

Social practice of Camera Phone in Japan

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Abstract

The camera phone makes it possible to take and share pictures of the stream of people, places, pets and objects in the flow of everyday life. The work reported here is the emergent practice of camera phone use in Japan, providing concrete examples from “the ethnographic study” in Tokyo, based on a diary study of camera phone usage patterns. We divided three social usages in camera phone communication; *Personal Archiving*, *Intimate Sharing* and *Peer-to-Peer News and Reporting*.

Related Works

From the point of view of social construction of technologies, some researches emphasize that the meaning of technologies are embedded in our culture and everyday practice [6, 7]. An emergent practice of camera phone use is also closely linked to our daily social interaction. Our prior study describes that the text messaging are exchanged to maintain the lightweight contact and co-presence [2]. Recent studies show the practice of camera phone use. In their study of camera phone use by three workplaces, Ling and Jusrud describes that the emotional functions of MMS like snapshot, post card and greeting are used among those workgroups [5]. Kindberg et al. also describes the affective function of interaction via camera phones. They note that camera phone enables to bring remote people into an experience [3]. Koskinen also notes that MMS messaging gives people a means to interpret and share their life visually, and elaborate their experiences together. And his study shows the people’s practices that arise in this process in Finland [4].

Sketches of Camera Phone Usage Patterns

We have some sketches of current kinds of patterns we have observed in camera phone usage.

The first might be considered a kind of personal self-authoring practice that is unique to the visual medium of photography. The second two are related to mobile media exchange, revolving around the sharing of information among close friends and families. Mobile phones are enabling forms of communication and information access that are closely tied to the personal, portable, and pedestrian forms of technology use.

Personal Archiving

Most photos taken by the camera phone are not sent or shown to others, but are captured more as a personal visual archive. Camera phones enable personal visual archiving and authoring, a street level everyday visual viewpoint. For example, one 20-year-old female college student snaps several pictures a day with her camera phone: a photo of an interesting view from an escalator at a station that she frequents. These photos of mundane scenes are indicative of an emergent practice of visually archiving an individual’s everyday life. Most of the photos that people take are not intended be sent to others. Rather, they are snapped casually, with the intention of recording a momentary slice of a viewpoint on everyday life. For example, a female college student says “...*I took the photo of my professor’s profile...this photo is just an omamori (good luck amulet).*” In Japan, people often carry *omamori* simply to have a trusted spirit close by. This student sees her photo as a similar kind of presence.

Within the broader ecology of personal record-keeping and archiving technologies, camera phones occupy a unique niche. One participant says, “*The camera phone is my eye. The personal viewpoint is the most important thing.*” These are not random photos, but rather are highly personal viewpoints on everyday life that are archived on

the small screen. Most of young users described a unique pleasure in building this personal viewpoint archive. Most of these photos only have meaning to the individual who took them, a quality that makes them even more valuable as a resource for personal identity construction.

Intimate Sharing

Most of the sharing we saw of photos was off the handset screens. We have found that photos are generally only emailed to intimates such as a lover, spouse, or very close friend. In the case of mobile email, we found that most people had regular exchanges with 2-5 others, but not more than 10 people. With photo mail, the circle for exchange tends to be even smaller and the content more selective. There are technical and economic reasons why people don't email photos to each other very frequently. But there are also interesting social reasons that limit people's emailing of photos. Apparently, in comparison to sending text messages, sending photos is perceived as "intrusive," and "narcissistic." One female college student indicates this view. She says *"I can send a photo of me with a new hairstyle to my boyfriend, with the comment, 'How does this look?,' but I can never send a picture like that to a friend. They'd think I was an idiot."* Decisions of whether to send a photo or what kind of photo to send are made based on social relationships.



