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The daily digital practice as a form of self-care: Using photography for everyday well-being

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Abstract

Interest in the connection between involvement in digital communities and well-being has increased as these communities become more commonplace. Specific models of interaction that affect well-being have emerged; here, we examine one of those models, termed 'digital daily practice'. Digital daily practices involve a commitment to doing one thing – exercise, photography and writing – every day and sharing it online. Participants in these practices agree that they provide an unexpected benefit of improving well-being. This article makes an in-depth examination of one digital daily practice, photo-a-day, using a practice theory framework to understand the affordances it offers for well-being. We engage with the literature on well-being and self-care, critiquing its presentation of well-being as an individual trait. We present data from an ethnographic study including interviews and observations to highlight how photo-a-day as a practice functions as self-care and how communities are formed around it. Photo-a-day is not a simple and uncomplicated practice; rather it is the complex affordances and variance within the practice that relate it to well-being. We conclude that this practice has multi-faceted benefits for improving well-being.

Keywords

creativity, online community, photography, self-care, well-being

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Background

Digital daily practices, such as sharing a photo online every day for a year, are an increasingly familiar Internet phenomenon. These practices involve conducting a task or activity on a daily basis, and sharing it online with a community who are doing the same. Digital daily practices are innovative social networking movements, connecting interaction online with changes in real world behaviour. Various different activities can be adopted and built into a 'daily digital' pattern; examples include exercise (yoga or running), drawing, writing or taking a photograph. The commitment can be short-term (a monthly challenge, for example, National Novel Writing Month (NaNoRiMo), in which people aim to write 50,000 words of a novel in a month), medium-term (a year-long project, for example, a 365 photo project) or long-term (continuing indefinitely). On the surface, these practices present a simple formula for making a positive change and getting into the habit of doing something new. However, when people participate in them, the practices are experienced as more complex and contain unexpected challenges and benefits. One benefit frequently discussed by participants is that of improved well-being.

The overt aim of such practices is typically not to improve well-being, but those participating report that involvement does have this effect. In this way, digital daily practices operate outside a medico-cultural paradigm, but their effects can still be understood within a context of health behaviour change (Broom et al., 2012). Like many health behaviour change interventions, the public commitment to involvement – in this case sharing on the Internet – is integral to this practice (Holman et al., 2017). For many people, making oneself accountable through a public commitment is central to what makes it a shared experience. The pledge to do something on a daily basis is also critical to establishing a new way of doing, thinking or being. The aim is to make a positive change: to establish a new exercise routine, make time to write that novel and to be creative more often. However, as established in the literature on health behaviour change, making a sustained and meaningful change to thought and action is not a simple task (Cohn and Lynch, 2017). Viewing it as such ignores the complex relationships between practices, in which practices are deeply embedded in a wider nexus of other practices (Shove et al., 2012).

Using photo-a-day as an exemplar, the purpose of this article is to explore how people use a digital daily practice to enhance their well-being. Here the commitment is apparently simple: to take one photograph every day and to post it online. However, unpacking this practice and examining the affordances it offers to those who participate in it will reveal that it is complex and versatile. The complexity of choices (of photo theme, textual annotation and how the practice is carried through as a routine) means that photo-a-day is characterised by wide variation. Much research has been done on photography blogs and social networking, and photo-a-day aligns to some previously established ideas around connectivity and communication when sharing images online (Van Dijck, 2013; Hand, 2012). What makes photo-a-day different is some of the common factors it shares with other daily digital practices, including their effect on well-being. The public commitment to sharing one photograph provides an opportunity for daily interaction. Taking a photograph links with other offline activities, such as walking and observing,

that encourage a mindful engagement with the world. As this article will show, those who participate in photo-a-day identify a connection with improved well-being linked to this mindfulness. Self-care, community interaction and the potential for reminiscence were components of the practice that improved well-being. Photo-a-day practices have previously been examined as a form of reflection (Piper-Wright, 2013) and learning (Barton, 2012), but the relationship with well-being has not been fully theorised.

The article presents data drawn from an ethnographic study, which used online observations and interviews to investigate how people practised photo-a-day and threaded it through their daily routines. We take a practice theory approach to examine what constitutes photo-a-day, its emergence, relation to other practices and embedding in daily life. In doing so, we consider notions of self-care and engage with current debates which consider the nature of well-being. We move away from top-down impositions of a narrative of self-improvement and towards a conceptualisation of living well, or a self-constructed model of well-being. Our interest in photo-a-day is as a socio-cultural practice, not a psychological intervention, and while we draw on some of the literature around positive psychology, this is not central to our approach.

