# Visual Dynamics: Reconfiguration of Affective Behaviours through and Because of Digital Photography

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***Abstract:*** *In times such as ours, where pictures are all pervasive and digital technologies and Internet have led to large-scale transformations, it becomes imperative to study the social, economic, cultural and political repercussions such changes have on our understanding of the world around us. By referring to theories of visual studies and affect, the paper aims at studying the impact of such visual upsurge and to trace its effect on our mental, emotional and social lives. There is no dearth of either quality or quantity of photographs in circulation, yet, there is a general lack of, what visual critics may call 'visual literacy'. This research endeavors to investigate issues and themes related to affective behavioural changes caused due to visual media such as the devaluation of actual experiences due to compulsive behaviour to digitally record, desensitization of the viewers due to recurrent viewing of violent and shocking images, blurring of boundaries between the real and virtual due to social media circulation of photographs, visual consumerism and the changing concept of memory and identity in the digital age.*

***Key Words:*** *Visuality, Digital Photography, Visual Culture, Affect, Cultural Studies, Violence, Identity*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The invention of photography in nineteenth century created, as worded by Jean-Louis Comolli a "frenzy of the visible" (1980: 122). Though photography faced its set of initial opposition from some critics, which included even famous critics such as Charles Baudelaire, it soon became a popular and reliable medium of representation and preservation of memories. Soon, photography attained a respectable status and "within a mere 30 years of its invention" began being used for "police filing, war reporting, military reconnaissance, pornography, encyclopaedic documentation, family albums, postcards, anthropological records . . . sentimental moralising, inquisitive probing . . . aesthetic effects, news reporting and formal portraiture" (Berger 2013: 49). In 1984, Vilém Flusser wrote in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* that, "Photographs are omnipresent: in albums, magazines, books, shop windows, posters, on cans, paper wrappings, boxes and postcards" (1984: 29). By 1990s, Digital Camera became commercially available and further lead to an exponential growth in the number of photographs taken each year. By the beginning of 21st Century, photography had already reached new levels of growth. At present, if the estimate by InfoTrends it to be believed than as many as 1.2 trillion photographs were taken in 2017.

The invention of World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1990, led to the popularization of the Internet, which today, is an almost inseparable part of our lives (Andrews 2013: 2). As per the statistical data provided by *Satista*, the total number of Internet users in the world in 2017 was 3.58 billion. According to a report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and market research firm IMRB International, the number of Internet users in India would have reached up to 450-465 million by June, 2017 (Chopra 2017: 1). A report from We Are Social "that **more than half** of the world's population now uses the internet" and more than half of these users are active users of Social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp, etc. (Kemp 2017: 2). "Connecting with family and friends, expressing opinions, entertainment and online shopping are amongst the most popular reasons for internet usage"[i]. There is a strong complementary relationship between the rise in the number of photographs in the world and the production and distribution of photographs on social media. In the words of Nicholas Mirzoeff:

> One of the most notable uses of the global network is to create, send, and view images of all kinds, from photographs to video, comics, art, and animation. The numbers are astonishing: three hundred hours of YouTube video are uploaded every minute. Six billion hours of video are watched every month on the site, one hour for every person on earth. The 18–34 age group watches more You-Tube than cable television (And remember that YouTube was only created in 2005). (2015: 6)

In times such as these, where visuals are all pervasive, especially in the form of photographs, it becomes imperative to undertake the study of the visual culture and how it shapes the world in new ways. "More precisely, it involves how to see the world in a time of dynamic change and vastly expanded quantities of imagery, implying many different points of view. The world we live in now is not the same as it was just five years ago . . . But more has changed and changed more quickly than ever and, because of the global network society, change in one location now

matters everywhere" (Mirzoeff 2015: 13). In words of Dikovitskaya, 'Visual Studies' "is not limited to the study of images or representations but extends to the everyday practices of seeing and showing" (2006: 120). Since at present, people possess camera equipped and Internet enabled smartphones, they can upload/share content whenever they want, no matter where they are; it gives them power to disseminate information and share their experiences and thoughts with the public. Such technological empowerment is however, not without its effects, which include both good and bad ones. To quote Mirzoeff:

> Networks have redistributed and expanded the viewing space, while often contracting the size of the screen on which images are viewed and deteriorating their quality. Visual culture today is the key manifestation in everyday life of what sociologist Manuel Castells calls 'the network society', a way of social life that takes its shape from electronic information networks (1996). It is not just that networks give us access to images—the image relates to networked life on- and offline and the ways we think about and experience those relations". (Mirzoeff 2015: 13)

## 2. Changes in Affective Behaviours Due to the Exchange of Photographs on Social Media

Whether it is newspaper or television or websites, we are surrounded by visuals at all times. Psychologists have conducted many researches to study the impact of taking and sharing photographs on social media in order to figure out how they affect our realities, our understanding of the world and our identities. Media, through use of photographs, can provoke or inhibit affective behaviours. "From instilling fear to inspiring hope, the media (in it's various guises) produces emotional responses . . . Emotional responses are individual, but, simultaneously, individual responses are shaped by shared cultural and social contexts" (Amy Milka & Abaigéal Warfield 2016: 2).  They further add that, "Images and photographs can also stimulate intense emotional engagement, sometimes prompting what has been labelled as 'emotional politics'" (2016: 2). It has been established by various researches and books that photographs can act as powerful stimuli for eliciting emotions and affecting pathos. Mirzoeff contends that photographs are so influential that, "A photograph can change the world in seconds" (2015: 24).

No sooner does someone say the words such as "Twin Towers" or "Bhopal Gas Tragedy" than a listener recalls the photographs of 9/11 attacks on twin towers of the photograph of skull of a dead child buried in the ground in Bhopal respectively. There have been many instances in recent history where the publication and dissemination of a photographs evoked intense responses from the viewers and lead to wide changes such as the photograph of Alan Kurdi's dead body lying on a beach in Turkey. Due to the presence of social media and networked societies, compelling photographs such as Turkish photographer Nilüfew Demir's photograph of the drowned three years' old Syrian boy become widely shared or 'viral', begetting responses from all around the world. The photograph aroused emotions of grief, sadness, sympathy and pity in their viewers who Amy Milka & Abaigéal Warfield inform us, shifted the media discussions from migrants to refugees and "spurred an increased interest in volunteering, donation and other philanthropic activities" (2016: 3). According to a many researches such as *Image Impact in Print Media: A Study of How Pictures Influence News Consumers* by Cope et al., *The Effects of News Photographs on a Reader's Retention* by Katherine Bruder, *Seeing photos makes us read between the lines: The influence of photos on memory for inferences* by Linda Henkel, if photographs are accompanying news or article or any form of writing, it engages the viewer more deeply than textual narrative alone and has higher potency in leading to altered behaviour.

As per a report published by *Statista* in January 2018, the most popular social networks are Facebook, YouTube and Whatsapp with 2167 million, 1500 million and 1300 million users respectively[ii]. "Sharing digital photographs on computer networks has been proposed as a new way for people to maintain social relationships, at the same time demanding little effort and being very affective" (Liechti and Ichikawa 1999).  While this sharing of photographs makes people feel connected and involved in one another's lives, it has its own set of repercussions since virtual connections are slowly obliterating the need for face-to-face interactions amongst people. Virtual connectivity is leading to a disconnection from the warmth of real time social interactions. In fact, some studies show that "the more time people spent on these sites, the more socially isolated they *perceived* themselves to be" (Walton 2017: 6). According to the statistics given by Clarissa Silva in her article *Social Media's Impact on Self-Esteem*, "50% of people using social media reported having negative effects on their relationships" and "80% reported that is easier to be deceived by others through their sharing on social media" (2017: 1-2). One of the major reasons for such deception is that, for seeking approval and 'likes' or to maintain a good reputation online, people present a very idealized version of themselves on social media websites.

