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# Photography Industry under Digitization: A Glimpse of How Digital Images Influenced Professional Photographers and the Public

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Wenke Fu

## Abstract

Photography is not only about scientific proof and art anymore. Social photography is gradually emerging and changing our perspective on photographs both in the eyes of the public and professional photographers. The phenomenon of social photography is reducing job opportunities for professional photographers, but at the same time social photography may give people a feeling of digital belonging and digital diasporic intimacy through image sharing on Instagram. Therefore, online image-based communities can be formed. An online image-based community is a mediated medium for conversations about collective and individual memories.

## Key Words

Social photography, social media, photography industry, digital diasporic intimacy, mediated experience

## Introduction

In the digital era photography has reached a stage of mass production and communication quickly, with different public spaces accessible on individual cellphones and laptops. Photography has been ubiquitous since the first digital camera emerged, with social media offering a platform for sharing digital photographs. Digitization has sparked a new wave of photography among amateur photographers. Taking a photo has become unprecedentedly easy, as almost all smartphones now have cameras. Also, social media has increased mass production and communication of digital media. Social media cultures involve engagement, participation, and socialization.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon leads me to consider whether photography has gradually become a tool for socializing. Perhaps “*social photography*” is a better term to describe this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> *Social photography* refers to everyday photography that mainly serves a socializing purpose, rather than as a form of art or a scientific proof. Digital cameras offer immediacy, while social media platforms provide digital belonging and diasporic intimacy.<sup>3</sup> Combined, these factors give rise to a culture of digital diasporic intimacy.<sup>4</sup> The term digital diasporic intimacy seems controversial. This term can be explained

by a quantitative study conducted by Matthew Pittman and Brandon Reich (2016), who argue that people may feel greater happiness and life satisfaction when using image-based social media platforms compared to text-based ones.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, photography serves as a medium for cultural and social communication, and posting an image is a kind of shared communication within socialization.<sup>6</sup> According to Martin Hand, “social and cultural practices are driven by technological changes.”<sup>7</sup> This leads me to believe that social photography is likely a product of ubiquitous photography and social media. In this paper, I will explore how the digitization of photography has changed the photography industry and the working conditions of professional photographers towards something more like a social photography industry<sup>8</sup> by studying image-based social media platform Instagram, giving examples of how certain communities were formed by image sharing on social media, and how people gain digital diasporic intimacy<sup>9</sup> on image-based platforms. Additionally, I will examine how photography and the industry alter how people receive information, socialize, and shape photography culture, digital culture, and popular culture within the general public.

## 1. Social Photography is Reducing Job Opportunities for Professional Photographers while Redefining and Extending the Meaning of Photography through its Social Aspects

Is the photography industry evolving towards a social photography model today? How does social photography influence professional photographers? I will present my Explanations in two sections. First, I will explore the different creators of social photography, along with their significance and influences. Second, I will demonstrate how social photography redefines and extends the meaning of photography through sociality.

I propose that the rise of social media has created a more complicated environment for physical photo publishing in the photography industry and for professional photographers. Physical publishing is getting expensive because the consumption of physical photography is decreasing when viewers can view photographers' works through image-based social media platforms like Instagram or Flickr without spending money. Social media has provided a place where people can consume digital photos without payment to the photographers, offering free photo viewing. Furthermore, photography has been more accessible since the first digital camera came out; almost everyone can take photos with their smartphones and consumer-level cameras. These have resulted in fewer physical photography publishers getting involved within the industry, and fewer professional photographers getting paid reasonably. However, the number of photographers, both professionals and amateurs, is generally increasing.

### 1.1 Professional Photographers and Social Photography

I think many professional photographers have not yet realized the significance of social photography and how it changes the photography industry. Sometimes, professional photographers get hired to shoot portraits. Often, those portraits are used for socializing. In this circumstance, these photos themselves are a way of self-expression for the client. The term "yue pai/yue pian" is often used by Chinese independent photographers. It means "book a shoot session". Often, independent photographers post their advertisements on social media platforms, and clients contact them to arrange a shooting session. Wedding photography is a social photography genre we are most familiar with. In addition to wedding photography, family portraits, couple portraits, and individual portraits all function as memory storage and generate socialization between people. Sociality has become the main principle in this genre of work, and

the desire for customers to be pretty and look perfect in social photos is a common trend. Sometimes professional photographers get asked to do heavy Photoshop editing that they might not want to do within their work to fulfill the "being perfect" requirement from customers. This phenomenon deals with artistic and aesthetic values, which I won't discuss in this paper.