We chose photo-a-day practices as they are well-established and exhibit sustainability. While many participants in the research study began with something akin to a 365 project, taking one photograph every day for a year, there are examples of people taking and sharing a photograph every day for over 10 years. Blipfoto, a key photo-a-day site, has been running for over a decade and has around 4000 active users. The dedicated website 365project.org claims to have more than 160,000 members, and Instagram has over 1.5 million photos tagged #365 and #365project. These figures show that this is a popular social phenomena. More broadly, looking at other daily digital practices, over 480,000 were involved in NaNoRiMo in 2015, and 30 day yoga challenges on YouTube attract over 2 million views.

Conceptualising well-being

Well-being is a multi-faceted term, which has been described as elusive to define and 'undeniably complex' (Dodge et al., 2012: 229). Often conflated with other concepts such as life satisfaction, happiness or resilience, there are many models which try to outline what affects an individual's well-being (Dolan et al., 2008; Graham, 2011). These models examine what is required to have good well-being, often including characteristics like engagement, meaning, relationships and accomplishments as well as relevant skills and capabilities (Nussbaum, 2005; Seligman, 2011; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, one shortcoming of these models is their location of the capacity for well-being solely in the individual. Cieslik (2017) refers to this as 'fail[ing] to capture the relational nature of well-being and how often it emerges collectively, rooted in different domains in life as well as through our biographies' (pp. 67–68). Well-being is thus not a universal concept that can be quantitatively measured; it is experienced in relation to others and is not a static concept, in that it can change over time (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008).

For the purposes of this article, we take a broad definition of well-being. We are not concerned with making a categorical statement of what well-being 'is'. Instead we use

the term as a conceptual tool that highlights what is understood by the individual (their account of well-being) in relation to their social context, experiences and functioning. By using well-being as a concept, we are trying to move away from an understanding of mental health within a medical model and towards ideas of everyday well-being. Avoiding a medicalising discourse was important to our use of the term. Within the research, we did not want to define the concept for participants, instead asking for their own understanding of the term and then locating this within our knowledge of the discourses available to discuss well-being, including a medico-cultural paradigm. Building on research that examines experiences and interactions over time to reflect on levels of well-being (Bell et al., 2015), we similarly followed people and their photo-a-day practices to understand their relationship with well-being.

Taking a broad definition of well-being with relational and social concerns at its centre also allows for a critique of its uses in wider discourses. The tension between personal empowerment to affect well-being and the accompanying responsibility placed on the individual is reflected in the literature on health consumerism (Harris et al., 2010) and fundamentally sits at the heart of debates around subjective experiences, agency and structure (Blackman et al., 2008). The co-option of individualised accounts of well-being by political agendas has led to fierce criticisms of well-being and related concepts like resilience. Our recognition that these terms have been 'colonised by particular discourses' (DeVerteuil and Golubchikov, 2016: 145) – in particular, the discourse of neo-liberalism – allows for their use in a more holistic way, moving beyond economic and psychological conceptualisations and towards a social understanding of well-being, linked to the politics and ethics of care. In maintaining an awareness that perceptions of well-being occur within a social milieu and context in which actors both draw on and reproduce social structures, we shift from an account in which 'attitudes, behaviours and choices' are replaced by the 'habitual dimensions of interaction shaped by culture' (Holman et al., 2017: 5). An acceptance that this cannot be depoliticised is helpful in framing our position here.

Models of self-care

Within the health sector, self-care is typically associated with the self-management of long-term physical health or mental health conditions. There are two main framings of self-care: the first views self-care positively around a less paternalistic agenda that empowers patients (e.g. Barlow et al., 2002) and the second sees it more negatively as a potential replacement for service provision and a negation of responsibility for care (see Cullen, 2005; Fox and Ward, 2006; Rimke, 2000). More recently, self-care has been popularly adopted as a term to describe non-medical activities conducted with an awareness that to be empowered to act (and in particular, to activism) requires a level of inner resolve or resilience. Drawing again on Broom et al.'s (2012) construction of a medico-cultural paradigm, action is shaped by framing these techniques as an essential element of good mental health and well-being. This framing places self-care closer to the first anti-paternalistic discourse but resists a fully medicalised narrative and locates it within a paradigm of daily living. In this way, as will be shown in the results, photo-a-day performed as self-care for participants.