It is in quest of seeking validation from others and establishing one's desired identity on social media websites that people visually portray themselves in a certain way, which, may or may not be akin to how they really are. "What we're seeing here is a consequence of the performative nature of social networks . . .  In this respect, social networks can act as an uncomfortable mirror against which we unconsciously measure ourselves and determine our own sense

of worth" (Beattie 2013: 2). The users of social media tend to compare themselves with others, which makes them "feel socially isolated" (Walton 2017: 3). Walton further informs us about a study titled *Seeing Everyone Else's Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage is Linked to Depressive Symptoms* by Steers et al., which stated that people make "comparisons to others in 'upward' or 'downward' directions —that is, feeling that" one is "either better or worse off than" one's friends and relatives[iii]. It breeds jealousies, which further leads to insecurities about self, low self-esteem and emotional instabilities. She further adds, "It turned out that both types of comparisons made people feel worse, which is surprising, since in real life, only upward comparisons (feeling another person has it better than you) makes people feel bad. But in the social network world, it seems that any kind of comparison is linked to depressive symptoms" (Walton 2017: 3).

The maximum number of Facebook users fall in the age group of 18-34, as per January 2018 statistics by *Statista*[iv]. Many of these users, who are single, also use Facebook to look for partners or to find a date.  In case of dating, Silva writes, "It seems that social media is creating a paradox effect " where people are creating and promoting illusions "of having more social engagement, social capital, and popularity, but masking one's true persona" (2017: 2). When people who have only known one another virtually meet in person, they often times lack the same level of communication skills and expressiveness that they otherwise possess while interacting online. Many psychologists have already expressed concerns regarding the growing lack of meaningful real life conversations in couples in the wake of virtual communication. In fact, more and people these days interact through photos and pictures rather than words. We're moving towards or rather already are living in times where social interactions through photographs are rapidly overwriting the verbal ones; using 'snaps' to communicate on social media platform Snapchat is a point in case. Mirzoeff explains this phenomenon very aptly, "The interest for us is not in the specific platform but the development of a new visual conversation medium, usually relayed by phones that are used less and less for verbal exchange. The selfie and the snap are digital performances of learned visual vocabularies that have built-in possibilities for improvisation and for failure. Networked cultures are intensifying the visual component and moving past speech" (2015: 68).

There are also many users who are below 18 years of age and maintain profiles on social media networks. The American "Academy of Pediatrics has warned about the potential for negative effects of social media in young kids and teens, including cyber-bullying and 'Facebook depression' (Walton 2017: 1). Heyman tells us that "In academia, researchers have warned that taking too many photos of your children may breed egocentrism, that oversharing pictures on social networks can damage real-life relationships and that comprehensively documenting special moments hurts one's ability to remember them" (2015: 1).  A study from Pew Research Center, Lenhart conducted in 2015 informs us, "92% of teens report going online daily – including 24% who say they go online 'almost constantly'", which means that teens are using social media more than ever before and are constantly updating and viewing photographic updates (Lenhart 2015: 1). They post their own photographs to get 'likes' from people in their friend lists which include many they barely know. "Such endorsements", writes Flores, "lead them to feel a heightened sense of self-importance. Sooner or later they will have to log off—even for brief moments—and face their offline reality. When they realize that they are not as interesting, important, or powerful offline as they are online, their world as they know it will come crashing down. Not being able to manage their offline identity may lead to anxiety and identity confusion" (2014: 144).

There are other ways in which photographs affects the emotional behaviours of viewers. The research titled *Picture Perfect: How Photographs Influence Emotion, Attention and Selection in Social Media News Posts* examined the "influence of image presence and valence on attention to and engagement with news stories on social media" and found out that "posts containing positive images elicited a higher level of emotion than those with negative or neutral images, which led to higher intentions to click and share posts with positive images" (Keib et al. 2016: 1). The findings of this research further "provide a deeper understanding of how social media drive news consumption, and offer practical implications for journalists, news organizations and groups using social media to spread a message" (2016: 1). Sharing the photographs also lead to emotional contagion i.e. transferring of positive or negative emotions from one individual or group to another to synchronize experiences. In this context, the Emotional Broadcaster Theory, which states apart from other things, that "emotions associated with high arousal (i.e. anxiety or amusement) lead to increased sharing in contrast with emotions that are characterized by low arousal (i.e., sadness or contentment)", becomes relevant (Keib et al. 2016: 7). The presence of photographs in a post enhances its emotional impact because photographs "are processed by the right brain, 'which tends to be more holistic and emotional, and is processed automatically and quickly'[v]" (Neilson 2010: 3).