### 1.2 Public Social Photography

The tourist photo is a good example of public social photography. The banality photos at the same location often lead to imitation.<sup>10</sup> Tourist photos express and declare 'I was there, and here I am,' or as Nathan Jurgenson calls them, "certificates of presence." Tourist photos are meant to be stored and shared, generating communication between shared partners naturally. In the early twenty-first century, professional photographers could always offer professional tourist photo-taking and printing services at popular tourist sites. They provided immediacy and expertise simultaneously, but by 2022 we could hardly find these services at popular tourist sites anymore. This photography service became rare, and this decline coincided with the popularization of consumer-grade cameras that deliver near-professional camera quality. Faux-vintage filter is another social photography phenomenon proposed by Jurgenson.<sup>11</sup> A faux-vintage filter creates different nostalgia effects when applied to a digital photo, such as yellow tones, film strips, film scars, film burns, etc. We can see that faux-vintage filters are ubiquitous in the photography market, with tons of free faux-vintage filters on Instagram created by other users, and numerous free faux-vintage filter apps such as HUJI, NOMO, Hipstamatic X, etc. Fredric Jameson has described creating nostalgia for the present as "an attempt to make our photos seem more important, substantial, and real, to endow the powerful feelings associated with nostalgia to our lives in the present." Jurgenson suggests that applying a faux-vintage filter is a form of documenting personal experience, with the faux-vintage filter reifying the nostalgia. Nostalgia connects the present and the past; it makes photos shareable and generates social communication. Jurgenson also proposes that social photography is a cultural practice; the general public will barely talk about social photography beyond the device, the platform, and the technique.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the faux-vintage filter is another wave hitting the professional photography industry. People will consume less analog photography to gain nostalgia because other free nostalgia effects are available in the photography market.

## 2. I can take a photo like this as well. Redefining and Extending the Meaning of Photography with Sociality.

Andreas Gursky's *Rhein II*, created in 1999, was sold for \$4.3 million in 2011. In the twenty-first century, fewer photos will likely sell for such a high price. At first glance, there seems to be nothing particularly special about this photo. It is a landscape photograph of a riverbank on a cloudy day. I suggest that the public might comment on this kind of photo by saying, "I can take a photo like this as well, and just with my phone." This reaction is likely due to the simplicity of the landscape perspective. *Rhein II* is unique for its large dimension and its timing; the photograph measures 71 x 143 in. In the 1980s, producing large-scale photographs was the norm as photography sought to compete with paintings on the walls of galleries and museums, although by 1999 the digitization of photography was already impacting the industry and social media had not yet emerged. Sociality had not yet been as embedded in photography at that time, but by 2022 social media had taken over the internet. I argue that the prevalence of social media will lead to fewer large-scale photography works produced by professionals. Even when any large-scale works are produced, in the digital age, people often will take a photo of printed photos on the wall using their smartphones. They may store these images as memories or share them with others as part of their social life. Eventually, viewing photos will be a viewing action through small-scale electronic devices, smartphones, and monitors which are all much smaller than physical prints on the wall.

### 2.1 Exception

*National Geographic* magazine is an exception to the digitization of photography and the rise of social media. Although it also launched its website in the digital era, the printed version is as popular as its digital archive and digital edition. It is because this magazine has built a reputation since 1888, and used its strategy of "cosmopolitan citizenship" throughout the magazine.<sup>13</sup> Because it is a magazine, independent professional photographers will have fewer chances to sell their physical prints, and fewer people will buy them. We can see the idea of globalization and conglomeration within the *National Geographic* magazine. *National Geographic* magazine was founded in the United States, but has twenty-nine language editions worldwide (Wikipedia). Almost everybody knows of, or has heard of, *National Geographic*. Their reputation has helped the magazine to reduce risk from the shock of digitization of photography and social photography. Working conditions differ betw-

een a magazine like *National Geographic* and independent underground professional photographers. Paul Frosh proposes that the digitization of photography has formed two kinds of independent professional photographers: integrated professionals and maverick photographers.<sup>14</sup> Integrated professionals are photographers who have adapted to the digital environment and can use digital media's strength to promote their work and themselves. They may also integrate some social photography within their work. Maverick photographers are photographers who have just graduated from their professional training and have not yet adapted to the digital mode of the photography business; they often are part of the art world, although most professional photographers have realized the fragility of digital media.<sup>15</sup> I think the wide realization of social photography has not yet been achieved.

## 3. Social Photography can Gather People Together and Generate Communications

I have suggested that the digitization of photography and social photography have challenged professional photographers within the photography industry. Still, social photography plays a different role for the general public. People could gain digital diasporic intimacy,<sup>16</sup> as well as communication, participation, and engagement through social photography practice.

### 3.1 Online Image-based Community

Image-based online communities and archives are emerging because people may feel more happiness and satisfaction, and are less lonely, when using an image-based social media platform rather than a text-based social media platform.<sup>17</sup> An online image-based archive can re-contextualize photos that might differ from the original context. For example, some old social photos that may have been discarded and forgotten can be revitalized after being collected and re-curated in the archive; these old social photos are revitalized by the curator's hard work. I will use @Beijing\_Silvermine's Instagram account as an example. In Figure 1, we can see some random old analog photos of the ordinary lives of Chinese people from the recent past. Imagine taking any of these photos out individually to display or make an exhibition of them rather than collectively displaying them on a digital archive page. These photos will not be as impactful as they are when they are curated together as a unit. Curation is an important principle in building an image-based online community. @Beijing\_Silvermine is an analog archive of the ordinary lives of Beijing residents, with anonymous photos from 1985 to 2005



