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# Practices Surrounding Children's Photos in Homes

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**Abstract**

New parents cherish photos of their children. In their homes one can observe a varied set of arrangements of their young ones' photos. We studied eight families with young children to learn about their practices related to photos. We provide preliminary results from the field study and elaborate on three interesting themes that came out very strongly from our data: physical placeholders; family dynamics and values; and creative uses of photos. These themes provide an insight into families' perceived values for photo curating, displaying and experiencing them over a longer period. We provide future directions for supporting practices surrounding children's photos.

**Author Keywords**

Photos, domestic photography, children, HCI

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

**Introduction**

Domestic photography can be described as a combination of family narratives, identity, home entertainment and leisure [11]. In the case of families with young children, domestic photography plays a role both from an emotional and sentimental, as well as

practical point of views. Photos of young children are archived (in physical and online photo albums), personalized and displayed on different parts of homes to support emotional and reminiscence needs [4, 14, 15]. On the practical side, the work of Kientz et al. [5] has shown that continuous record keeping of children's photos starting from birth can be of great value when they are diagnosed with some disorder.

In recent times, the HCI community has seen a substantial amount of work on domestic photography: how households display [2, 12, 13], organize [6, 10] and share [1, 4] photos. In particular, aspects such as storytelling [15] and 'photo talks' [1, 4] are emphasized in different ways. Most of these studies implicitly involve the role of young children but very rarely provide an account on domestic photography with an explicit focus on young children. In this paper, we look at this relatively untouched aspect of domestic photography – practices surrounding children's photos. We believe that a detailed account of different curation and display practices in homes can lead to an understanding of parents' perceived values and of the care they like to provide to their children.

We provide the results of a qualitative field study involving eight families with young children. Using a combination of semi-structured interviews and guided home visits, we studied their current practices related to children's photos in their homes. Our aim in the study was to get an insight into their perceived value in dealing with these photos. For the sake of brevity, we present our results 1) describing collocated and offline curation and display practices, and 2) focusing on three main themes that played an important role in this type of domestic photography: physical placeholders; family

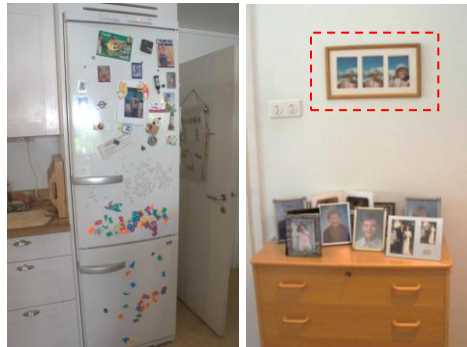
dynamics and values; and creative uses of photos. Our results, though consistent with previous studies [13, 3], focus on young parents' values and motivations in curating and displaying photos of their children. Our main intention is to identify themes and generate implications for designing digital photo sharing applications specializing at parents with young children.

## **Methodology**

We recruited eight families with young children in the Helsinki region of Finland. The recruitment was done keeping in mind variations of social dynamics (e.g. single mother, a family with an adopted child, a family with special needs child). The families consisted of 32 members in total, where the age of children varied from 1 year to 10 years, with an average of 5.5 years. We used a combination of guided home visit and semi-structured interviews with parents. In the guided home visits, one of the authors was accompanied by both the parents (in 3 cases, one of the parents) to discuss photos and photo related materials in their homes. We aimed to explore their photo storing, sharing and displaying practices in the home, focusing on different media, forms and reasoning they applied in doing so. In the semi-structured interviews, we asked questions related to their children's photos and the practices related to them. During the interviews, the parents were asked to provide examples from their printed photos as well as photos from their computers. The central aspect of this field study was to understand the values and motivations behind storing, sharing and displaying children's photos. The home visits and interviews were audio recorded, with some supporting notes and a large number of pictures were taken during individual sessions.



(a)



(b)

(c)

**Figure 1.** Photos on physical platforms: (a) a stair wall; (b) a fridge and (c) a dresser.

## Results

In the following, we describe our results in the form of three themes. While describing these themes, we will use some examples from the field and to protect the privacy of our participants, we will refer to them with a pseudonym.