Ready access to Internet and the availability of camera equipped smartphones with high storage capacities are a major reason for constant influx of photographs being taken and shared online. A major problem that users who are addicted to posting and viewing photos on online media face is the 'fear of missing out' or FOMO which compels them to check their phones as many as "150 times a day", on average (Beattie 2013: 2). Also, sharing of personal photographs raises a lot of issues regarding privacy and cyberbullying. "Like it or not, the emerging global society is visual. All these photographs and videos are our way of trying to see the world. We feel compelled to make images of

it and share them with others as a key part of our effort to understand the changing world around us and our place within it" (Mirzoeff 2015: 6). Visual Culture has also affects the patterns of consumerism; Keib et al. inform us, "The results show that past work on social media has determined that images elicit more interest than content without images" (2016: 2). The research also states, that on social platforms "people will engage with content that elicits emotion, and that negative emotions may lead to greater sharing" (Keib et al. 2016: 3).

Photography has been linked to concepts of memory and identity. "Today, we can actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world" (Mirzoeff 2015: 297). While taking and sharing photographs affect the identity of both the subject and the viewer, it is in turn also affected by it. Photographs we take play a part "in confirming and challenging the identity and history of their users" (Holland 2009: 122). The immense focus on self-image can encourage narcissistic tendencies[vi] in frequent users of social networking websites. Also, "According to psychologist Maryanne Garry, the overabundance of digital images may be detrimental to memory formation" (Macmillian 2016: 3). When we take photographs of an experience, we also omit some frames. Photographs "take the place of our memories, wearing away at our own reconstructions of imagery and association and privileging their content and metadata over what we may otherwise have found important. They do not record history, but determine it" (Fawns 2014: 12). When we try to recall a particular time in our past, more often than not, the photographs we have taken and revisited over years aid in recalling the event, or rather, become it in our memory. Barthes iterates this in Camera Lucida, "Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory …but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory" (1981: 91). Macmillian tells us about a research[vii] by psychologist Linda Henkel wherein she (the researcher) "encountered what she describes as the "photo-taking impairment effect" – the idea that photographing may discourage remembering" unless the photographer zoomed in or increased "cognitive engagement" by focusing on the subject of the photograph (2016: 3).

## 3. Devaluation of Actual Experience in a Quest to Photographically Record

Earlier when people attended an event or socialized or travelled or visited a new place, they used to live the experience of being there through their memories, but things have now undergone a sea change. The new technology has brought a "revolution in ways of perceiving" both "the immediate domestic world" and the far reaches of the globe; "Photography" has been "democratised" (Holland 2009: 119). Many researches have shown that tourists are more engaged in taking photographs of the place they're visiting and posting them on their social media profiles and adding check-ins at new places. "This effect occurs because taking photos to share increases self-presentational concern during the experience, which can not only reduce enjoyment directly, but also indirectly by lowering engagement with the experience" (Barasch et al. 2). Not to generalize, but majority of people these days experience a place through their screens, constantly documenting their whole visit. "Photography anticipates and determines many visual experiences, which more often than not linger in the tourist's post travel memory as 'reality', no matter how remote from the actual visiting experience" (Costa 2010: 44). In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes, "*A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs . . . Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter (1977: 9).*

Digital photography has changed the face of personal imagery. It has become "more interactive, more interventionist, and more inclusive . . . History has been popularized, and family history has been re-framed and made more public" (Holland 2009: 120). Belk and Yeh (2011) suggest in their paper titled *Tourist photographs: signs of self*, that people take images as a part of "identity project" which serves "as a means of conveying internal tales to the self rather than as a means of, beyond the immediate family, communicating with others". It is important to question whether people actually pay attention to the places they are visiting or are they too under the pressure of matching up to others' expectations or experiences. In words of British photographer Martin Parr, "The photographic record of the visit" almost destroys "the very notion of actually looking". There were times when people had limited films to record their experiences and they picked and chose the best moments from their trips or lives as such, to be framed and remembered. Nowadays, photographs are clicked in abundance and they "just hang around clogging up the hard drive on the laptop or phone" (Parr 2012: 1). We live in an "unfiltered, cacophonous world full of tastefully instagrammed photos of food and babies, trite status updates and spoilers to your favourite TV shows. In short, it's a veritable minefield of the banal" (Beattie 2013: 1).