Using practice theory to understand photo-a-day

Pink et al. (2016) highlight the challenges of researching practices which contain elements of experiences, relationships and social worlds, all which are not tangible but are integral to interpreting the practice. One aim of practice theory is to look at processes and interactions that exist in everyday human life and to consider how they interrelate. This needs to be achieved with an awareness that individuals act within established teleo-affective structures and within a social unit of inquiry that is beyond the individual (Spaargaren et al., 2016). Practice theory centres on its use of a flat ontology and conflation of human and non-human actors, in common with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and post-ANT complexity theory. Shove et al. (2012) identify three component parts of a practice: meanings, competences and materials. Meanings are the aspirations and ideas around a practice; competencies are the skills and knowhow required to achieve it, including what Reckwitz (2014) terms as 'background knowledge' and materials are the physical objects that are needed to do it (Shove et al., 2012: 14). Here we use 'meanings' as per Shove et al.'s (2012) interpretation but also as a shorthand for a broader practice theory–led conceptualisation of common understandings. The meanings that people ascribe to elements of their practice are an amalgamation of their bodily and mental acts, understood within socially available discourses of what it is to do or say. These meanings are not always reflexive or rational and are always materially mediated (Schatzki et al., 2000). Practice theory's focus on configurations, or assemblages, provides a useful tool to look at the interlinked 'bundles' of activities and helps to explain the rhythm of practices – the ebb and flow of their use – which is particularly relevant for digital daily practices. Practice theory also encourages a focus on the emergence and persistence of practices, enabling consideration of how people were recruited to them, and how they maintain them and integrate them into their everyday life (Spaargaren et al., 2016).

Methods

Based on our use of practice theory as a theoretical framework, we took an ethnographic approach to data collection. Interviews were used to elicit many aspects of practices, especially when rooted in discussion of details of processes. Observation captured the detail of what people do and often forget to mention or see as too trivial to talk about and placed the practice as the central unit of analysis rather than the individual. Descriptive statistics of interactions and subjects were collected to analyse how each individual photograph had a role to play within the longitudinal photo-a-day practice. These methods of data collection produced a robust account of what participants did and how they experienced it. Without the observations, the interview data collected would not have given as much of a rich picture of how participants used photo-a-day within their lives. Taking this methodological approach helped to draw attention to how the practice had become ordinary, everyday activity for participants.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via an open invitation shared on social media, including via the 'friends of Blipfoto' Facebook page with over 6000 followers. A total of 33 people

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Participant	Gender	Approx. age	Geographic location	Platform	Length of project
Participant 1	Male	20	Wales	Instagram	>6 years
Participant 2	Male	50	England	Blipfoto	>2 years
Participant 3	Male	40	England	Flickr	1 year
Participant 4	Female	60	England	Blipfoto	>8 years
Participant 5	Female	50	Scotland	Blipfoto	>7 years
Participant 6	Female	50	United Kingdom (other)	Blipfoto	>2 years
Participant 7	Male	40	Scotland	Blipfoto	>6 years
Participant 8	Male	50	Switzerland	Blipfoto	>2 years

responded via social media or email. Three potential participants were excluded because they were not currently engaged in the practice. All others were provided with further information about the research. The first eight respondents to provide written informed consent were selected as a convenience sample. Review of the gender, age and website use showed that those selected to participate provided a fair representation of those who had initially responded to the call to participate (Table 1). Two participants disclosed a mental health diagnosis in initial recruitment, but this was not a criterion for inclusion or exclusion in the study.

Ethical procedures

A University Research Ethics Committee gave ethical approval for the research. For ethical reasons, the participants were asked to include details about their involvement in the research project on their profile or in comments online, giving those who had not consented an opportunity to ask questions or opt out of being a part of the observation. Identifiable details about other photo-a-day users who had not consented were not recorded, though regular patterns of interactions with consenting participants were observed.

