

Phonetography: Does This Enhance or Diminish Our Enjoyment of an Experience?

Description

In Season 8 of the tv show *Friends*, Alec Baldwin makes a guest appearance, playing Parker, a character who is over-the-top-enthusiastic about everything. Who at one point, can no longer contain his excitement, and tries to capture a mental snapshot of the moment ([watch the clip here](#)).

That episode aired in 2002. Months before the [first phone with a built-in camera](#) would be available in the US, and five years before the release of the first iPhone.

Nowadays, of course, camera phones are everywhere. So there's no need to capture a "mental" snapshot of anything.

But are we worse off for it?

I mean, go to any restaurant, park, sporting event, or school play, and people are taking pictures and videos left and right.

Which can sometimes be super annoying. Like, when you're trying to watch your kid in their dance concert, and the person in front of you has a giant iPad blocking your line of sight. Or whose phone is taking up a big chunk of the frame in the video you're trying to – oh, wait... ?

But let's put aside the question of how our phonetography obsession affects the experience of people around us, because I think that's probably pretty clear. The more interesting question is – what effect does taking photos have on *our* experience of these moments?

I can definitely remember times when I have put my phone away, and smiled smugly at the clearly less psychologically savvy folks around me, thinking that experiencing my surroundings through my eyes, rather than through the screen of my device, was enabling me to have a more enjoyable experience than they were having.

But is this any truth to this? Does taking photos *actually* detract from our enjoyment of an experience? Or have I just become a mindfulness snob?

Nine studies

A team of researchers ([Diehl, Zauberman, & Barasch, 2016](#)) conducted a series of nine studies, across a variety of situations, to see how taking photos affects our enjoyment of an experience.

A bus tour of Philadelphia

The first study involved a bus tour of Philadelphia. Half of the participants were given a digital camera and encouraged to take pictures during the tour (“People often take photos of their experiences. During your tour, please use the camera provided to take photos as you normally would in this context. Please take at least 10 photos during your experience.”), while the other half were asked to leave all their belongings and cell phones behind, and were simply told to go about the tour as they would any other sightseeing experience (“Please experience the tour as you normally would when going on a sightseeing tour.”).

When the tour was over, they completed a short survey, in which they were asked to rate their enjoyment of the tour, and how “immersed” they felt in the experience on a scale of 1-15 (1=not at all; 15=extremely).

So what happened? Did taking photos take away from their enjoyment of the tour?

Results

Well, actually, no. If anything, taking photos *increased* their enjoyment of the tour, as the photo group rated the experience as being a little more enjoyable than the non-photo-taking group (11.13 vs. 10.23 – which was a statistically significant difference).

Hmm...ok, I guess sightseeing and taking pictures generally go hand in hand, so perhaps that's not surprising. But what about something more mundane, like a meal at a food court?

Lunchtime at Reading Terminal Market

In a second study, 149 people visiting a historic farmers market in Philadelphia were asked to participate in a quick study in exchange for a candy bar.

Those that agreed were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Half were asked to take at least three photos of their dining experience while eating (**photo group**). The other half were simply instructed to eat their meal as they normally would (**control group**) – and were neither encouraged nor discouraged from taking photos.

A few folks in the control group did end up taking photos, but as expected, those in the photo group took significantly more (an average of 4.48 photos for the photo group and .83 for the control group).

When participants were finished eating, they were given the same quick survey as in the bus tour study.

So did eating without the distraction of having to take photos lead to a more enjoyable meal?

Results

Well, once again, not so much. Just like with the bus tour, those who took photos of their food actually reported enjoying their meal more than those in the control group (13.33 vs. 12.17).

Hmm...and why might this be?

Well, the participants who took photos reported feeling more immersed in the experience than those who didn't (12.44 vs. 11.37). And it was this increased *engagement* in the experience that contributed to an increase in their enjoyment of the experience.

