

Tactile Photography Fotografia Tátil

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Abstract:

Although much of the previous work on mobile photography has focused on its role for visual communication in networked visuality (Van House et al. 2005; van Dijck 2007, 2013, etc.), the substantial proportion of mobile digital photography remains unshared. Visuality may not be a core practice to frame such photos practiced within wider practical contexts such as inscribing, personal archiving, carrying-with, and even being forgotten. To examine this less-articulated but pervasive phenomenon, this paper examines the sensitive aspect of mobile photography as an extension of debates regarding the tactile adoption of mobile media (Cooley 2004, Verhoeff 2012, Pink et al 2016, etc.). Based on ethnographic data with Japanese users, it explores how mobile media has affected photographic practices and a new visual culture, herein termed "tactile photography."

Keywords:

Photography; Mobile Media; Tactile; Un-shared; Visuality.

Resumo:

Embora grande parte do trabalho anterior sobre fotografia móvel tenha focado em seu papel para a comunicação visual na visualidade em rede (Van House et al. 2005; van Dijck 2007, 2013, etc.), uma proporção substancial de fotografia digital móvel permanece sem compartilhamento. A visualidade pode não ser uma prática essencial para enquadrar essas fotos praticadas em contextos práticos mais amplos, como inscrição, arquivamento pessoal, transporte e até mesmo serem esquecidos. Para examinar esse fenômeno menos articulado, mas generalizado, este artigo examina o aspecto sensível da fotografia móvel como uma extensão dos debates sobre a adoção tátil da mídia móvel (Cooley 2004, Verhoeff 2012, Pink et al 2016, etc.). Com base em dados etnográficos com usuários japoneses, explora-se como a mídia móvel afetou as práticas fotográficas e uma nova cultura visual, denominada "fotografia tátil".

Palavras-chave:

Fotografia; Mídia móvel; Tátil; Não compartilhado; Visualidade.

1 Introduction: the rise of mobile photography

In 1999, Kyocera, a Japanese manufacturer of electronics equipment, first introduced the camera-embedded mobile phone. The camera function was initially a subsidiary component for video calling. This meant that the lens was set facing inward for the primary purpose of capturing the caller during the video call. After observing that users preferred to use the camera as a tool for taking photos of themselves (rather than for making unpopular video calls), the company soon improved the awkward interface and shifted in the direction of having the lens face outward, which is definitely a more friendly set up for taking photos. Within a decade, mobile camera phone became the dominant popular platform for daily photography, making mobile photography undoubtedly one of most significant global media phenomena.

Given their active Internet connection, the use of mobile camera phone has transformed the role of photography. Numerous photos are now taken, saved, edited, and viewed within a single handheld device: the smartphone. People are not only taking a plethora of photos; they are also deliberately sharing them on the Internet. Social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram further encourage the use of mobile photography as a means of visual communication, self-identification, and social presentation. Mobile photography has changed the way photos are produced and circulated as well as the way they are aesthetically and/or socially evaluated and archived in personal visual reserves. In other words, mobile camera phones have practically transformed the life cycle of photography, and apparently, they have also brought about the transition of the ecosystem of visual culture.

2 The practical transformation of photography

Since Kodak introduced the snapshot camera in 1883, photography has been occupying an important part of people's social and private lives. As Batchen

(2001) noted, *vernacular photography* was neglected in historical accounts of photography, in general. While eminent works by professional photographers or photojournalists were praised and celebrated on the walls of museums and urban galleries, amateurish and regional photographic artefacts were silently performing their roles as decorations for private rooms or in family albums where they comprised a precious archive of personal memories. Their visual presentation might be relatively crude and less refined in terms of photographic expression. Nevertheless, those pictures played an irreplaceable role in individuals' lives.

As Sontag (1979) highlighted, the success of vernacular photography was also about the establishment of the social ritual of taking photos together as well as reviewing them as shared memories. In the 70s, the price of snapshot cameras fell to the point where ordinary families (at least, in developed nations) could purchase one for use at home. With the rise of the middle class and growing interest in aesthetic expression, photography became a popular hobby, enjoying its decades-long position as a 'middle-brow art' (Bourdieu 1965) for mass social consumption.

