

Chapter 7. Take a photo a day and call me in the morning: exploring photography projects and well-being

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Abstract

The practice of taking a photo every day and sharing it online has increased in popularity across social media and image-sharing websites. This paper explores the potential well-being benefits of participating in this practice, examining the different social and creative ways in which participants use it.

We interviewed sixteen people who currently participate in photo-a-day projects, and identified with the concept that participation in these projects had positive well-being benefits. Data were analysed using a grounded and iterative approach. Analysis focused on how participants derived well-being benefits in photo-a-day projects.

Photo-a-day projects enabled participants to look differently at the world. There was something satisfying to participants about noticing the world around them more, perhaps giving a sense of being more alive because they were more aware. The negative impacts on well-being mainly centred around the rules and constraints of the projects, including feeling obliged to respond to comments. Nevertheless, photo-a-day projects gave a sense of agency and choice, focused around a pleasant goal. Sharing photos could enhance social connections and lead to new relationships. The structure of taking one photo every day encouraged reminiscence, looking back on positive experiences and negative experiences overcome.

Keywords: photography, well-being, mental health.

Theoretical background

Taking digital photographs and sharing them via social media sites like flickr, Facebook and Instagram is a common practice. This paper focuses on

a particular aspect of photo-sharing in the online environment: taking and sharing digital photos as part of a daily project. In a photo-a-day projects, also known as 365 projects, people commit to taking and sharing one photo online, every day, for a year. Often, people continue this practice after the initial year, recording daily life on a longer-term basis. These projects can become a personal photo diary or journal, but there is a lot of variation in how people use them. Some people choose to have a theme for their project, others treat it very much like a diary or daily record, or to practice and improve their photography. It is difficult to establish numbers of users and purposes of conducting photo-a-day projects, but the dedicated photo-a-day website blipfoto is estimated to have around four thousand users, and two significant Flickr groups (project_365 and project365) have approximately 37,000 members internationally.

Online photo-a-day projects are part of a new infrastructure for sociality and creativity (Dijck, 2013) and may be said to contribute to an 'increasing visualisation of everyday life' (Hand, 2012). Previous research on photo-a-day projects has focused on them as creative and reflexive projects (Piper-Wright, 2013) or learning experiences (Barton, 2012). Both these framings of photo-a-day projects give insight into why people might conduct them. But our research has shown, building on a tradition of therapeutic photography, that these projects are more than this: they make a defined contribution to improving well-being.

Therapeutic photography takes many forms, including the photovoice method (Guell & Ogilvie, 2015) and its use in psychotherapy. The general principles are that those involved either take or select images that resonate with them and express an emotional state (Loewenthal, 2009). In photo-a-day projects, the predominant aim is not always to express or improve an

emotional state. Instead we theorise that the process of taking a photograph, selecting it, uploading and sharing it online – along with the processes of commenting on others’ photos and receiving feedback on photographs – has a positive impact on well-being.

Photo-a-day projects share some commonalities with interventions in Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology aims to have a beneficial impact on well-being by recommending small behavioural interventions such as gratitude letters or journaling (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Emerging evidence suggests that these interventions are effective, but Positive Psychology assumes that they can be administered in a defined ‘dose’ to improve well-being. This ignores the complexity of the intervention itself, and its interpretation in everyday life.

By focusing on existing online photo-sharing practices, we provide evidence about the activities that people choose to engage in and explore how people enhance their well-being by weaving these practices into their daily lives. We take Cieslik’s (2014) view of well-being as a ‘social, processual and biographical phenomenon’ to develop an understanding of these perceptions and interpretations of well-being. Instead of using survey-based methods to quantify well-being levels, our focus is on how well-being may appear in vernacular accounts and popular narratives that reflect a complex picture of competing discourses.

The aim of this paper is to explore photo-a-day projects in the complex context of everyday life, focusing on their impact on well-being and the affordances of choice and action they present as part of changing daily routines.

Method

Because our aim was to understand how participants themselves perceived photo-a-day, we used an interpretive methodology based on qualitative data collection. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed, which sought to explicate the participants' personal understanding of well-being and its connection to photo-a-day practices. It included questions on motivations for conducting photo-a-day projects, the value of the projects and the concrete processes of taking and sharing photographs. We recruited participants via an open online invitation, which outlined our interest in the potential connection between conducting photo-a-day projects and well-being.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2015. Eleven of the participants were female, with five male. All were aged between their mid-30s and mid-70s, and had been conducting photo-a-day projects for over a year. The majority (ten) shared their photos on the blipfoto, with cross-posting to other platforms including Facebook and Flickr. Smartphone cameras, tablet computers and digital SLRs were all employed as tools for capturing photographs, depending on availability and circumstances.

Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed, and all participants gave written consent. A research assistant conducted most interviews over the telephone or via skype, with one of the authors conducting one interview face-to-face. Ethical approval for the study was given by two University Research Ethics Committees.

Data were analysed using an iterative constant comparative approach (Charmaz, 2006), initially looking across the interview transcripts for

themes. Open codes grounded in the data were reviewed and organised into categories, then supplemented with themes generated from the literature.

Results and discussion

Interview participants reported positive benefits to taking part in photo-a-day projects. Participants discussed how taking part in photo-a-day helped them to keep noticing and encountering the world. It encouraged them to engage with other people – both online and offline – and it created a narrative of identity in which glimpses of the self could be seen, rather than a conscious portrayal or biography. However, photo-a-day was not entirely a benign intervention: sometimes people found it difficult to fall in line with the ‘rules’ of the projects. And while these projects were often a positive experience, they were rarely simple.

