

Photography in the Age of Facebook

Johnny Winston
Stanford University

When American photographer Robert Frank famously said in 1961, "[y]ou can photograph anything now," he may have spoken too soon (Sontag, 1977, p. 187). At the time, Frank was remarking on how the advancements in camera technology made taking photographs easier than ever before. Today's photographers, looking back at the limitations of analog film with its chemical processing and relatively large cameras, might respond to Frank by saying 'but you can photograph so much more *now*.'

Due to the ubiquity of the digital camera and the popularity of instant photo-sharing technology, photographs are everywhere. More than ever before, images can be taken by anyone at anytime, and can be seen by anyone instantaneously. The sheer volume of image-making has exploded exponentially with the advent of cheap and accessible digital-imaging technology: every two minutes today, we take as many photos as all of humanity did in the 1800s (Good, 2011).

Compared to the days of analog photography, we increasingly use photographs to communicate, construct our identity, and understand reality. Even though photographs were long used to communicate, recently the comparative cheapness of digital photography, which eliminates the expense of wasted shots, and the relative ease with which digital images are shared, makes photography the tool of choice for communication in the digital age. Photo-sharing applications like Facebook, Instagram, and most recently Snapchat allow users to communicate using images in completely new ways and are partly responsible for making images the "preferred idiom of a new generation" (van Dijck, 2008, p. 58). In this essay I will focus mainly on Facebook, since it has the largest collection of photographs on earth, reportedly possessing 140 billion photos as of 2011 (Good, 2011). On photo-sharing sites like Facebook, images are not only used for communication, but have also become a primary way by which individuals construct their identity on the web. The result of using images to communicate and construct one's identity is that others look to those images in order to inform their own understanding of reality. "Photographs are valued because they give information" and consequently the information people glean from photographs affects and shapes their understanding of reality (Sontag, 1977, p. 16). Thus, photography, as it is used most frequently and visibly today—in the form of digital images broadcasted through the web—has

significant effects on communication, identity, and reality, though its influence largely goes unnoticed and is often left unanalyzed.

Taking photos and sharing them through web channels like Facebook has become an increasingly common cultural phenomenon, yet there is only limited critical analysis of its effects on communication, identity, and reality. This may be due in part to the nascency of the trend. However, there is a significant amount of literature on motivations for the use of images rather than the implications of the use of images. For example, researchers tend to ask questions like “why do people use photographs?” instead of “how do photographs affect society?” A possible explanation would be that research on motivation is more valuable to technology companies attempting to understand user needs, and thus researchers are more likely to investigate people’s motivations for photographing rather than analyzing photography’s effects on a more theoretical level.

However, for a deeper understanding of photography we can turn to past analyses from critics like Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Their critiques of analog photography are dated to the extent that they lack the technological perspective on the recent developments in modern image-making, having been written years before cell-phone photography and Facebook. Despite this, Barthes and Sontag analyze the fundamental properties of photographs so that their insights transcend evolving technological advancements and can be applied to today’s use of images. Now that photographs have become even more ubiquitous, it is more important than ever to revisit these critics and apply their theoretical, critical, and cultural lens to modern photographic practices. Using Sontag’s collection of essays *On Photography* in addition to Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* as a basis for thinking about photographs more critically, I will analyze photography’s influence on behavior, communication, identity, and reality in order to illustrate how modern photographic practices invite one to promote a false or incomplete version of one’s identity and simultaneously work to promote distorted realities.