The advent of digital cameras and their growing engagement with social networks dramatically expanded the social circumstances of photographic image use. For example, Van Djick (2007, 2013) reads digital photography as a mediation tool for building social memories and one's identity; one can *draw a self* in cyberspace in order to establish and maintain one's personality in a visual form. For her, the visually mediated memories in online, which frequently surpass offline lives, are crucial ones in the collective formation of network culture. Because photography became a synonym for personal identity in the digitised world, people grew more conscious of gaze in virtual spaces and responded by taking pictures for sharing more than ever. For Lee (2010), the role of digital photography is necessarily discussed in a wider range of social context; it no longer merely serves family rituals and the creation of personal memories, but also 'constitute[s] a part of spatial imagery and contribute[s] to sharpening and defining people's perceptions of the realities' (p. 274).

Since digital photography embraced smartphones as a new portable, the social and cultural circumstances of visual practices encountered another turning point. The smartphone consolidated the procedure into a single device (minus the printing; also, digital images are more easily printed, too), dramatically reducing the overall costs and practical burdens. In the past, taking pictures was not a simple practice; it involved not just the act of taking the photographs but also required follow-up actions such as developing the negative film and making prints. The latter process was usually conducted at a specialty store for photography and was both costly and time consuming.

The democratisation of mobile camera phones is also responsible for streamlining the process of managing visual output by enabling the saving, organising, reviewing, and even editing of photographic images on a single device. Even by providing an easy gateway for uploading photos on the Internet, smartphones literally serve as one-stop centres for visual practices. Given mobile media's proximity to users' bodies, there is easy access to digital cameras; this fostered photo-taking as a ubiquitous practice, making photography one of the most remarkable features of the mobile media phenomenon.

This convenience, however, resulted in an unexpected consequence: disenchantment with the myth of photography. People no longer impart a special meaning to the act of taking pictures; rather, they just scroll and flick on their handheld screens to engage in visual production. This means that a large part of mobile photography will occur without the ritualistic choreography of the 'say cheese' moment.

Owing to the fact that many psychological and practical barriers to photographic practices have been removed, the subjects of and occasions for photography have diversified. Smartphone users often open camera applications to capture images of scenes that are neither particularly memorable nor visually impressive. For example, mundane happenings such as daily dining fare, routine activities, and small excitements during the course of common events are, nowadays, frequent subjects for mobile photography whereas, in the past, when photography required more effort, such subjects would not have been considered

‘photo-worthy’. The symbolic meaning of photography has, accordingly, been diluted with daily items and banal objects making commonplace appearances in personal photography. Mobile media have actually affected the impulses and motivations that trigger picture-taking, bringing about a new mode of personal photography. It is *more habitual than ritual* and should be examined *not only in terms of sociality but also in terms of privacy*.

When considering the practical transition of photography, it is necessary to ask: How has the rise of mobile camera phones actually affected the impulses and motivations behind picture-taking? How does the everydayness of mobile photography create a different sense of the embodied relationship to visual production? This study will interrogate the private and banal nature of mobile photography and attempt to distinguish its practical mode from previous technology.

3 Related previous works

In previous discourse surrounding mobile photography, the expanding social roles of visual communication and visibility have dominated the debate. While the impact of a virtually networked society has become more influential and extensive, mobile photography as a tool for visual creation and social sharing has gained greater attention and has been argued widely (e.g., in Kato et al. 2005; van House 2005; Villi 2011). Expanding on this logic of sociality linked with growing visibility, Jurgenson (2019) argues how the advent of the ubiquitous camera (smartphone) brought about new visual creativity as a continuing part of sharing culture on the Internet.

Sociality is an undoubtedly important aspect for mobile photography. Yet, it does not explain every aspect of its popularity. A considerable number of photos remain stored on any user’s smartphone since not all the photos on a mobile device go social. Some are saved for later review while some are transmitted to other devices and others are to be lost someday. It may be necessary to pay attention to

the substantial proportion of these ‘leftovers’ in order to fully grasp the overall circumstances of mobile photography.