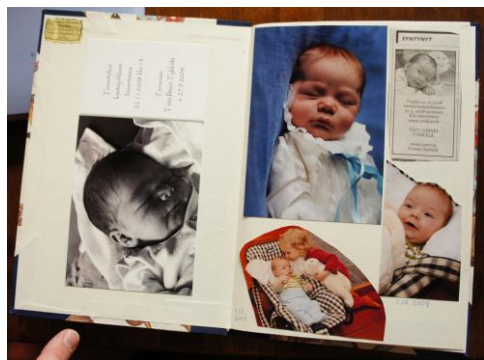
### *Physical placeholders*

This theme was commonly seen in all eight families, where parents used a varied set of physical setup such as living room walls, fridge surfaces, mantels, tables and shelves to show photos of their children (figure 1). The details, forms, choice of the location and persistence of photos varied. Daisy, a homemaker and a mother of two, gave us the following rationale for framing her daughters' photos in her living room walls: "I can obviously look at my daughters' photos on my computer whenever I want. But sometimes, I feel that I want to see my children closer. And photos of my children on the walls make a home 'the' home. Since I am at home most of the time, it makes the home look more familiar and not so empty. It also makes the walls look happier [laughs]."

The role of physical placeholders for photos in domestic lives is well covered in [2, 3, 13]. Van House [15] also reported how such photos can trigger storytelling and conversations. Here, we will cover this theme within the context of children's photos. Dedicated platform was one of the important and common patterns that we observed. Dedicated platforms are carefully selected setups that are used exclusively for children's photos. Figure 1a and 1c are the two examples of such dedicated platforms. Figure 1a is a stair wall full of photos of two children of Ann and Tim – both fulltime workers. Here, the photos of both children represent

different moods. All the photo frames are intentionally of different sizes and colors and in some photos close relatives can also be seen. This is an example where parents have shown equality and balanced importance to both children. Figure 1c is an example from another participant called Tanya. It shows a dresser on the top floor facing stairs that goes down to ground floor. A set of images of Tanya's only son is kept on the surface of the drawer and a photo frame is attached to the wall (in the red box). Explaining this setup, Tanya comments, "these are different photos of John [her son] that we received from his day care and school. It gives me a good feeling about how John is growing over the years." This photo setup was arranged in a way that whoever comes to the bedrooms from downstairs will see these photos. Tanya had kept less photos of John in the living rooms and other parts of ground floor, which shows her sensitivity towards privacy. In the same example (figure 1c), there is a set of photos framed on the adjacent wall, indicated with red box. These pictures, taken during a vacation trip, show three consecutive expressions of John, captured when he gave a surprised smile. Tanya commented: "it was a nice moment. I tried to capture John's expressions. In the first photo, he is serious and then he starts smiling when he sees me taking these photos. So, I thought it would make a nice souvenir from that holiday. I can always see his smiling face when I come upstairs."

Some of these placeholders were used as permanent displays of photos (figure 1a), some were temporary (Figure 1b) and some were *in-betweens* – with space to add or discard photos (figure 1c). Simon who lives with his wife and three daughters ended up storing some printed photos and albums in a closet since there was



(a)



(b)

**Figure 2.** (a) Photo album a mother created over three years. (b) A participant pointing to a photo of her own album her mother created 35 years ago.

just no extra space in the home for such photos. Another family that immigrated to Finland chose not to make many holes in their rented apartment walls: most of their photo were stored digitally.

#### *Family dynamics and values*

The second theme we identified was how the curation and display of photos in our participants' homes reflected their family dynamics and family values. In our study, out of eight families, four had more than one child. Parents in such families attempted to keep a social balance in terms of providing equal importance to the children's photos. Tanya, who lives with her husband and a son, had filed for adoption and was expecting another son from India. She had already started placing her adopted son's photo on her fridge and other places. She commented, *"I want to make sure that John becomes familiar with his younger brother Ravi [adopted son] before he comes to Finland. I tell stories about Ravi, when we are in the kitchen."* In this case, the photo of Ravi on the fridge triggered us to ask for such details. Similar to the observations of Taylor et al. [13], we found attempts to cherish relationships within a family. Single mother Ruby who lives with her adopted daughter has created yearly printed albums to capture even small moments of her daughter's life. Ruby has a closet full of her daughter's printed photo albums, with detailed annotations and comments. Ruby commented, *"I am nearly fifty now. For the time my daughter lives with me, I want to make sure that I capture as many memories of her as possible. Maybe when she makes her own family, she can carry these albums with her"*. Being a single mother, Ruby has devoted a majority of her off-work time to her daughter.

