'It's Just Pictures': The Death of Social Photography as we Know it

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Abstract: The widespread adoption of smartphones and increased use of social media has changed how people document and share their everyday lives. As social media has evolved over the last decade, so has social photography practice. In this short paper, we discuss this evolution in relation to our work in progress within an ongoing longitudinal qualitative study spanning over ten years. In this project, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with the same group of informants in 2012, 2017 and 2022. This methodological approach has allowed us to examine how social media users reflect on experience, use and practice. In this paper, we highlight how during this last decade there has been a shift in how people document and share their everyday life in social media. More than ever before, social media users of today are able to document and share snapshots of everyday life, keeping friends and memories close and easy to access. However, in the early days of social media, people were more active in terms of their own production of content and posting of pictures, while today, they share less new material. From our analysis, we discuss how our informants report a shift in how they experience social photography, from being a process of editing and sharing photos intensely, to a more passive approach where they describe taking a lot of images, but not sharing them on social media to the same extent as they did before. Based on one representative example from our empirical material, we discuss the implications of the development of social media platforms over this past decade, and how the possibility to edit and share with others 'in the moment' has transformed into something less social over these years. We show how social media photography has evolved from being a practice of editing and sharing memorable content, to being less interactive, and instead involving more individual consumption and reflection, as well as sharing photographs in smaller circles. While the claim that social photography is 'dead' is rather bold, we do believe that there is a trend towards a less social and more individual engagement in social media photography.

Keywords: Social media, Social photography, Longitudinal study, Stimulated recall interviews, Qualitative study, User study

1. Introduction

Social photography, i.e., the practice of documenting and sharing photographs, has been of research interest for decades. Chalfen (1975, 1987) did early and influential work on practices surrounding taking, editing, storing, and sharing photos which still constitute an important theoretical framework for contemporary scholars studying digital and social photo sharing (Shannon, 2022; Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022). Within qualitative social media studies, social photography has been of interest especially to researchers interested in specific practices, e.g., networked photography and selfie cultures (Savnal, 2021), as well as activities within specific social networking sites such as Instagram (Barnwell et al., 2023) and Snapchat (Best, 2016). Studying and comparing photo sharing practices on Snapchat and Instagram, Larsen and Kofoed (2016) found a great difference in both aesthetics and message in photos shared on the two platforms. Best (2016) studied motivation behind Snapchat communication and how Snapchat "both extends and intensifies digital photography's shift from memory to communication" (Best, 2016, pg. 2). In recent years, a distinction has been made between active and passive use, where active use is held in contrast to passive use of social media (where the latter refers to "viewing others' social media pages without interacting with the page owner" (Roberts and David, 2023, pg. 240). While intuitively appealing, other scholars have criticized the active use hypothesis (Krause et al., 2023). When reviewing previous research on social media photography, we found that the general focus has mainly been on specific instances, in delimited settings and locations tied to certain platforms and specific practices. In this way previous work has primarily provided us with snapshots of current practices, rather than insights on the development and progression over time. On a related and important note, Miller (2011) highlighted the fact that social media platforms should not be considered static entities. Rather, these platforms can be drawn upon in several different ways, developing into genres of use within different groups and communities while also continuously evolving and changing over time (Miller, 2011). Therefore, within our work, we have aimed to focus on the evolution of cross-platform social media photography during the last decade as experienced by the users themselves. Building upon previous work and our own rich data corpus of a decade of social media use, we zoom out and approach the evolvement of social photography in contemporary society holistically.