Meanwhile, the omnipresence of mobile camera phones paradoxically intensifies the mundane and invisible nature of photography. Digital snapshots are literally everywhere as they never were before; not only are mobile media filled with photographic images, so are mass media and social networks. Additionally, everyday communication cultures occupied by photographic artefacts that create a unique contingency (Larsen and Sandbye 2014). Now, photography is a natural part of our lives and our social interactions and is also a banal and unexciting component of a versatile daily-use device. In this regard, as Gómez Cruz and Lehmuskallio (2016) address, digital photography needs to be interrogated *as a part of everyday life*.

Against the backdrop of mainstream discourse concerning visual sociality and shared creativity, this phenomenon might remain relatively obscure. In terms of technological affordances in everyday life, the role of digital photography is not solely found in the act of visual communication and sharing; instead, it is about the domestication and appropriation of visuality within one’s private context.

Based on the perception problem described above, this study will temporarily reserve the frame of social visuality and attempt to examine how mobile media and the subsequent uses of photographic images have affected people’s visual practices in everyday life. It will focus on the material and sensory aspects of mobile photography as a way to approach its practical dynamism in private and personal contexts. As a form of defiance against the self-evident view of photography as a visual phenomenon, the rise of a new practical dimension of photography is worth noting, and it is herein termed ‘tactile photography’.

4 A methodological overview

This study is based on the results of an ongoing ethnography of Japanese users that I have been conducting for more than a decade with a particular focus

on relations between the materiality of mobile media and visual practices. The purpose of the study lies in an exploration of the personal appropriation of mobile photography in diverse private contexts. Thus, it will necessarily engage with people's personal stories and therefore requires a methodology capable of approaching private territory in an apparent mode.

In addressing this problem, I mostly relied on data derived from a series of educational workshops wherein media users were invited to voluntarily share their own experiences with mobile photography. Inspired by the concept of performance ethnography (Turner 1987, Denzin 2004) as well as its applied action research in the field of media literacy studies (Mizukoshi and Kim 2011), I designed the workshops to encourage participants to voluntarily recall personal memories and experiences with their own mobile media as a way of collecting private stories regarding the technology. Additional follow-up interviews were conducted as needed. Using this approach, I was able to access participants' user experiences in their own settings and acquire empirical data from a different perspective.

Mundane uses of digital technologies are often 'hidden' from observational research approaches because they are enacted and experienced by people when they are alone, especially during moments that they are unlikely to share with researchers (Pink 2015). Because of this, the workshop approach allowed me to improve my understanding of the private issues related to the sensory appropriation of mobile media use. Accompanied by long-term fieldwork on the use of mobile media, these stories provided a useful entryway to the unspoken (either intentionally or unconsciously) territories of user experiences.

Famous for its early adoption of mobile photography (Kato et al. 2005), Japan provides an excellent field for observing the social and cultural transformations that are inspired by new technology. I have been employing this action-research scheme in Japan since 2009. During the course of its execution, I worked with more than 150 users from diverse backgrounds. At the initial stage of the research, mobile media practices, in general, were the focus, and I gradually realised that the act of photo-taking played an important part in reconciling the

medium to people's daily rhythms. Because the research aims at the personal and private rather than the visual and social aspects, I concentrated on the following three questions related to the personal appropriation of mobile photography:

- As it pertains to taking pictures: What is the exact motivation for taking pictures with a mobile phone rather than using other camera equipment; and how, from a user's perspective, does mobile photography differ from other photographic practices?
- As it pertains to archiving pictures: How do users manage their visual archives in mobile media, and how do they decide which ones should go public, which should be saved, and which should be deleted?
- As it pertains to looking at pictures: On what occasions do users revisit mobile visual archives and how do they post interpretations of each picture?

My concern was not with a quantitative generalisation with respect to mobile photography but with the revelation of the personal and private aspect that has been frequently omitted in the conventional frame; therefore, from the next section on, I will describe focusing on the unspoken aspect of the mobile photography phenomenon rather than on the general trend of user behaviour.