In many of cases, we observed that families created printed photo albums, capturing important events with relevant annotations. Ann who has a husband, a son and a daughter, made sure that she kept printed photo albums for both of her children. These albums looked like record keeping of her children with detailed annotations of photos and experiences related to them. She not only kept photos in her albums but also other important information about her children, such as a clip from newspaper announcement and child's growth information (weight, length, etc.). Figure 2a and 2b show the photo albums she created over the years. During the interview, Ann mentioned that keeping a photo album is their family tradition. Her mother also created a large archive of photos when she was young. In figure 2b, she is pointing to a photo, which shows an album that her mother created 35 years ago. To Ann, making photo albums was about creating legacy for the family generations.

We observed that some families attempted to educate their children with photos. Kat, who lives with her husband and two children, has made a collage of photos of their close relatives in her three-year-old son's room. In Finnish families it is very common to have god son or god daughter. All six Finnish families (the other two being immigrant families) had at least one photo of their god son or god daughter on display. We did not observe the issue of parental control, unlike Durrant [3], since in our study the families had much younger children.

#### *Creative uses of photos*

The third theme we observed showed a strong inclination to creatively utilize photos to support practical as well as playful activities in the household.



**Figure 3.** Ruby's fridge surface, showing different clips of her daughter's getups. The magnet roll used for such photos (right).

Diana has two young daughters aged 3 and 5. The older one was diagnosed with an early stage of autism when she was one. Her mother started collecting many photos and things related to her. Her belief was that such a record keeping could help in understanding her daughter's progress as well as discussing her case with the doctors if needed. She gave the following comments: *"Every morning when she wakes up, I show her pictures of all the family members and tell her 'this is momma, papa and your little sister'. I keep some of these photos at hand and show them to her whenever I feel like. I like to think that when she gets better, I can show her some of her own photos, what she was like and what she did."*

In a different example, we saw how a single mother Ruby uses the photos of her adopted daughter in a playful way. On her fridge's surface, Ruby attaches magnetic photos of her daughter. Figure 3 shows some of the magnetic photos of her daughter and herself. Interestingly, she has also used pictures of known characters (e.g. Barbie) and clippings of cloths, handbags and hats from magazines to creatively put different outfits on her daughter's photos. This is often done collaboratively with the help of her daughter and sometimes with close friends of Ruby. Ruby has a magnetic roll (shown in the figure), which she keeps at hand. She would make these magnetic photos by herself, whenever she finds some interesting image from a magazine or a website. Here is a short comment made by Ruby: *"We normally have fun with it. At one time, when she went to her bed, our au pair and I created a nice outfit for her. In the morning, when she saw it, she was pleasantly surprised. And we all had a good laugh."* To Ruby, this was a way to strengthen relationship with her daughter.

We observed several other examples where parents used photos of their children in sending out gifts. One family created a calendar using the photos of their two children, representing different events and activities within a year. This calendar was sent only to the grandparents. The father used an online service for editing the photos and for sending the calendar to the grandparents. In another case, a family printed a photo of the daughter on a coffee mug as a gift to a close friend. Similarly, photo books were printed using existing online services and sent as gifts.

### **Discussion & Future Work**

Our results show that collocated curation and display of photos remain important in a growingly digitally-mediated world. Our early results do provide specific insights into the *experiences* that are inherent into the practices of parents. The examples discussed in all three themes show the thoughtfulness and care parents put in, to curate and display photos in their homes. Our intention to do this kind of field study is explore new technological possibilities. However, we are aware that the empirical evidence and practices described in this paper may not be readily transferred to the digital domain. We propose to focus on the following two issues for our future work.

***Photo sharing 'by the rules'***. Sharing often is a very private matter: photos or photo-bearing objects are given to a very restricted set of relatives or friends and some photos are only on display in a 'closed' part of the house. When supporting photo sharing, the 'rules of the home' should be respected: acceptability of platforms may differ based on the context and history of the family. Family traditions should be acknowledged and supported in photo sharing and displaying. For

example, distant grandparents should be able to read stories about some photos via some kind of video chat. Family Story Play [9], a prototype developed by Nokia Research, can be a good inspiration point, which allows grandparents to read stories to their children.

**Educational and playful photo viewing.** Technology should support children's participation as well as parental control – the need for either or both can be context dependent. Using image and object recognition can also be explored to support educational aspects. If object, building or a person is recognized from a photo, the technology should be able to provide additional resources that educate children. For example, in a photos where Eifel Tower is recognized by image recognition, historical or popular facts can be provided from public sources (e.g. Wikipedia). Prototypes developed at Microsoft Research: Family Archive [7] and Wayve [8] can be seen as useful starting points where new ideas can be devised further by combining the photo archiving with playful elements.

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