2. Method

The discussion presented in this paper is based on ongoing qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) (Audulv et al., 2023) with the same informants having been interviewed in 2012, 2017 and 2022. In 2012, we started out with an interest in Instagram use, as the then emerging dominant social media and photo sharing platform. Sixteen Instagram users (eleven women and five men between the age of 19 and 38) were recruited and invited to take part in semi-structured in-depth interviews. In 2012, the participants were both asked questions specifically about their social media photography engagements as well as about their social media use in general. In 2017, the same sixteen participants were invited to take part in interviews again. Eleven of them accepted and participated in interviews on their general social media use. In 2022, the same eleven participants as in the 2017 study were interviewed once again. Questions were asked on their social media use as of 2022 and about how their social media activities differed from ten years earlier. At the end of each interview, the participants were shown snippets from previous interviews and asked to comment on their reasonings five and ten years ago, influenced by the stimulated-recall technique (Dempsey, 2010). A more general discussion preceded showing examples from previous interviews. In our work, we have encouraged the participants to reflect upon their past selves and allowed for reflections about changes in both social media practices and life circumstances, while also tying their reasonings to specific, previous statements. The video recorded material as well as the transcribed interviews has been analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo. The data collection has been conducted adhering to the most recent version of AOIR ethical research guidelines available in 2012, 2017 and 2022 respectively.

Table 1: Participant details

Informant	Gender	Age 2012	Occupation 2012	Age 2017	Occupation 2017	Age 2022	Occupation 2022
1	F	19	Shop assistant	24	Student	29	Journalist
2	M	27	Information officer	32	Project manager	37	Business analyst
3	F	27	Home care worker	32	Medical secretary	37	Medical secretary
4	F	26	Student	31	Teacher	36	Planning officer
5	F	29	Journalist	34	Journalist	39	Student
6	F	31	Copywriter	36	Copywriter	41	Copywriter
7	M	28	Group home worker	33	Marketing manager	38	HR specialist
8	F	23	Student	28	Purchaser	33	Purchaser
9	F	29	Marketer	34	Marketer	39	Team manager
10	F	26	Student	31	Social media team leader (on parental leave)	36	Communications manager
11	M	38	Digital producer	43	Strategic digital producer	48	Strategic digital producer

3. Findings and Discussion

For this short paper, we use one representative example from our rich empirical data to illustrate a recognizable theme that have emerged from analysis of how users describe the evolvement in their own social media use over this last decade:

"I have some memory of that when we started this thing many years ago […] I was an active instagrammer. It was more then of like taking pictures of your everyday life and you were supposed to take pictures of your life and share that, so it wasn't that I posted 20 pictures a day, but it was at least with some frequency. And I remember when we had the follow-up and then it was more of like, yeah, I do post some but maybe rather for myself but not that much for others and maybe that you saved yourself to when you did fun stuff, you were at a festival, you were on vacation, it wasn't a lot of this like basic everyday life. And then now, we are two years into a pandemic, war is burning in Europe and it's just like, I don't post anything. I do a lot of stuff, but that's just pictures saved in my photo album on my phone."

This informant described a shift in how she practices social media photography by relating her current engagement to the previous two interview occasions. She reflected upon how she initially, in 2012, shared everyday life activities very frequently, but in 2017 had become more selective in sharing special moments with less focus on the social and interactional aspects and more on the aim of creating memories for oneself, whereas in 2022 the public sharing on social media platforms were even more selective, and although a lot of images were being taken, very few, if any, were being shared. Despite this trend of posting less actively, somewhat paradoxically, our informants reported still seeing social media as an integrated and intertwined part of their everyday lives, and as a space they spend time in and visit several times a day, and enjoy returning to, to revisit past experiences that appear as memories and highlights.

This leads us to reflect upon how social media photography practices have evolved over time. Miller argued in 2011 that social media platforms are continuously evolving and change over time. In 2016, Larsen and Kofoed (2016) concluded a great difference in both aesthetics and message in photos shared on two platforms and Best suggested an ongoing shift in digital photography," from memory to communication" (Best, 2016, pg. 2). We acknowledge that there might be a great variety in use between both users in general as well as within user groups on different platforms, and that these varieties will also affect the content that these users produce. However, for this short paper, we want to argue that what we are experiencing now is a trend towards a shift, almost opposite to the shift presented by Best in 2016 (Best, 2016). Based on our empirical findings, we argue that we can see a change in the practice of social media photography over this past decade, where the social and interactional aspects of social media photography are no longer as prominent as they initially were. Social media photography has evolved from being a practice of editing, sharing and interacting around memorable events with friends and family, to having become less social, and rather to a greater extent a practice of individual consumption and reflection.

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