictures - less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated." Besides the fact that digital cameras have become an everyday accessory even for the soldiers, these photographs also clearly demonstrate that war photography has changed dramatically, with soldiers being the photographers and the users of photographs as a casual and 'fun' way of sharing experience and constructing identity.

Informally intended as 'postcards' sent to relatives back home only to be forgotten, these photographs remained in the eternal networked memory, which is the Internet. This shows that digital photographs are not one's only to keep on cameras or smartphones anymore. They have now become a hidden burden in people's both personal and professional life. In short, it is clear that digital photographs taken with smartphones or cameras may not be limited to one's exclusive and personal space as easily as it is taken for granted. Instead, they get integrated into the networked memory and remain eternally distributed in the Internet.

Conclusion

With the dramatic move of photography from the chemical processes in the darkroom of the analog photography to the electronic circuits of the digital camera in the second half of the 20th century came the remarkably easy yet extremely important manipulability of photographs. Thus, digital images could rapidly spread into the global network of electronic communication, which meant that digital photographs could not be kept in the drawers or albums unlike what our grandparents did before the advent of digital photography. All this shift in paradigms has transformed the roles of digital photography in a wider cultural and sociological context which could be defined via concepts like experiencing, communication, manipulation and easy circulation of digital images.

In this novel circumstance, digital photographs have turned into tools of identity construction because of the reconfigured equilibrium of the roles of recording memories and communicating experiences. With the extensive availability of digital tools like cameras, smartphones and enhanced software on these, tweaking and manipulating photographs seem to have become the standard procedure, not an alternative, to 'present' oneself. Although it is hard to claim that photography is a true reflection of reality and memory, digital photography has pushed this reflection even more to its limits by providing people with the ability to



'enhance' and 'reconstruct' their appearances via technological tools mentioned above, which they share instantly over the social media as an expression of their identities. This new and widespread 'ritual' naturally lead to the question of how much control people really have over their photographs. In its new form as a tool for the formation of identity, it would not be wrong to claim that digital photography coupled with the power of the Internet has the potential danger of images being manipulated and popping up unexpectedly in completely different domains. Moreover, the bitter fact is that it is very difficult to tell the true image in most cases.

While images as keepsakes of memory are leaving their places to images as means of communication, photographs captured by a digital camera or a smartphone and intended merely as 'jokes' or 'postcards' to be forgotten are now becoming engraved in the distributed memory of the Internet, which further complicates the issue of control referred to above. Even though a digital photograph is taken only as a memory and shared solely with the purpose of communication or expressing one's identity, it easily goes back and forth between individual, confidential use and general, popular one. This is not exactly the direct result of digitalization of photography but, as stated earlier, a combination of digitalization and a sociocultural transformation which digital photography is only a part of. However, digital photography and the Internet have made the distribution of images easier as a form of communication, which, in turn, renders private images communal property and considerably undermines individuals' control of their photographs.

Overall, the growing ease of tweaking and manipulation in digital photographs has led to individuals to feel powerful in constructing and presenting their digital identities yet powerless in controlling them in the networked memory of the Internet. Because of this circumstance, the meaning of memory and the role of photography as a way of remembering have changed dramatically to include the eternal photographs in the digital corridors of the Internet as well as instant and private ones on the cameras and smartphones.

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