Data collection and analysis

Participants were shadowed online by an observer for 2 months (within the period of October 2016–February 2017), who recorded what photographs they took, what text was added and how they interacted with others on the photo-a-day site. Observations were conducted weekly, and an observation framework was used to highlight areas of interest. The two observers had fortnightly analytical debriefs, in which experiences were compared and 'sensitising concepts' (Charmaz, 2006) were added to future observations. At the end of the 2-month period, the observer who had not been shadowing a participant conducted a further overview observation of the previous 2 months (a 'counter-observation' – see Figure 1) to triangulate perspectives and provide an element of inter-observer reliability (Gobo, 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). All observation field-notes and debriefs were audio-recorded and transcribed.
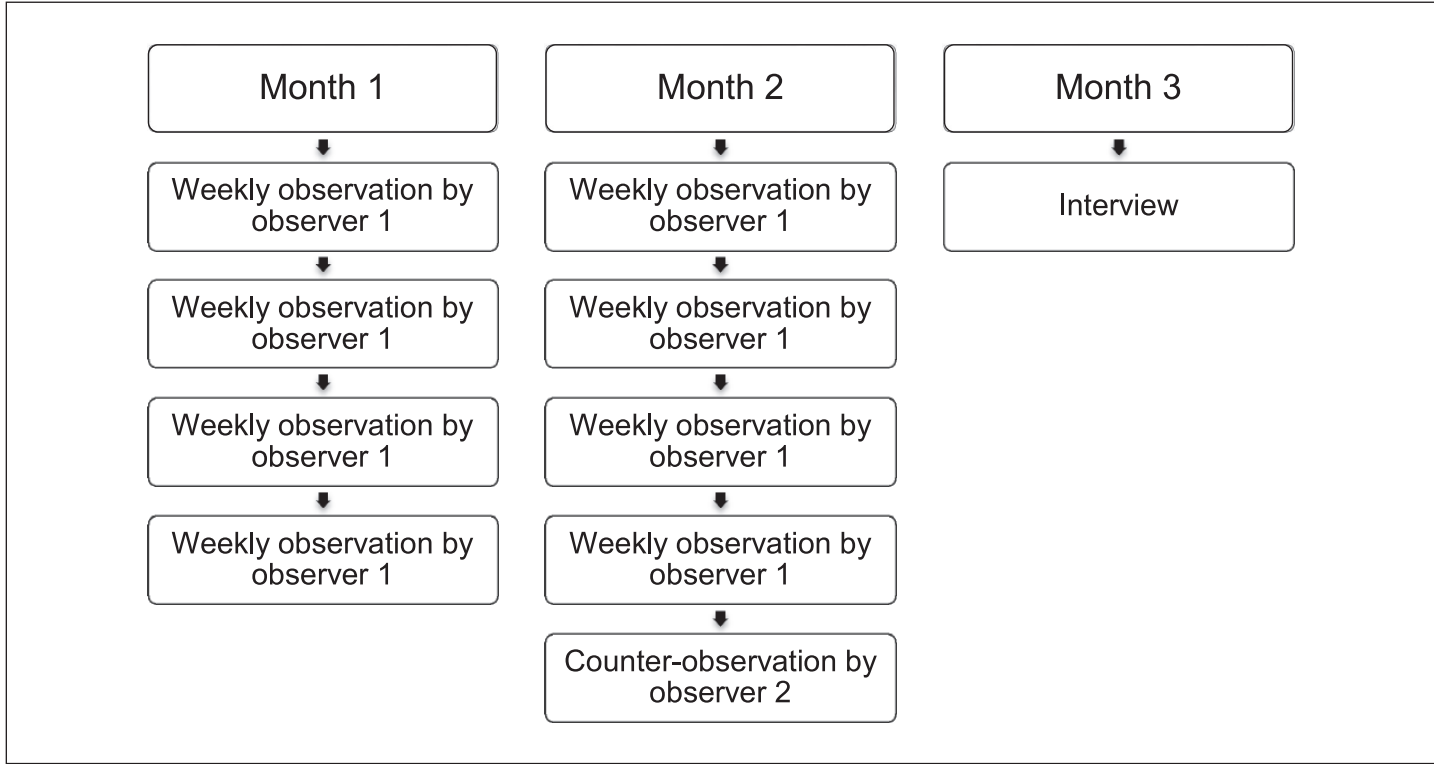
Figure 1. Typical observation timeline pattern for each participant.

At the end of the observation period, all eight participants consented to a semi-structured telephone interview that focussed on the meaning of their photo-a-day practice and experiences of conducting it. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Interview questions reviewed everyday activity in practice with participants. Stanczak (2007) emphasises how this shifts the locus of meaning away from the subject of the photograph for the observer, which could be seen as empirically objective, towards a recognition that a photograph does not just have one meaning but instead should be seen as a tool to tell multiple narratives.

Data analysis was based on the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). Using the ethnographic observations and interview data, initial open codes were generated with close attention paid to the aim to keep the practice as a unit of analysis. These initial codes were then organised into thematic categories, which provided a framework for processing all data using QSR NVivo 10 software. Key thematic categories included purposes/functions of the photograph, community activity, relationship with daily routine and connection with other practices. Both observers contributed to the analysis in audio-recorded debriefs, in which analytical concepts were discussed, and these debriefs were used as a further source of data. In drawing together the analysis, thematic categories were then further developed using a structure of materials, competencies and meanings to highlight how photo-a-day constituted a practice in relation to other practices observed in the ethnography and described by the participants in interview.

Results

Materials, competencies and meanings for photo-a-day

If the aim of practice theory is to focus on the emergence and persistence of practices, examining how they are integrated into everyday life, then photo-a-day presents a particularly interesting subject for examination. Many people who conduct the practice start out doing a defined 365 project – one photo per day for a year. Sometimes, the availability of materials (wanting to use a new digital camera) or a desire to gain new competencies (to learn to take better photographs) opened up this practice as a possibility. However, it was the meaning afforded to these practices and their linkage to other practices (leaving the house, mindfulness and community interaction) that enabled the persistence of the practice and was seen to have an impact on well-being.