Photography’s influence begins at the moment of capture; the practice of photographing shapes the behavior and the mindset of photographers as they experience and move through the world. According to Sontag, “[a] photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture-taking is an event in itself” (1977, p.8). The deliberate act of carrying a camera influences how one sees the world (Lee, 2010). For example, camera-holders may be more inclined to behave in a way that is photographable. In this way, camera phone use is no different than traditional camera use. Though the decision to carry a camera is not deliberate in the sense that the camera comes along as a byproduct of a phone or smartphone, the effect is very much the same. The option of easily capturing and sharing moments influences which moments are pursued and which moments ultimately occur. Sontag asserts that a “way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of

refusing it—by limiting experience, to a search for the photogenic” (1977, p. 6). Korean professor of communications at the University of Incheon, Dong-Hoo Lee, finds that as people increasingly use photographs as a form of communication and identity construction, they “begin to use their photographic eye to search for ‘pro-photographic’ events” (Lee, 2010, p. 271). Those in the presence of a camera may shape their behavior differently because they know that their experience will be captured and shared. For example, tourist activities may become more appealing if one knows that photographs will effectively capture and communicate one’s experience or people might be influenced to order more elaborate desserts if they anticipate posting a photograph of the dish online. Thus, before considering photography’s effects on perception of reality, it must be recognized that the act of photographing shapes reality itself because the camera is not a passive capturing or communicative tool, but rather, a tool that actively affects the photographer’s actions and behavior.

After the moment of capture, photography becomes influential as an increasingly popular tool of communication, yet what it gains in ease of transmittance and concision it sacrifices in fixed and intentional meaning. Recently people have turned to photographs as their preferred method of communicating and according to José van Dijck, a Professor of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, “[p]ictures [have] become more like spoken language as photographs are turning into the new currency for social interaction” (van Dijck, 2008, p. 62). People use photographs because they are shorthand for describing and sharing one’s experience with a large number of people. Lee finds that “photography can ... be used as an expressive tool that conveys an individual’s visual experience and feeling in that moment” (2010, p. 269). Despite these benefits, photographs are more ambiguous than written descriptions because they show rather than tell. Barthes writes of the “image as an area of resistance to meaning” (Barthes, 1982, p. 32). In addition, according to Lee quoting Susanne Langer, photography as a “representative form” is “nondiscursive” and provides “symbolic analogues of our sensory and emotional experiences, in contrast with the discursive forms of language based on syntax, which can offer ‘propositions’ or statements” (Lee, 2010, 269-270). Langer also argues that photography’s “nondiscursive signification” provides “neither fixed connotations nor explicit denotation” yet still conveys “factual” and “emotional aspects” (Lee, 2010, p. 270). Therefore, the non-fixed connotation leaves the photographic message ambiguous and open to interpretation, and consequently, photography invites miscommunication or unintended interpretation of communication when it is used to convey information.

Even though photography as a communicative tool lends itself to ambiguous interpretation, images themselves appear to be a trustworthy source of communication. The warranting principle, which “predicts that users attach greater credence to information that is immune to a target’s manipulation ... compared to [a] target’s self-descriptions,” can be applied

to Facebook photographs in order to explain why they seem to be trustworthy sources of information (Walther et al., 2009, p. 247). Walther, et al. (2009) compared both user-generated and third-party-generated written statements on Facebook, and found that observers trusted the information from the third parties more than the user-generated statements. User-uploaded photographs seem to fall somewhere between user-generated statements and third-party generated statements on the warranting spectrum, because photographs, to an extent, provide evidence that a moment occurred, yet they can still be subtly manipulated in the process of deciding which photographs to take and upload. Sontag states that “[p]hotographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it” (1977, p. 3). Consequently, observers generally place more credence in photographs than in written self-descriptions because they are often more reliable sources of evidence. For example, a Facebook status update saying, “I love my wife,” would be less important than a photo upload of a man embracing his wife. Sontag notes that a “photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists” (Sontag, 1977, p. 3). Although user-uploaded photographs present themselves as unbiased testaments, they still have an element of self-manipulation. Even if photographs are not doctored using photo-editing software, the user-uploaded photographs may be manipulated in the sense that users can decide which photos they want to make public and which photos they would rather keep private.