5 The unspoken aspects of mobile photography

5.1 Forgotten photos: when smartphone photographers never look back

Among the thousands of photographic images stored on personal mobile media devices, only a handful is likely to go public either on a social network or by being shared within a relatively small, trusted circle of acquaintances; however, many others remain on the medium, waited to be looked back on. Lister (2014) notes that a massive portion of the personal photography that inhabits the Internet goes without being viewed amidst the era's tsunami of digital images; this suggests that 'being overlooked and rarely looked at' is one of the evident characteristics of digital visibility. Since

mobile photography became a universal practice, the same applies to people's personal archives (stored on mobile phones) in which plenty of mobile photography is produced only to be overlooked. For example, a workshop participant made the following comment about her visual archive:

I looked into my visual memory after an interval and found many unfamiliar photos. I have no idea why, when, and where I took those photos. For example, did I take the photo of my eye because it was swollen, or because make-up was done nicely? I am surprised that I am actually carrying so many unknown images in my mobile phone (female, 21, Photo 1).

Photo 1: female, 21



Many photos are destined to be forgotten since they are never revisited after they are taken. A workshop participant who was carrying a funny photo of himself with friends in a state of drunken excitement confessed that he remembered the scene, but it was hard to recall why he had wanted to take a photo of such an embarrassing moment. He said:

I take photos at the moment that I feel are entertaining or memorable. But when I look back after days, I often question myself about why I took those pictures. Outside of the exact moment, photos simply lose their meaning (male, 21).

In many cases, photo-taking motivation either arises from an emotional urge or is accoupled with an atmosphere that incites an access to mobile camera. Another workshop participant (male, 22) said that he took a particular photo because he wanted to *ride on a mood in the moment*; he went on to explain that

the meaning of photography would be obviously diluted after that moment had passed. The performance of taking a picture was, indeed, itself the purpose of photography. Mobile photography's quality of being 'easily forgotten' may not be due merely to the surfeit of photographic images, but rather, it suggests that the practical motivation for photography has been changing.

Another participant (20, female) confidently noted that *the meaning of mobile photography lies in its meaninglessness*. As a small form of reinvigoration intended to combat everyday boredom, mobile photography can be a playful performance of creativity in a context that contrasts the conventional understanding of photography as a ritual of visualisation. Smartphones automatically save pictures unless a user intentionally deletes them. So, it is common for ordinary people to carry thousands of photographic images on their mobiles, many of which have never been looked at again since they were taken. Against the overwhelming volume of discourse on social media and visibility, insiders' narratives are pointing to a different direction; that is, mobile photography is not only about the growing enthusiasm for photo-taking as a hobby as well as an impetus for social visibility, it is also about the dilution of the symbolic meaning of a 'photo-worthy' moment. The ubiquitous existence of digital cameras and the quantitative explosion of visual practices combine to reveal a new condition of photography: *forgotten images that are never looked back at*.

5.2 A visual record

I took a screenshot of a bus schedule for the campus, and actually I revisit quite often. I sometimes took a picture of the whiteboard in a class instead of making a note. Photography is a visual reference for me. (female, 21, Photo 2)

Photo 2: female, 21



Workshop participants frequently mention that they are more likely to take pictures instead of taking notes. Since the advent of the mobile camera phone, it seems quite common to carry photographic images of bus and train schedules, lecture notes, street maps, posters, and so on. The motivation for these sorts of visual practices is purely for reference, suggesting that they are no more than a visual shorthand, representing neither aesthetic or expressive intentions nor any desire for social sharing.

Another convincing example is taking a screenshot, which captures the contents of a user's own smartphone display as a means of visually recording that information. Screenshots, which are becoming an increasingly popular visual practice, play a reliable role as informational records as well as versatile tools for communication.

These are visual practices usually being excluded from discussions about mobile photography. Indeed, they may be more suitably categorised as digital information rather than photography in its traditional sense. Nevertheless, the

embodied process of creating such digital data exactly duplicates that of mobile photography; that is, opening a camera application, focusing a picture, and tapping a shutter on the screen. Thus, in terms of technological affordance and the embodiment of visual production, these visual images could apparently be included and argued as a phenomenon regarding mobile photography. Some mobile photography establishes its status as neutral, concise information in a digitalised visual format. *Absentmindedness* needs to be taken into account as an emerging visual culture brought on and frequently appropriated by mobile camera phones.

5.3 Carrying-with

I took a picture of a photo in order to carry it within my mobile. I feel comfortable and stable if I can keep it all the time, ready for sending to someone immediately (female, 21).