In photo-a-day practices, the material structures that need to be in place are: the device used to take the photograph (camera, tablet, camera phone, etc.); the website used to host the photographs, which also provides affordances to write about the photograph and interact with other photographs and the referent of the photograph itself – the subject, object or signifier that the person is representing in the photograph. Although these structures needed to be in place, participants used them flexibly, some taking a photograph and writing a long, directly connected text and others writing minimal text or leaving the connection between the text and image implied. The competences required are the ability to take photographs, to upload them to the site, to write about and share them and to engage with others who participate in the practice. The meanings, as defined above, are multiple, varied and integrated into other practices. These meanings are, it can be argued, what sustained the practice.

Research participants could identify an initial aim of taking part in photo-a-day, which had developed as they had continued with the practice. These motivations were quite diverse and not typically initially connected with improving well-being. For some participants a change in life circumstances, such as going to university, taking time out from work or retirement, prompted a desire to document their days:

> I […] stopped working, not retiring, but I took time out. During this time out, I thought, 'OK, how shall I record my days; I want to be much more mindful about how I spend my time now'. Because I didn't have the company, the corporate structure anymore, for a certain period, and that's why I started basically doing it. (Participant 08)

This quote demonstrates one of the ways that photo-a-day is different to other photoblogs or projects: it implies that photo-a-day meets an identified need for structure. Changes in personal circumstances that are seen within the literature to potentially have a negative impact on well-being, such as increasing loneliness or isolation, were seen to be mitigated by involvement in the practice and its associated community.

Some participants spoke about how the practice unexpectedly became integrated into daily life. In an interview with participant 07, the internalisation of this practice became very clear as the interviewer referred to the photo project:

> It's funny, because you talk about it as 'the project' … To think of it in the terms that it has become such an engrained part of what I do every day that I don't even think of it as being, 'Oh, that's my Blip project'; it's something more fundamental. (Participant 07)

The description of photo-a-day as 'something more fundamental' demonstrates that the affordances of the practice had extended beyond the initially articulated meanings. The sustainability of a practice, according to Shove et al. (2012), rests on its ability to provide 'internal rewards' for participants, have a symbolic anchoring or significance (i.e. it can be identified with a previously understood meaning or practice) and to be connected to other practices. Looking at photo-a-day from the perspective of those undertaking it shows that though the internal reward is often the taking of a 'good' photograph, it is anchored in concepts like keeping a diary or record. Participants identified walking and getting outside, mindfulness, seeking different experiences, reflecting on daily life and community interaction as linked practices.

Photo-a-day as self-care

Photographs had meanings and functions within the practice that related to their competencies and material structures, demonstrating the complex assemblage of the practice. This complexity was also where benefits for well-being were identified by participants. Participant 03 identified his use of photography as a form of self-care:

> Photography has been quite good for me over the years because I think it forces me to look at the world again. And also there's a postural thing. If you're only looking down, when you're depressed and hunched over, it encourages you to look up or at least squat down and look at

something different and to stop and smell the flowers … So I find it to be a very versatile self-care technique. (Participant 03)

This embodied activity, mediated by the camera, helped the participant to develop an account of the practice having a positive effect on well-being. Other participants expressed similar sentiments. They presented diverse practices within photo-a-day that went beyond the capturing of an image:

It's really good to be able to take that five minutes every day to do something slightly creative, which I enjoy doing and I think is good for well-being. It's positive in that it gives me something to look for. Like I was saying earlier, with looking for novel experiences. I think that's very good for someone's well-being. So there's a lot that does contribute to it. (Participant 01)

Participating in the practice was renewing and refreshing. Taking a moment to be mindful and looking for something different or unusual in the day were seen as positive well-being benefits of the practice:

[My job] was a very highly stressful role … Oh, God. There were some days when I'd almost not stopped to breathe, you know what I mean … And just the thought: oh wait a moment, no, I'll stop and take a photograph of this insect sitting on my computer or something. Just taking a moment is very salutary I think. (Participant 05)

It's a starting point that you say, 'OK, let's be mindful of what I'm doing and what is happening'. What it does to you then is what I've noticed, you develop curiosity. You are much more aware of what you do and why you do it, because in the evening, you are telling the others what you've done, why you've done it, somehow. (Participant 08)

This approach, mediated by the photo-a-day framework, affected other practices. As part of the observation data, each photograph was classified according to subject and location. Many photographs were taken outside; for example, for participant 07, 76% photographs were exterior, often on a local beach or seafront. The idea that the natural environment has 'salutogenic' or health-giving benefits is widely discussed in the literature on therapeutic landscapes (Bell et al., 2015; Gesler, 2005). Going beyond this idea of therapeutic landscapes, Bell et al. (2015) usefully talk about therapeutic experiences. The task of conducting photo-a-day led people to take more exercise (e.g. going for a walk to get a photograph), engage with their environment (natural and urban) and gave a sense of purpose, competence and achievement:

It encourages me out of the house sometimes when I could just sit on my backside with a cup of tea. I'll think maybe I'll take a walk down on to the seafront and before I know it I'm two miles along the coast. And that could be something that I wouldn't do if I hadn't an object. When I go out for a walk I like to have an object in mind and I've always got the camera. It's like having a dog, you know, you don't look odd if you've got a camera or a dog. (Participant 04)

Having the material object of the camera as a justification for seeking well-being–promoting activities was a positive aspect of the practice. Mindfulness and engagement

with the world could be seen in participants' photographs and the text around them as well as their narratives about the images.