## 4. Desensitization of Viewers through Continued Exposure to Violent Photographs

One of the major issues that photography, especially in the form of photojournalism raises, is the issue of exposing viewers to violent images and thereby leading eventually to desensitization. The photographs of accidents, conflict zones, war, natural disasters, etc. which get published in papers and magazines and get circulated on social media raise the concern of making the viewers indifferent to agonies others are bearing, over time and makes their reactions less prominent. Such a threat was amply put forward by E.B. White in *The New Yorker* in 1948, "If everyone is going to be able to see everything, in the long run . . . it may well turn out that people, being able to see and hear

practically everything, will be specially interested in almost nothing." Media has often been criticized for sensationalizing the news or using photographs to promote or reject political agendas. In the words of Sig Gissler, a journalist and former editor of Milwaukee Journal, "We have a commercial interest in catastrophe"[viii]. Many critics believe that, "'If it bleeds, it leads', is an undesirable rule of thumb" (Sethi 2008: 52). Writing in 2013, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag states, "Flooded with images of the sort that once used to shock and arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react. Compassion, stretched to its limits, is going numb" (2003: 108). A study conducted by Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson in 2009 proved that violent media exposure led to desensitization and thereby to decreased helping behaviour. According to them, "desensitization can reduce the perceived seriousness of injury and the perception that an emergency exists" (2009: 1) and the viewers get comfortably numb to pain and suffering of others.

**5. CONCLUSION:**

One may venture to say that capturing, sharing, viewing and reacting to photographs have become communication systems in themselves. It "allows people to maintain social relationships with their peers, in a very affective and little demanding fashion" (Liechti and Ichikawa 1999). The visual culture that we constitute and are constituted by "involves the things that we see, the mental model we all have of how to see, and what we can do as a result. That is why we call it visual culture: a culture of the visual" (Mirzoeff 2015: 11). It is a wide field of study with theoretical approaches informed by "poststructuralism, feminism, Marxism, queer studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial studies" (Dikovitskaya 2006: 120). So much has the field gained prominence that visual culture has now "evolved into a form of practice that might be called visual thinking" (Mirzoeff 2015: 289). In a world that is satiated with images, it will be dangerous to treat photographs as harmless entities.

The democratization of digital photography and availability of platforms for expressions have taught us or rather left us not choice but to "see the world enabled by machines" (Mirzoeff 2015: 18), due to which, it won't be an exaggeration to say, things have radically changed as far as our emotional, social, cultural and political lives are concerned. It is the need of the hour to understand the implications of existing in times where "our bodies are now extensions of data networks, clicking, linking, and taking selfies" (Mirzoeff 2015: 14). The plethora of images that we are surrounded by should not be taken for granted for they have deep influence over our affective behaviours. There is a need for rigorous amount of time and study to be devoted to research on the effect of such a phenomenon since "pictures are themselves carriers of meanings and interpretations" (Holland 2009: 121) and carry the potential to define and re-define an occurrence or event or history as such.

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**Endnotes:**

[i] As per the report titled *Number of internet users worldwide from 2005 to 2017 (in millions)*, published by Statista, the link to which is: https://www.statista.com/statistics/273018/number-of-internet-users-worldwide/

[ii] The complete report can be accessed at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/

[iii] The complete paper can be accessed at https://guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1521/jscp.2014.33.8.701

[iv] The complete report can be accessed at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/

[v] Neilson has further cited a research paper titled "The Effects of Print News Photographs of Casualties of War" by Michael Pfau et al. published in Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly (Vol. 83, Issue 1) in 2006.

[vi] In a talk at titled "*Poke Me: How Social Networks Can Both Help and Harm Our Kids",* presented at American Psychological Association National Convention, Washington, DC (2011), Dr. Larry Rosen, professor of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills, discussed how teenagers who use social media become prone to having narcissistic tendencies, since social media makes its users put spotlight on themselves.

[vii] The research paper Macmillian is referring to is "Point-and-Shoot Memories: The Influence of Taking Photos on Memory for a Museum Tour" by Linda A. Henkel, which can be found at: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797613504438
[viii] As quoted by Pankaj Sethi in his book *Photojournalism and Communication Technology* on page 52.