Given the image’s advantage over written self-description, it is logical that photography has become the modern tool of choice for constructing one’s identity and conveying it to others. For the purposes of this paper, I draw on Sociologist David Altheide’s definition of identity as the part of the self “by which we are known to others” (Altheide, 2000, p. 2). Today, new technological advancements have made photographs easier than ever to take and transmit. Consequently, as van Dijck outlines, there has been a shift in personal photographs from objects of “memory and commemoration ... towards pictures as a form of identity formation” (van Dijck, 2008, p. 60). She notes that today “cameras are used less for the remembrance of family life and more for the affirmation of personhood and personal bonds” (van Dijck, 2008, p. 60). The camera is an empathic tool that allows the photographer to share his or her life, experience, and perspective with another. In a study with nineteen Korean digital camera users, Lee found that “[m]ost interview participants believed that photographs would show not only things and events but also themselves: who they are and what their feelings, or perspectives are” (Lee, 2010, p. 270). The photograph’s *ability* to show perspective and identity has not changed since the days of analog photography insofar as an analog image shows just as much as a digital image; rather, it is the way that we *use*

photographs differently today that has emphasized photography's ability to display the self.

Particularly, camera phones and social networking technologies have magnified the photograph's ability to communicate and construct identity. In the world of analog photography, and in the early stages of digital photography, photographs had only a limited capacity to communicate identity. Not as many photos were made with analog photographs due to the bulkiness of cameras and the high cost of film. As a result, daily life was not captured as frequently as it is today and personal photography was limited mainly to the realm of family photos (van Dijck, 2008; Lindley et al., 2009). Moreover, communicating one's identity through analog photographs meant making prints and physically sending them to individuals, which is a cumbersome and costly process. Similarly in the early stages of digital photography, though the cost of film was eliminated, sending personal images to others required either making and transmitting individual physical prints or sending digital files over email. Both of these routes marked only mild improvements for digital photography over its analog counterpart and limited photography's display of identity to the home in the form of photo albums, picture frames, and digital images stored on computer hard drives (Whittaker, 2012). Recently though, social networking sites, such as Facebook, have provided the necessary tools for people to share their identities through photographs to a large number of people, without hassle or cost. Furthermore, camera-phone technology eliminates the time it takes for a photo to be shared with others because a photo can be instantly uploaded to social networks. In this way, camera phones and social networks combine to encourage users to construct and communicate their identities through photographs.

Facebook and other similar social networking sites are primarily used in impression formation—the sociological term for the process by which an impression of an individual is formed through the integration of many pieces of information. To this end, photography plays an important role as users value the image's ability to show rather than tell, which is the prevailing paradigm of identity communication on the web. Communications researchers from Chapman University note that one of the primary motivations for social network use is “to create and enhance a self-image” (Hum et al., 2008, p. 1829). According to Christine Rosen, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington DC, Facebook and other social networking sites like it are primarily used as “vehicles” which allow an individual to engage in “egocasting, the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one's personal taste” (Hum, et al., 2008, p. 1829). Furthermore, Rosen argues that Facebook users have a tendency to portray themselves like products, in a form of self-promotion (Hum et al., 2008). Photos play a crucial role in this ego-casting endeavor. Sociology Professor Shanyang Zhao et al., from Temple University found that “by ‘showing without telling,’ Facebook users sought to make certain implicit identity claims aimed at generating

desired impressions on their viewers especially in terms of the depth and extent of their social ties” (2008, p. 1825). Facebook users prefer to “create identities through implicit communication” and leave “clues” for other viewers to interpret. These context clues are viewed as more accurate and reliable portrayals of one’s identity, which is supported by the warranting principle because implicit cues appear to be free of user manipulation. (Hum, et al., 2011). Zhao, et al. (2008) found that most of the “implicit identity claims” that users preferred over more explicit declarations were visual claims consisting of photos uploaded by the users themselves. Thus, users employ photographs to construct their online identities because images are ideal for making the implicit self-descriptions that are preferred on social networking sites.