Photo-a-day as community practice

For many participants, this form of self-care was not an individualistic pursuit. A community of mutuality and support formed around this daily contact positioned around photography. For example, participant 02 spoke about finding support through sharing his photo narrative during his wife's illness and recovery. Participant 07 also spoke about how the practice of sharing photographs and talking through his grief was helpful following his mother's death a few years earlier. This connection between a creative practice and an online community is central to photo-a-day and builds on Crawford et al.'s (2013) concept of mutual recovery.

Much has been written about user-generated content, social networking sites and online communities, and drawing on this theoretical basis underpins understanding here (Dijck, 2013; Thumin, 2012). Community can be seen as a form of locality; a neighbourhood where people with similar mindsets come together, using the proximity of shared interests rather than the proximity of location as the basis. The notion of community was relevant for all participants, but its meaning was diverse. Within concepts of self-care and well-being, participants discussed how online contact helped them to manage loneliness and connect with established offline networks (family and friends) and also to meet new people with shared interests. The encouragement to connect on a daily basis, provided by the structure of photo-a-day, was about taking a moment for the self, as described above, but also sharing this moment with others. Several participants had taken early retirement and found that the contact established via photo-a-day replaced some of the daily office chatter that they missed:

> There's the banter in the workshop or the office or the place where you work. There's dealing with different people's days… if somebody has had a bad day they talk about it. You have that experience of sharing your day with other people and hearing other people's news. When you're not doing that anymore either you're retired or you're working in a solitary environment then you don't have that experience. And perhaps [photo-a-day] offers that … Because I'm having conversations with people that I would perhaps have had in the workplace. (Participant 02)

This view was also echoed in participant 04's perspective on her interactions with other people:

> If it was just a photo site putting a picture up and a title I would probably have dropped out within a month or two. But it was the conversations. That's when you realised that it was something different and that was possibly at least as important as the photograph that you were taking. It could be a rubbish photograph but if somebody commented on it, it made it worthwhile. (Participant 04)

Within the practice, an idea of mutuality is included: the practice did not just depend on taking your own photograph or on commenting on other people's photographs, it was

usually a reciprocal practice when it was seen to have an impact on well-being. However, participant 06 also discussed the negative impact this need for reciprocity had had on her well-being at one point in the past:

> At one point it became a real focus for me … You think I want to get so many likes and then you realise 'actually calm down. It's just blip[foto]. It's just a bit of fun'. […] And I found it really hard actually, with all the commenting on other people's journals. Because that's a big part of it as well and it can take up an awful lot of time to look at everybody's things every day. So I didn't want that to be my focus all the time. (Participant 06)

Being open and sharing photographs and narratives was integral to photo-a-day for many of the participants, and this contributed to its persistence over time. Building a genuine connection with other people required honesty and what participants perceived to be an authentic self-presentation. This openness was not always intimate. Meanings could be hidden, or understood only by the photographer and not visible to the audience, within the pictures or the text around them, and a beautiful photograph could represent a terrible day. But the invitation to share someone else's experience was a crucial draw in embedding the practice and its relationship to well-being.

Community did not hold the same meaning or relevance for all participants, though the element of public commitment always seemed to be central. Participant 01 discussed how he had started out doing a 365 project for himself, storing the photographs but only sharing some of them for many years, then decided that he would move his photographs into an open online site and use the practice to stay in touch with family and friends. During the 2 months we observed his photographs, 282 different Instagram users had interactions (likes or comments) with participant 01's photographs. Some of this interaction, it was confirmed in interview, was with family and friends who used photo-a-day as a method of keeping in touch.

Another participant, 03, used his photo-a-day practice differently again: he did not write about his photographs and gave each a number not a title. When he described his practice, it centred on being a personal challenge but it was still important to make this commitment public and to share photographs. Within his practice, he did also sometimes share a photograph with a broader audience, adding it to a popular Flickr daily group:

> But that was one of the photos which was genuinely I think – not a beautiful photo – I would tell you I consider all of these to be snaps. I took them with a phone. But that was one where actually people will enjoy that. People will take something from that. People will think, you know, I should get my camera out and take another picture today. So for me that was one that I think really I wanted to share. (Participant 03)

This sharing was a form of co-creating well-being in an online community setting. For most participants, the community was formed via a hybrid of photograph and text, and (unlike participant 03) the interactions played a central role in establishing the practice as a persistent one:

> Connections with other people and sharing things, and so being able to put things out there and then get a response back. And it can be some surprising people, as well, it's almost like having

a personal conversation but with a lot of people at once, that sounds a bit odd. I've found you can be saying these things and then different people will react back to them. And yeah, it gives a sense of connection, which helps well-being. (Participant 07)

In this way, community engagement was formed via the interrelated elements of the practice, and sometimes the text was unrelated to the photograph and generated conversation. Both participant 02 and participant 07 sometimes talked about politics and wider issues that were unrelated or loosely related to the photograph itself. For participant 05, who broke her arm during the observation period, the photographs needed to be explained using the text, and the reaction from the community rested on their ability to follow this narrative and tolerate a series of what participant 05 called 'boring pictures' while her activity was limited.

Rather than the photographs standing alone, the text was used to provide personal narratives, reminiscences and explanations of repeated images (taken of the same place or item at different times of the year) that demonstrated why the photograph had been chosen. Often, as participant 04 implies above, the photograph did not have to be 'technically excellent' to be interesting or to provoke conversation. However, technical excellence was still a goal for some participants in the research. Participant 06, for example, spoke about the enjoyment she got from this aspect of her photography and how being on the 'popular' page of Blipfoto (which provided access to photographs that had been 'most liked' recently) provided recognition for the improvements that she had made. Looking back on photographs provided another aspect of the practice that could be used for well-being.

Photo-a-day as reminiscence and reflection

Back (2015) argues for the examination of everyday life and practices with a recognition of the temporality within life. His work on the seasonal rhythm of daily life resonates with this exploration of photo-a-day, as one of the key aspects is its temporality. The daily nature of the practice motivates continuation, but also provides an opportunity to look back over previous days.

Reflection in photo-a-day has been explored in part in Piper-Wright's (2013) work. She examined how Blipfoto users used their photographs to document, examine and adopt a reflexive attitude towards themselves. Building on this understanding, we observe that participants in this research spoke about the connection between reflection and well-being. In an interview, participant 03 emphasised the complexity of this reflection. During the observation period, he had undergone a personal crisis and though he kept going with his photo-a-day practice, he found this tough. In discussion, he found that though looking back reminded him of this difficult time, it also helped him to reflect on change. He had survived the darkest days, and there were elements of light and colour in his photographs, giving moments of brightness:

As I reflect on this, it was probably an opportunity to perhaps add some colour to some of those days which were dark or to show that those days, many of them had good things in them. However bad I felt at the time they had something. Every day has got something … It's to find the good thing in the day for me. (Participant 03)

Reminiscence could be a reminder of recent events, an opportunity to look back over the previous month or year or seen as a record for the more distant future; all were seen as having an effect on well-being. Participant 01 currently benefitted from looking back over his photographs, whereas for participant 08, the aim was a record for the future:

> If I'm ever feeling down or something it's nice to be able to scroll back and see good memories. You know, the photos I've taken will have a positive memory attached to it even if it's something as simple as I had a really lovely half an hour for lunch sitting outside the [location] and was feeling really relaxed. (Participant 01)

> I do it more for a time when I really will have forgotten about what I did and then it's kind of new again. [Interviewer] So you can see yourself looking back over it in years to come? [08] Yes. I'm now at the age of 50 plus, so I probably have about 7,000 days to live, I want to be mindful about it. If you talk about 20 years or 25 years, it sounds a lot, but when you convert them to days, it becomes much more time-driven: you spend every day once, so it makes me mindful, and I know that at some point of time, I will get old, and then I want to look at it. (Participant 08)

These three meanings of photo-a-day – as self-care, community practice and reminiscence and reflection – connected it with well-being and demonstrated why it was embedded as a practice.

Discussion

Photo-a-day presents an example of what Pink et al. (2016) refers to as 'accompaniment' or 'co-presence'; the way that an object (in this case, a camera) is available to a person at all times and affects their experience of everyday life. The concept frames the idea of digital devices or objects being ubiquitous or permanently present. We take this further to suggest that in this case, it is not only the digital technology that accompanies but the ethos of the practice of photo-a-day itself. With an aim to take one photograph per day, the practice is co-present with the person as they go about their daily routine. Photo-a-day practices vary, showing how people used the fixed framework of photo-a-day in different ways to address their needs. Gauntlett (2011) positioned the tools that are available to people to be creative (such as a camera) within a context in which they do not have a fixed or predetermined meaning; instead they are an open opportunity.

Photo-a-day practices perform interlinked online functions enabling social networking and sharing user-generated content (Van Dijck, 2013). Photo-a-day's primary purpose is to generate user content in the form of photographs, but the shape of the practice enables social networking and connects it, for participants, to the experience of improved well-being. Within the literature on online communities, much has been written on the role of identity and kinship. Chayko (2002) refers to these ideas of online community as sociomental bonds; those friendships that are not located in real life but provide a sense of connection across distance and time, creating community. Self-presentation and reciprocity are critical concepts here, with an expectation that participants had to present their photographs to enable them to play an active part in others' lives (Gauntlett, 2011; Thumin, 2012).