Eye-tracking at the museum

Indeed, when the researchers sent 51 students through an archeology museum while wearing eye-tracking gear, they found that those in the photo-taking group looked at key elements of the exhibits more frequently and for longer periods of time than those who didn't take photos.

In other words, it seems that those who took photos engaged more actively with and paid greater visual attention to the details of the exhibits.

And once again, just as in the other studies, it was the folks who took photos, and were more engaged in the experience, who reported enjoying themselves more.

Hmm...so if the key factor here is your level of engagement, and not necessarily the photo itself, what if you [pull a Parker](#) and only *imagine* taking pictures?

A simulated bus tour of London

The researchers wondered this as well, and put together a simulated bus tour of London, where some participants were asked to take photos, others were asked to experience the tour as normal (no photos), and a third group was asked to simply *plan* the photos they would take if they had a camera ("As people often take pictures during events that they are experiencing, we also will ask you to plan out the photos you would take on the experience, as you would if you were actually there taking photos.").

And how did taking mental photos affect their enjoyment of the tour?

Results

Well, once again, participants who took photos on the tour reported enjoying the experience more than those who didn't (5.36 vs. 4.76).

And, believe it or not, the enjoyment ratings of those who simply *imagined* taking photos was almost indistinguishable from those who actually took photos (5.46 vs. 5.36)!

So what are we to make of all of this?

Takeaways

Well, I think there are a few takeaways.

The first, is that the role of photography in our daily life appears to be a more nuanced and complex issue than I realized.

And that at least in some situations, maybe we should make a concerted effort to take *more* photos. In that whether it's taking your dog on a long walk, baking cookies with your kids, or visiting family over the holidays, the research suggests that documenting our experiences through photos (or even "mental" snapshots) leads us to be a more actively engaged and attentive participant in the experience. Which in turn, heightens our enjoyment of it.

Of course, just because a little is good, doesn't mean more is better. And the research doesn't suggest that we should start [Truman Show-ing](#) every aspect of our lives. Because the authors note that there are a lot of other situations and factors that haven't yet been fully explored.

Like what?

Caveats

For one, these studies all looked at capturing *photos* of one's experience. Not video – which I suspect would be a very different psychological experience, given the different kind of focus that I think would be required when filming continuous video.

In addition, the live experiences in these studies – bus tour, having a meal, visiting a museum – were all relatively slow, predictable, or self-paced experiences. Trying to capture a key moment in a fast-moving and unpredictable event, on the other hand, like a big play at the end of a close basketball game, could be much more difficult, and take away from your ability to fully experience and enjoy the excitement of that moment.

And speaking of excitement, in situations where a key aspect of the experience is emotion-based – like watching your kid score their first goal, or sing a solo in a school musical – it could likewise be difficult to fully experience the emotional impact of that moment, if too much of your attention is diverted to the task of picture-taking.

And finally, there are some experiences in life that you may not be able to capture with a camera. Like a

particularly beautiful sunset over a vast expanse of ocean, as you relax on a quiet beach with your family following an afternoon of kayaking. Where futzing around with all the settings on your camera in an effort to get the exposure just right, rather than simply taking it all in, will likely diminish your ability to feel the sense of awe or peace that's probably a more meaningful part of the experience than the visuals per se.

A related podcast you might enjoy

Speaking of sunsets and capturing photos, this week's study reminded me of a recent *The Happiness Lab* podcast episode that delved into the research on how sharing experiences with others can enhance happiness – if we do it right.

[Episode 5: Caring What You're Sharing](#)

If you're not familiar with [The Happiness Lab](#) podcast, it's totally worth checking out. Most episodes are devoted to topics and research related to increasing happiness in daily life, but some episodes even get into performance-related concepts like imagery, that can totally be applied to preparations for your next audition or performance.

References

Diehl, K., Zauberman, G., & Barasch, A. (2016). How taking photos increases enjoyment of experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 111(2), 119-140.

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