Figure 1. Screenshot of the profile page from @Beijing\_Silvermine on Instagram.

created by Thomas Sauvin. The other image-based online communities on Instagram, such as the @Our\_Emergency\_Recipes by Oil Street Arts Space in Hong Kong and the @HKFont\_Walking in Hong Kong, function similarly to other image-based online communities. @Our\_Emergency\_Recipes is a page that collects secret emergency recipes written by Hong Kong residents. It is a project dedicated to the pandemic period when the whole city was locked down. Those recipe photos encourage people to find joy while cooking and to help each other with food support. @HKFont\_Walking

is a page that collects traditional Chinese fonts on the streets of Hong Kong. @HKFont\_Walking provides a platform for people to discuss and discover the culture of the Chinese language in their everyday lives. Those image-based online communities extended their cultural and community practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have both offered a unique digital belonging and digital connection between people.

### 3.2 Memories, Mediated Experience, and Digital Diasporic Intimacy



Figure 2. Screenshot of the comment section from @Beijing\_Silvermine on Instagram.

I suggest that by viewing an image-based online community or archive, it can recall individual and collective memories. As José van Dijck has suggested, photo sharing can lead to a collective experience.<sup>18</sup> Take @Beijing\_Silvermine as an example. Figure 2 is an ordinary old analog social photo shot at a wedding. People can find their connection with the photo in the comment section: “Still got this type of blow dryer at home.” Almost everyone in China has this kind of blow dryer at home. This ordinary wedding photo has generated communication and engagement among Chinese people and people of different cultural backgrounds. Because Instagram is a global platform, viewers can see these photos from various places worldwide. This Instagram account provides opportunities for cross-cultural communication. Through photo sharing, the process of tagging, and the process of tagging and commenting,<sup>19</sup> people participate and interact with photos, other people, and communities. Van Dijck also thinks that the dialogue within image-sharing will happen naturally.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, many people are facing diaspora issues due to the influence of globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, digital photography could be a vehicle, a bridge for gathering digital communi-

cations worldwide. Digital photography is also a mediated medium for storing memories. I propose that digital photography is also an evocative object embedded with digitization,<sup>21</sup> which could make people evoke their memories from digital photos; it is a mediated experience. According to the image-based Instagram community accounts case study, we can better understand digital belonging and digital diasporic intimacy.

In 2012, Hand suggested that photography’s priority role had changed from memorization to communication with digital technologies.<sup>22</sup> In 2004, van Dijck argued that in the digital photography era, memorization can still exist; it is a technologized process, and memories are technologically packed into digital photos.<sup>23</sup> In 2024, I now better understand how digital images function as a way of communication rather than just memorization. Although each photo contains a unique memory, the massive number of digital photos we each have on our own electronic devices illustrates the idea of ubiquitous photography better. We have already reached a stage of easily forgetting about images.

Each platform has its own paradigm and platform vernacular.<sup>24</sup> On Instagram, the basic functions are tagging, posting, commenting, and liking. I think those

basic functions are also part of our social practice of social photography, which is also why we cannot get around to using Instagram when we talk about images. The ubiquitous photography phenomenon is also an important aspect to be aware of. Sometimes, we have already lost the ability to choose whether to view an image or not; images just come right before our faces. Jurgenson has said that “[t]he social photo makes more explicit than ever how we are made of and by images, just as much as they are made of and by us.”<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Digitization of photography has reduced the number of physical prints produced by professional photographers, and social media has increased media fragility, sociality, and digital diasporic intimacy in the photography industry. Ubiquitous cameras also act as a booster for creating social photography.

The working conditions for professional photographers have become precarious due to the technology

and the sociality of photography. Perhaps independent professional photographers could find a way to cope with and embrace the ubiquitous digital social photography phenomenon, like those image-based online communities. Creating a digital page with a persona dedicated to the photographers themselves might be one of the solutions for solving the precarious work conditions within the current photography industry. I think social photography is not just photography with sociality—it is also shaping the way of seeing, digital culture, and communication in our society today.

WENKE FU is a photographer and visual artist. She holds a bachelor’s degree in photography and a master’s degree in the creative media industry. Her research focuses on contemporary art photography, vernacular photography, and the photography industry.

Editor: Yao Xiao

#### ENDNOTES

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## 數位化下的攝影行業：數字圖像如何影響專業攝影師和普通群眾

付汶可

**摘要：**攝影不再僅僅是科學證明和藝術。“社交攝影”正在逐漸興起，並改變著我們對公眾和專業攝影師眼中圖像的看法。“社交攝影”的現象正在減少給專業攝影師的就業機會。但與此同時，“社交攝影”通過在社交媒體上分享圖像讓人們感受到“數字歸屬感”和“數字離散親密感”，因此可以形成基於圖像的網路社群。基於圖像的網路社群可以是一種提供有關集體記憶和個人記憶對話的媒介。

**關鍵詞：**社交攝影；社交媒體；攝影產業；數字離散親密關係；仲介體驗