Positive benefits

Research participants spoke about how photo-a-day helped them when they were in difficult situations in life. For example, when one participant had lost his job, it was something that he could still do.

It stopped me thinking negatively if you see what I mean. I could do something positive every day, although I was having trouble finding another job.

Others found it changed their routines, giving them something to talk about and something to focus on.

It actually keeps me ticking over... and I drive home and I am looking - I will sometimes stop at the side of the road if I have got my camera with me. [My friends] do notice a change in me. Because I will talk about photos, I will get excited about what I am doing.

These aspects of photo-a-day projects resemble the interventions recommended in Positive Psychology. Undertaking a new activity every day and building it into a routine is a common feature of such interventions, but where Positive Psychology views these projects as a simple intervention, photo-a-day was a more complex set of activities. The activity of searching for a photo took people outside of their existing routines.

Encountering the world

In its nature, photo-a-day is closely tied to everyday experience; but for some participants it subtly reshaped their daily practices. Participants adapted their routines looking for new things to photograph and some spent the day with their 'eyes open' searching for photos. Seeking different images became an enjoyable occupation, with one participant stating that this *'transforms how I look at the world.'*

I notice all sorts I never would have noticed before. You are kind of scanning around all the time you are outside. Noticing things.

Sometimes, people had deliberately adopted photo-a-day because it was seen as a challenge to complete. Participants spoke about changing their usual activity to seek out an interesting photo opportunity. This breaking of existing routines was seen as something positive: leaving the desk at lunchtime, driving a different way home, or going on a walk to look for photos.

So it was really a way of getting myself away from my desk and out taking a lunchtime. [...] You know it is still quite a good way of forcing myself to think about something else other than work.

This seeking and searching for photographs added positive interest to the whole day. It was not simply a one-off act. Participants also spoke about the

way that other aspects of the project, such as editing photos and adding text, further elaborated enjoyment.

Engaging with others

Photo-a-day was 'social' in ways that would typically be expected from sharing material on a social networking site. Family and friends could be subjects for photographs, and often viewed and commented on the photos. But photo-a-day projects could also provide a connection with people that the participants did not know outside the online environment. Participants enjoyed the insight into other lives, and many clearly had a sincere interest in others' lives and photos. They felt the way that they conducted themselves in relation to followers was a part of the ethic of photo-a-day. These relationships felt significant.

It is just an interest and almost a privilege if you like to be able to eavesdrop in on their lives and see what they are doing.

Because photos were usually of pleasant things, sharing photos was seen in itself to be giving something nice to others.

I have had several people say to me that my photos make them feel better when they see them in their day.

Participants felt that those they followed on blipfoto or other social networking site formed a community because of the shared sense of concern shown to people. One participant talked about how he felt supported to discuss online how his illness had affected his life.

It is an odd thing to say but I have got to know people without meeting them... You get to know bits about their life which are sometimes quite intimate. People ask me about my illness... it can be fairly heavy stuff really and through that you do get a sense of mutual support. People are concerned for you, and you are concerned for them.

Photo-a-day projects became meaningful as a deeply social practice. Although the initial aim was the simple act of taking and sharing a photo, one of the main draws of photo-a-day became this creation and mutual reinforcement of a community.

Glimpsing the self

Participants felt that the photo-day was representative of, and affected by, what else was occurring in their lives. However, these revelations of the self were not coherent or complete. A narrative of identity emerged through choices of photo over time; the story was not complete and the ending was not known.

It is not a diary. It is much more, and it is what takes me.

Photographs sometimes had a very private meaning, not appreciated by the audience. Photos also retrospectively acquired meaning through time and association, with a sense of emergence of knowledge experienced by the person undertaking the project. This meant that when looking back over photo-a-day projects, their multiple meanings and role as a record of lived experience could encourage reflection.

It has become a valuable sort-of history of my life. [...] Some photographs that I take are very important to me in terms of memory, but the memory that I know they will evoke is completely private. So I might write no words at all because I have nothing that I want to say in public, even though I know the photograph will evoke something for me in the future.

However, this history was predominantly written without artistry. It was not the aim to construct a definitive biography of the self or fashion a self-portrait. Any revelations emerged from the series of photographs and the text around them.

Rules and responding

Photo-a-day was not a universally positive activity; the negative impacts on well-being mainly centred around the rules and constraints of the projects. People felt under pressure to find a good image every day, and feeling obliged to respond to comments.

I used to get really stressed if I missed a day [before], because there was a group leader who would say you have not posted a photo and it felt a bit of a chore.

I don't get myself upset that I can't possibly comment on everybody's photograph... Recently there was a spate of people leaving [the group] because they felt under pressure and they couldn't commit to commenting on everybody's photograph.

Both participants commented that they had made changes to their practice following these negative experiences, showing that they still had agency and choice in action.

Conclusion

Our aim was to try to capture the complexity of experience in photo-a-day projects, considering their effect on well-being and the diverse ways in which they could contribute to personal identity and memory. Taking the stance that well-being is a complicated 'social, processual and biographical phenomenon'⁸ we have presented the lived experience of undertaking these projects and started to reflect on their role. Participants who were recruited to the research identified a connection between our view that photo-a-day projects impacted on their well-being and their own experience of conducting these projects. Although this was a small pilot study, further work in progress has confirmed that this is not an isolated phenomenon

among those who conduct photo-a-day projects, with many viewing them as beneficial to their well-being.

The photo-a-day projects themselves were a form of documentation of daily life, but also opened up a dialogue with others. Sharing photos could enhance social connections and lead to new relationships. The structure of taking a photo-a-day encouraged reminiscence, looking back on positive experiences and negative experiences overcome.

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