Figure 1: A snap of steamed sweet bean buns to send to her friends

This same college student made a different kind of decision with respect to a photo of some steamed

bean buns that she made. After she made them, she sent this photo out to several of her friends with the caption *"Look, look what I have cooked!"* One male college student also says how he feels that if it is between very close friends he feels that picture sharing is appropriate. Most of young users want not to send the intrusive pictures, but want to show one's sense to the intimates. This kind of social use is significant for the future mobile technology and application design

implication for camera phone briefly, from the point of view of participatory design [1] and user centered design.

In the view of the instance of young couple with kid(s), we can observe that new communication modality is emergent through the spread of picture sharing with mobile. One 30 years old female sometimes sends their son's picture to her husband. She said, *"Most of snaps taken by my mobile are behavior of our kid. ...I select the best shot and sometimes send photo mail only to her husband especially during his business trip. I don't want him to reply with the picture where he is at that time..."* Sharing the newsworthy pictures among the couple is the important thing to construct the sense of explicit family.

Peer-to-Peer News and Reporting

In addition to the ongoing mundane sharing of visual information between intimates who are in close touch, camphones are also being used to capture and share what people consider more noteworthy events that others might be interested in. In Japanese, "material" for news and stories is called "neta." The term has strong journalistic associations, but also gets used to describe material that can become the topic of conversation among friends. The following photos represent this kind of *neta* photo taken by young people and shared between peers.



Figure 2: *Neta* photos of a matrix-style move (left), a student who passed out drunk and got vandalized by friends (right).

Camera phones provide a new tool for making these everyday *neta* not just verbally but also visually shareable. These moments might have been talked about between friends, but now are captured visually and enter the stream of conversation and exchange. The following pictures show embarrassing moments caught on film. One student got drunk and wrapped toilet

paper around his waist and stuck on a “beginner driver” sticker at a lab party. And the college male student describes how he captured the image, a can of beer stuck to a forehead without the use of adhesives, intending it to share with others in the near future.

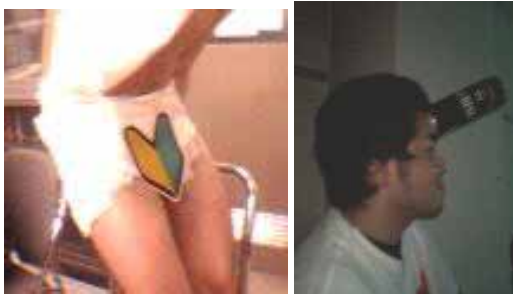


Figure 3: Neta photos of beginner driver sticker at a lab party (left), a can of beer stuck to a forehead without the use of adhesives (right).

Camera phones are contributing to a kind of everyday photojournalism, where people are attentive to images and events that might be interesting or newsworthy events. Some of photos might make it onto a photo journal site, but most of these photos are trafficked among peers, and are newsworthy only among friends. The everyday is now the site of potential news and visual archiving as a user might snap a scene from a familiar train station or a can of beer stuck to a forehead without the use of adhesives. By embodying the characteristics of the mobile phone as a “personal, portable, pedestrian” device, the function the camera has shifted.

Conclusion

The camera phone tends to be used frequently as a kind of archive of a personal trajectory or viewpoint on the world, a collection of fragments of everyday life. This kind of archiving is unique to the visual medium, in the sense that photos are often taken for purely personal consumption, where as text messages are generally created with the intent to share with others. Sharing of visual information, by contrast is a more selective and intimate enterprise than sharing of text. Users are still working out the social protocols for appropriate visual sharing, but seem to take pleasure in the adding visual information to the stream of friendly and intimate exchange of opinions, and news. Camera phones enable an

expanded field for chronicling and displaying self and viewpoint to others in a new kind of everyday visual storytelling. Camera phones makes ubiquitous visual access to others possible. In other words, the gaze of others is always present as a potentiality, leading to a heightened sense of visual awareness and a growing centrality of images in the ongoing social exchanges of everyday life.

Acknowledgements

Research described here was supported by “Docomo House” at Keio University Shonan Fujisawa Campus. This study was conducted with Mizuko Ito and Kunikazu Amagasa.

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