Another valuable aspect of mobile photography is tied to the representative advantage of mobile media: portability. According to workshop participants' narratives, one of the advantages of mobile photography is connected with the fact that images can always be carried with a user as digital data that is perpetually ready for immediate sending, editing, re-viewing, and sharing. Participants also mentioned that they felt emotionally stable when they had certain images in their smartphones as opposed to elsewhere. As a matter of fact, quite a few participants kept digitised photographic images of printed photos in their personal smartphones.

It may seem like a simple, trivial aspect; yet, this matter of *carrying-with* is a crucial one as far as materiality is concerned. It is no surprise to find that mobile media researchers have sought to diminish the cultural context of *carrying-with*, relegating it to the dimension of technological convenience (i.e., mobility and portability). However, this explanation provides only a partial understanding of the cultural and emotional commitment that is involved in these sorts of decisions. For example, a participant (female, 19) showed a digital photo of

Polaroid pictures (Photo 3) and said that she wanted to cherish her favourite photos within her daily device rather than shoving the physical Polaroid snaps in her desk drawer.

Photo 3



The desire for carry-with photography would therefore, regarding its sensibility at least, seem to involve an extension of an emotional intimacy that is conceived through the proximity of one's body to the device on which the image is stored. This tactile nature of the medium is crucial in establishing cultural affordance either practically or psychologically. Carrying-with can be read as visual culture forged by mobile media in this account, i.e., more precisely, through the culture of haptic intimacy that is conceived from an everyday relationship with the medium.

5.4 Tactile engagement

A workshop participant (20, female, a college student) showed a photo (Photo 4) that was slightly blurred and slanted with a close-up face in the foreground. In composition, this picture represents the typical *selfie* snapshot. She

flashed back to the moment she took the picture and made the following comment about the experience:

I unconcernedly took this photo on the way back home from a joyful hang-out with friends. Although it is a bit blurred and dim, it feels all the better for me reflecting vividness of the moment. It was like 'cutting off the space with one hand' while walking along and chatting with girls. I like it very much.

Photo 4



Photography has primarily been discussed in relation to visibility, and naturally, it has been considered in relation to the act of 'seeing'. A camera-holder peers into a viewfinder, checks composition, and releases the shutter to settle the image on film. In this process, visibility is unquestionably a main concern, and the practical role of hands is easily overlooked. However, for the workshop participant described above, the picture is not just about 'seeing' the scene in reminiscence, but also about 'touching' the screen of the smartphone while it is displaying the image. The rise of touchscreen smartphones has, by default, brought hands to the

foreground of media practice, giving tactile engagement a new frame for the act of photography. Touch is, therefore, a controlling pivot for photography.

As Verhoeff (2010) highlights, in the field of mobile media, the role of hands cannot be diminished to a subsidiary role. By focusing on the interactive touchscreen interface, she argues that haptic engagement as a form of interactivity and as an experience ‘[brought] together the aspects of agency—the doing—and the experiential—the seeing and feeling’ (p.163). For her, as long as it unfolds on the smooth surface of the medium’s touchscreen, visibility is inherently about interaction, standing by the intervention of the haptic at any time.

This logic of hybrid visibility is also applicable to mobile photographic practices wherein the role of the hands is not limited to pressing the shutter, but also extends to zooming in and out in order to adjust composition, confirming the frame, focusing on the object, etc.; these actions cast the hands in the role of constant director of the process of visualisation. Tactile engagement persistently outperforms the visual practice of ‘seeing’ in mobile photography.

While the convergence of the visual and the haptic is practiced and experienced in mobile photography, the notion of hybrid visibility allows for a useful distinction from traditional regimes of photography. This sensory convergence would entail the sense of spatial continuity between reality and the virtual display of duplicated images. Mobile photography would be the case as well, when mobile displays activates the sight as a croppable subject and generates a flat and continuing representation beyond a fixed frame. So, tactile involvement is about the practical and interactive coordination between physical spaces and digital information into a piece of visual presentation. As Farman (2012) argues, ‘[e]mbodiment is always a spatial practice’ (p.19). In contrast to a traditional conception of photography as a mediated memory beyond time, the hybrid nature of mobile visibility puts forward a practice that duplicates spaces, performance, and gesture.