However, despite users’ reliance upon the photographic image as an accurate portrayal of identity, identity is shaped and manipulated from the moment of capture. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes names four conception’s of one’s identity that “intersect,” “oppose,” and “distort each other” when a photograph is taken. Barthes writes that “I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (Barthes, 1981, p. 11). Hence, there are four distinct opportunities for the identity to be manipulated and, often, this manipulation is inescapable. As Barthes notes: “[E]ach time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity” (Barthes, 1981, p. 11). The camera’s tendency to distort, which Barthes describes, has only become more prevalent today as users increasingly use photographs to represent themselves. Van Dijck finds that today we want “our *pictures* to portray a better self” (2008, p. 68). This is especially true for photographs that are taken with the intention of being broadcasted to the social network audience. Scholars found that it is common for “self-images produced on Facebook” to be “carefully choreographed and well polished.” Individuals seek to construct “group-oriented identities” by posing for pictures with others (Zhao et al., 2008, p. 1826). This is supported by a finding that, in a survey of 63 Facebook accounts, “most of the pictures ... were group pictures, showing a user having fun with his or her friends” (Zhao et al., 2008, p. 1827). However, photography’s tendency to distort identity is not confined to the moment when the photograph is taken.

Identity is further shaped and manipulated through the selection, uploading and curation phase. Though it is possible for images to be retouched and doctored through editing software, this is not a widespread practice for the common Facebook user and therefore image retouching will not be considered as a significant form of identity manipulation. Instead, a more common and subtle form of manipulation occurs when individuals select which photographs they want to upload to social networks. Because digital cameras can take photographs without wasting film, and because the images can be viewed immediately, photographers have greater freedom to choose the images they take and ultimately upload.

Thus, digital photography provides “increased power over the editing process” (Strano, 2008). The Facebook profile picture is the most prominent and explicit way in which an individual selects from many photographs a single image that will serve as the “default photo” by which they will be identified throughout the Facebook network (Hum et al., 2011). The profile picture effectively “stands in for the user’s body in [the] virtual environment” and consequently users are very conscious about what identity they are projecting with their profile picture choice (Strano, 2008). We rarely acknowledge that the selection and editing process—epitomized by the profile picture—shapes a photograph “into an idealized image representing social norms about desirable personal characteristics and socially accepted notions of family, gender romantic relationships, and parenthood” (Strano, 2008). Facebook prompts users to select images to represent themselves, and in doing so the site encourages the projection of idealized identities.

Photographs are the most prominent way that users create idealized, hoped-for, and largely pro-social identities on Facebook. Though users’ Facebook identities expressed through images can be distorted, in many cases, users do not create deliberately falsified personalities. Sometimes users craft their identities *as they view themselves*, which can differ from *who they really are*. To this end, photographs become an important tool of self-expression. Other times, users provide a modified or incomplete record of their identities by merely downplaying perceived negative qualities and emphasizing perceived positive characteristics (Zhao, et al., 2008). In online social networks where the online and offline lives of users are not necessarily connected, users have the freedom to construct whatever identities they want without having others refute the falsifications. Alternatively, on sites like Facebook users’ freedoms of self-presentation are constrained by their online connections to offline friends, who act as deterrents for making obviously falsified self-claims. However, users of Facebook can, and often do, get away with making small modifications to their identities in order to present themselves in the best possible light. In their analysis of 63 Facebook pages, it was found that Facebook “served as a vehicle that empowered ... users to produce socially desirable identities that they were presumably not capable of producing in the offline world” (Zhao, et al., 2008, 1819). Photographs play a key role in this endeavor to portray oneself as more socially desirable than one really is, without stretching the truth so far as to make obviously false self-claims. Facebook users can choose only to upload photographs of themselves engaging in pro-social behavior (such as partying, playing sports, or hanging out with friends) such that their online photographic identities exaggerate how social they are. Due to the warranting principle, the observers assign significant credibility to images as a partially other-generated non-manipulated testimony, even though, invariably, images provide a distorted, exaggerated, or incomplete portrayal of one’s identity.

