

Home curation versus teenage photography: Photo displays in the family home

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Abstract

In this paper we report an empirical study of the photographic portrayal of family members at home. Adopting a social psychological approach and focusing on intergenerational power dynamics, our research explores the use of domestic photo displays in family representation. Parents and their teenagers from eight families in the south of England were interviewed at home about their interpretations of both stored and displayed photos within the home. Discussions centred on particular photographs found by the participants to portray self and family in different ways. The findings show that public displays of digital photos are still *curated* by mothers of the households, but with more difficulty and less control than with analogue photos. In addition, teenagers both contribute and comply with this curation within the home, whilst at the same time developing additional ways of presenting their families and themselves online that are ‘unsupervised’ by the curator. We highlight the conflict of interest that is at play within teen and parent practices and consider the challenges that this presents for supporting the representation of family through the design of photo display technology.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and motivation

In recent years, HCI researchers have given considerable attention to digital photographic practice as a central feature of contemporary home life in Anglo-American societies (Frohlich et al., 2002; Crabtree et al., 2004; Kirk et al., 2006). This attention has been motivated, in part, by a paradigmatic shift in the HCI field to develop more socially informed understandings of computing’s role in the domestic domain (Crabtree and Rodden, 2004; Taylor and Swan, 2005) and, in part, by the mass-market uptake of

digital photography (Chute, 2003) along with the proliferation of digital capture devices and photo-management tools for the desktop computer (Frohlich et al., 2002). Approaching the study of domestic photography from a social psychological point of view raises the issue of how different members of a family are adapting to new digital technology and the effects of that adaptation on family life. We take up this approach here by looking specifically at what has been called the ‘apparent democratisation’ of family photography by Shove et al. (2007). This refers to the possession of digital cameras and camera-phones by more and younger members of the household, and increasing access to downstream tools and services for photo manipulation and sharing (i.e. ‘photoware’, after Frohlich et al., 2002). In this context, we have been concerned to understand the ways in which traditional practices of personal and family representation are changing with the digitisation of family photography.

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For the purposes of this discussion, we define family photography within the ‘home-mode of communication’ that Richard Chalfen has previously outlined (1987). Within the conventions of home-mode, the tools and practices of family photography have been more accessible to adults than their children and the mother of the household has assumed the role of ‘family chronicler’, responsible for creating and documenting representations of the household-at-large (Chalfen, 1987; Rose, 2003). However, digitisation has signalled photography’s accessibility to the younger generations of the household. Developments in digital camera technology have coincided with development and proliferation of networked personal mobile devices, leading to the availability of photographic tools, primarily camera-phones, to juniors and especially older teenagers (Kindberg et al., 2005). This is coupled with developments in Internet technology, promoting use of online photo-sharing applications on social networking sites (Ames and Naaman, 2007; Miller and Edwards, 2007). With resources to-hand to generate and distribute photographic content, younger household members now have the potential to contribute to the making of familial representations. The question is, are they doing this and how do their representations interact with those of their mothers who have traditionally been responsible for photo archiving and display within the family? We address this question by looking at the photographic presentation of self and family at home, from an intergenerational perspective. This constitutes a long term, asynchronous form of collocated social practice around photos, which has implications for the design of an emerging class of electronic photo displays for the home and their related technologies and services.

There appears to be a gap in the literature concerning how photographic representations of family are created in a contemporary household that is ‘going digital’ (Shove et al., 2007). The integration of digital photography with ‘home mode’ conventions of representing family is a subject that remains relatively underexplored in HCI. Also underexplored is the intergenerational perspective on this integration: how the tools and practices of photography’s ‘new recruits’ (ibid.) are integrated with home mode. To date, HCI research on teenage photography has centred on teen uses of new digital tools, such as mobile and online photo-sharing applications, and the home setting has been somewhat overlooked as a site for teenage expression. Mobile digital devices afford photo-mediated communications between teens and parents in and beyond the home, but the meaning of ‘family’ and ‘home’ in these communications remains relatively unmapped.

Some theoretical studies have speculated on the changing role of photography in family representation, suggesting that teen participation combined with digitisation marks the individualisation of practice and the eclipse of family photography by personal photography (Van Dijck, 2008). For teens, digital photography is, in most cases, their first experience of photography, whereas, for their

parents, the transition from film to digital is a process of adaptation and revision (Shove et al., 2007). Hence, the take-up of digital by adult household members is arguably less straightforward and more incremental than it is for their juniors. This raises questions concerning the distribution of technical expertise across generations within the household, which could, in turn, have implications for the role of the family chronicler as creator and manager of family representations, as well as, more abstractly, the function of *family* in contemporary photographic practice. Indeed it is seemingly teen practices, rather than home mode practices, that are driving technological innovation in current consumer markets (Schiano et al., 2002).

With the exception of the last point, these speculations on the state of contemporary family photography are lacking in empirical foundation. We have attempted to shed some light on the subject in our own empirical work by inviting an intergenerational perspective on the meanings that domestic photo displays hold for parents and teenagers. Our findings underpin this discussion. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, we present and discuss empirical materials from a field study exploring the photographic presentation of self and family in family homes and, specifically, within the context of parent and teenager relationships. By looking at both film-based and digital photography, from an intergenerational perspective, we hope to provide insight on how digitisation and democratisation is currently being taken up within family households. Secondly, based on this insight, we identify some issues for designers of domestic photo displays and photoware to consider, in the case of families with parents and older teenagers living together at home.

2. Related work

We now consider some insights from the literature on photo displays in the family home, giving particular emphasis to their role in family representation.

2.1. The reproduction of convention

Chalfen (1987) acknowledges the central role that photography plays in family representation, observing how familial conventions are reproduced through photography’s tools and practices. Rose (2003) has explored this further in relation to motherhood. More recently, Drazin and Frohlich (2007) have shown how the specific presentational forms of traditional paper displays in the home are arranged to communicate domestic roles, relationships and obligations and can attribute salience to particular representations over others.

Historically, photos have been experienced in the home as both images and objects, as framed prints, album collections, or keepsakes. Edwards (1999, 2009) argues that the material qualities of the ‘photo-as-object’ have been largely overlooked in social studies of photography and stresses that it is precisely this materiality – a photo’s

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