6 The rise of tactile photography

This study has so far explored the everyday experience of mobile photography, especially in private and personal contexts. In so doing, it reveals that the practice of digitising, archiving, and consuming visuality is shifting, and calls for a careful investigation against a traditional viewpoint of visual culture. In opposition to the backdrop of discourse on sharing and visibility, users' private and personal experiences narrated completely different circumstances; from denial of visuality (*overlooking* and *forgetting*) to haptic cultural affordance (*carrying-with* or *touching*), there is an advocacy for mobile photography as a phenomenon that resonates with the physical, sensitive, and haptic domestications of devices rather than acting as a catalyst for the social and visual. How do we conceptualise the phenomenon that has been concealed under self-evident social visuality? And what is the cultural meaning of people embracing visuality in their private and sensory contexts?

Considering that the sensory and material dimensions are clearly the bases for these new practices, there may be much to learn from recent discussion on the tactile in mobile media studies. From the concept of the 'visual tactile' (Cooley 2004) to attempted 'tactile digital ethnography' (Pink et al. 2016), debates on a new sensitivity in mobile technology imply that the tactile deserves greater attention as a gateway for understanding mobile photography, which seems to be significantly affected by the portable, private, and digital attributes of mobile technologies. In the context of mobile media, Hjorth (2009) notes '[i]t is the touch of the device, the intimacy of the object, that makes it so meaningful' (p.243); this suggests that the cultural meanings of tactile practice might be beyond visual economy.

Despite McLuhan's (1964) provisional reflection that the sense of touch could be a centre of electronic media, the haptic has been a less articulated and under-argued field. In contrast to an obvious and perceivable sensitivity, such as the visual or the aural, the tactile tended to stay out of notice in terms of earning

scholarly interest. For example, Parisi (2018) criticises the winning operation of visualism in the field of media histories, claiming that the haptic might be an alternative approach for the enlightening of the experiential dimension of new technologies. According to him, the technologisation of touch has been a growing tendency in media histories; since the rise of the touchscreen interface, touch has become more distinguishable as a crucial axis for the bi-directional mechanism of user experiences.

As I have addressed elsewhere (2019), in the field of mobile media and communication studies, the tactile mode calls for an exploration not only in the dimension of interfaces and functional engagement with devices but also as an extensive gateway for generating understanding around emerging creativity. Here, I propose finding a new genre of the visuality fostered by the everyday condition of mobile technology: ‘tactile photography’.

The touchscreen interface, fine-tuning needs, and material intimacy built by mobile media are affected by and simultaneously affect the unfolding procedural creation of visuality. Haptics are part and parcel of establishments of mobile technology, which involve the constructive process of mobile photography in corporeal and affective dimensions. Thus, the notion of ‘tactile photography’ would benefit both the exploration of visual culture and mobile technologies as a frame for the emergent nature of multi-sensory and hybrid culture of media practices.

7 Conclusion: toward a hybrid visual culture

While technologies are increasingly versatile and multi-modal, as is typical of the smartphone, the integration of functions and convergence sensibility are becoming prominent phenomena in media experiences. In discussions of visual culture, the focus tends to be on visuality and representative roles of expression, leaving these changes relatively unexamined. For example, how has this multi-sensory and multi-modal technology affected our visual practices? How do we

grasp and describe this hybrid deployment of technology in terms of extension of visual culture and creativity?

In this study, I have suggested that we might be able to adequately grasp the phenomenon of converged creativity by supplementing the perspective of the haptic. My main concern here is not so much with the haptic process itself, but rather with the question of the new creativity generated by the merging of the visual and the haptic. Photography is ubiquitous now; however, this universality is not just about the extension of traditional qualities of photography, such as social memories, artistic visualisation, ritualistic archiving, and sharing. Whereas the explosion of the socially-networked visibility deserves in-depth discussions on the one hand, photographic practices are in the other hand stealing into our everyday lives and mundane pieces like blurred images, forgotten archives, visual information, screenshots, and many more hidden items. They are also the visibility that consists of the haptic culture, providing a new opportunity to reflect on our hybrid and cross-sensory media environments.

The exploration of the tactic also incites us to rethink the relationship between technology and creativity. Our everyday practices may merely be banal and unexciting performances in the presence of pre-arranged technological convenience. Nevertheless, a reflection on hybridity may lead to disillusionment as it regards technological progress and everyday visualisation, entailing an open question about the creativity of the digital age.

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