As a product of representing our identities online, we inform our understanding of reality based on the images we see. However, given that our online identities are frequently distortions, drawing information from these identities often leads to distorted notions of reality. For example, research shows that one's Facebook profile picture affects one's "willingness to initiate friendships with the profile owner" (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012, p. 247). This finding provides evidence that people draw significant conclusions about the offline world from information provided in online social networks. In another study it has been shown that Facebook users are attracted to others that are perceived as similar to themselves (Utz, 2010). Evidence of similarity presented in photographs influences whether the user is considered attractive. Again, users take information provided by online photographs and draw conclusions about the identities of people in the offline world. Furthermore, Dr. Sonja Utz (2010) finds that profile pictures of a user's *friends* played a significant role in how the *user* is perceived. Thus, on Facebook, one is known by the company one keeps. In each of these studies, it is found that identities projected through photographs (and viewed on Facebook) ultimately contribute to one's conception of reality; however, because the online photographic self-presentations are subtly distorted at many levels from the moment of capture until the photo is uploaded, the reality that is gleaned from the distorted identities is itself distorted.

The distortion, however, is not limited simply to the realities of the other. The reality of the self is prone to distortion as well. Photography serves as an extension of our memories and consequently we rely on photographs to remember and understand the past—both of others and of our own. Thus, as one's memory becomes eroded over time, the photo record of our lives that we keep online eventually grows to replace our own recollections of personal history. As van Dijck writes, "[m]emories are created just as much as they are recalled from photographs ... Research has shown that people are also easily seduced into creating false memories of their pasts on the basis of unaltered *and* doctored pictures" (van Dijck, 2008, p. 63). Experiments from the 1990s and early 2000s found that 50 percent of subjects were induced to construct false memories from old photographs that were retouched in order to depict a scene that never actually occurred. It is still debated whether photographs or narratives contribute more to triggering false memories, but regardless, it is well established that "people's autobiographical memories are prone to either self-induced intervention or secret manipulation" at least in part by photographs (van Dijck, 2008, p. 64). Therefore, photographs and the technological processes that have evolved around images (such as Facebook and camera phones) work to distort not only our view of external realities, but also the realities of our own pasts.

Thus photography's presence—though subtle at times—has a strong formative influence on our actions, our communication, our identity construction, and our perception of realities, both of others and of

ourselves. Compared to analog photographic practices, today we take more pictures of a wider variety of subjects that have come to include the everyday and the ordinary. In addition, the increasingly ubiquitous presence of the camera influences our actions and prompts us to pursue pro-photographic events. Though images have always been used as a form of communicating and giving information, today due to technologies like camera phones and Facebook that eliminate barriers of space and time, we can communicate our images to a much broader audience than ever before. A product of this facility of photographic communication, today we increasingly rely on photographs to construct our identities compared to the era of the analog image. Furthermore, we increasingly turn to online images in order to inform our notions of reality. We look to our friends' Facebook photos and form significant impressions about the identities and lives of others, even though these identities are largely subtle distortions and idealized version of the self. Moreover, due to the fallibility of human memory the online photo record can gradually become the primary way by which we remember our own lives. Our dependence on images to communicate, construct identity, and understand reality is alarming given the photograph's tendency to distort.

There certainly have been drastic changes in the shift from analog to digital image-making practices; however these changes have largely been a magnification of analog photography's communicative, identity-forming, and reality-influencing qualities. The fundamental construction of the image is roughly the same as it has been since the birth of photography; it is only how we use photographs that has changed. It is for this reason that the seemingly outdated criticisms of Barthes and Sontag transcend technological advancements and can still be applied to today's photographic practices. Both critics recognize that the image is part of an evolution by which we create, categorize, and organize information. But this evolution of dealing with information, and photography's role within it, is far from settled. Sontag notes that in the nineteenth century it was theorized that "everything in the world exists in order to end in a book." She contributes her 1970s perspective by adding that "everything exists to end in a photograph" (1977, p. 24). Today, it seems as though everything exists to end in a picture on Facebook. With the continued advancement of technology surrounding photography, images are becoming ever more embedded in our lives. In light of this trend, it has become important to apply a critical lens to photography in order to understand the extent to which the photograph distorts reality when it is used as a tool of communication and identity construction.