Managing the perceived demands of the community was important to ensure a positive, not negative, impact on well-being. However for most of the participants, alliances or social bonds were formed beyond the photographs; photographs were 'mediated dialogues' which developed the community (Gómez Cruz and Ardèvol, 2013).

Connecting these ideas of online community with well-being moves the discussion of practice away from an individualised context of self-care and towards a notion of a dynamic and mutual practice. This understanding of self-care practices draws on similar arguments to DeVerteuil and Golubchikov's (2016) reframing of resilience as an active, dynamic and sustaining awareness, rather than as static and individual. Photo-a-day can be seen to engage with this in three ways. First, it creates a community space, or 'commons', in which reciprocity and empathy are key. In itself, the posting of photographs becomes a community and also a resource for the community to draw on. Second, it encourages social relationships and builds relational capacity for well-being. Rather than being an individualistic process, there is the potential for well-being to be enhanced collectively in an empathetic context. And third, it is spatial, in that it encourages exploration of space and engagement with the 'real world' in its construction. Photographs need a subject, and for many of the participants in this research, that subject was to be found in a wider context of community and nature.

For some participants, this was reflected in the community that formed around these photographs – the office chatter and everyday interaction connected with them. For others, it was much more about the challenge to the self and the discipline of taking a photograph every day. Highlighting these differing aspects demonstrates the complexity of the practice, with elements that people assemble in a way that is useful to them. However, this impact on well-being was not universally positive, with some participants sometimes discussing feeling overwhelmed by the community.

One of Cieslik's (2017: 44) critiques of positive psychology, drawing on Furedi (2004), Davies (2015) and other critics of a 'therapy culture', is that it offers 'superficial tips that fail to support genuine well-being'. Using our earlier discussion of self-care, we should clarify that it is not our intention here to suggest that the daily digital practice – and in particular photo-a-day – should be positioned as one of these 'superficial tips'. If the complexity of practices is ignored, there is a danger that their potential value as a practice is negated. Here, participants self-identified the rich diversity of the practice that led them to consider it as self-care. While this demonstrates the value of everyday, small-scale activities for this group, it is not to say that these activities are available and valuable to all as an 'off-the-shelf' intervention for health behaviour change.

Strengths and limitations

Using ethnographic observations supported by in-depth interviews allowed both understanding of practices and exploration of their meaning to participants. Though this article uses a small self-selected sample of participants, its findings are supported by a previous study with different participants (Cox and Brewster, 2018). However, it is only representative of the experiences of participants who already identified with the idea that photo-a-day did have an impact on their well-being. Further research should explore

'failed' projects, in which the practice was discontinued, to understand its meaning for others. There is also scope to examine the impact of other daily digital practices using a similar methodological approach.

Participants in this study talked about photo-a-day as empowering. Yet, we would need much more data about the context of these individuals' lives to fully understand how their expectations around well-being are socially constructed and how this shaped their experience. There are questions to ask around the equity of access to photo-a-day as a practice that need further research. While the smartphone has brought the technical requirements of photo-a-day to many, there is a sense in which the cultural and temporal resources to use photography in such reflective ways do not seem to be accessible to all. There are also questions to ask around the way that the sites hosting photo-a-day use participants' labour and data, though this was not something that troubled participants.

Examining the patterning of photo-a-day as a practice has enabled us to look at the influence that online communities can have in encouraging adherence to establishing a new behaviour. This may provide further insights into the design of new health behaviour change interventions. The flexibility of the model and the data provided here about how different users shape the practice for themselves rather than taking a 'one-size-fits-all' approach enables consideration of personalised preventive health-related activity. In particular, as exercise is already established as a daily digital practice, health behaviour change interventions related to increasing physical activity may be informed by the findings of this study.

Conclusion

We have positioned photo-a-day as a practice that supports improved well-being but do not mean this positioning to be read as a simplistic, mechanical intervention. Instead, we look at the practice within a revised schema for understanding well-being, in which small, person-led interventions may have a role to play in the preventive well-being agenda. Rather than saying that photo-a-day can be prescribed to improve well-being, by looking at it within the wider sphere of everyday life and via the lens of practice theory, we can think about the interlinked and complex nature of the practice. Its affect arises from the way people come to attach meaning to it and connect it to other practices. By definition, this is an active process of meaning making, in which a new conceptualisation of well-being emerges.

The well-being benefits associated with photo-a-day may be paralleled in other daily digital practices, suggesting that there is scope to consider transferable theoretical and practical outcomes of this research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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