References

- Altheide, D. L. (2000). Identity and the Definition of the Situation in a Mass-Mediated Context. *Symbolic Interaction* 23(1), 1-27.
- Barthes, R. (1981). *He Who Is Photographed*. Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography (pp. 10-15). New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, R. (1980). Rhetoric of the Image. *Classic Essays On Photogarphy* (pp. 269-85). (pp. 269-285). A. Trachtenberg (Ed.). New Haven, CT: Leete's Island.
- Facebook. (2012). Company Info: Key Facts. *Facebook's Latest News, Announcements and Media Resources*.
- Gass, W.H. (1977, December 18). On Photography. [Review of the book *On Photography* by Susan Sontag]. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/1977/12/18/books/booksspecial/sontag-photo.html?_r=0
- Good, J. (2011, September 15). How Many Photos Have Ever Been Taken? *1000memories blog*. Retrieved from <http://blog.1000memories.com/94-number-of-photos-ever-taken-digital-and-analog-in-shoebox>
- Hum, N. J., Chamberlin, P. E., Hambright, B. L., Portwood, A. C., Schat, A. C., & Bevan, J. L. (2011). A picture is worth a thousand words: A content analysis of facebook profile photographs. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(5), 1828-1833.
- Lee, D. (2010). Digital Cameras, Personal Photography And The Reconfiguration Of Spatial Experiences. *Information Society* 26(4), 266-275.
- Lindley, S. E., Durrant, A., Kirk, D. & Taylor, A.S. (2009). Collocated social practices surrounding photos. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*. 67(12), 995-1004.
- Nadkarni, A., & Hofmann, S. G. (2012). Why do People use Facebook?. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 52(3), 243-249.
- Sontag, S. (1977). In Plato's Cave. *On Photography* (pp. 3-24). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Strano, M.M. (2008). User Descriptions and Interpretations of Self-Presentation through Facebook Profile Images. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 2(2). Retrieved from <http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?cisloclanku=2008110402>
- Tabak, A. J. (2004). Hundreds Register for New Facebook Website. *The Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2004/2/9/hundreds-register-for-new-facebook-website/>
- Utz, S. (2010). Show me your friends and I will tell you what type of person you are: How one's profile, number of friends, and type of

- friends influence impression formation on social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 15(2), 314-35.
- van Dijck, J. (2008). Digital photography: Communication, identity, memory. *Visual Communication* 7(1), 57-76.
- Villi, M. (2011, June 26). Messaging and Publishing Photographs: Sharing Camera Phone Photographs Via the Internet. *The Versatile Image: Photography in the Era of Web 2.0*. Retrieved from [http://www2.uiah.fi/~villi/tekstit/Sunderland Villi paper.pdf](http://www2.uiah.fi/~villi/tekstit/Sunderland_Villi_paper.pdf)
- Walther, J. B., Van Der Heide, B., Hamel, L.M., & Shulman, H.C. (2009). Self-Generated Versus Other-Generated Statements and Impressions in Computer-Mediated Communication: A Test of Warranting Theory using Facebook. *Communication Research*, 36 (2), 229-53.
- Walther, J. B., Van Der Heide, B., Kim, S., Westerman, D., & Tong, S.T. (2008). The Role of Friends' Appearance and Behavior on Evaluations of Individuals on Facebook: Are we Known by the Company we Keep? *Human Communication Research*, 34 (1), 28-49.
- Whittaker, S., Kalnikaite, V., Petrelli, D., Sellen, A., Villar, N., Bergman, O., Clough, P., & Brockmeier, J. (2012). Socio-Technical Lifelogging: Deriving Design Principles for a Future Proof Digital Past. *Human-Computer Interaction*, 27(1-2), 37-62.
- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). Identity construction on facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 1816-1836.