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Photo-a-day: a digital photographic practice and its impact on wellbeing

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Abstract

The practice of taking and sharing one photo every day for a year, has become a popular new form of photography enabled by the Internet. The purpose of this study was to investigate how people use photo-a-day to enhance their wellbeing. The data for the study were sixteen interviews with people who practised photo-a-day, analysed by thematic analysis. The analysis showed how photos offer positive affordances because of the conventions to take aesthetically pleasing images, share positive events and comment positively. A seemingly simple activity, photo-a-day creates a new layer of interest woven around daily activities, and expands social relationships. Representations of identity are complex, emerging through photos taken, rather than a premeditated profile.

Keywords: Digital photography, 365 projects, therapeutic photography, social networking, wellbeing, self-help

Words: 8381

Photo-a-day: a digital photographic practice and wellbeing

Introduction

A literature is forming around the term “positive computing” (Calvo and Peters, 2014), which refers to the design of tools that seek to improve wellbeing and to promote human potential, following the precepts of positive psychology. The authors argue that the convergence of ubiquitous and affective computing, and personal informatics create a context ripe to improve people’s lives by developing applications directly drawing on the theories of positive psychology. For example, a number of projects have sought to develop smartphone apps or tools in Facebook that promote wellbeing along these lines (Sosik and Cosley, 2014; Munson et al., 2010). Yet in doing this they are constrained by the assumptions of positive psychology itself.

Positive psychology promotes and seeks to measure the impact on subjective wellbeing of small positive behavioural interventions such as gratitude letters and journaling (Seligman 2003, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While such interventions have been shown to be effective and models are emerging of how they work (Lyubomirsky and Layous, 2013), the underlying analysis on which they are based seems “overly reductive and normative” (Cieslik, 2015: p.3). The assumption that such activities can be prescribed and their “dosage” determined, ignores the degree of choice in how they are interpreted and the complex impact of changing daily routines on everyday life, as well as the complex nature of wellbeing itself. This paper offers an alternative perspective gained by examining existing online practices that people engage in to enhance their own wellbeing. This allows us explore how people gain benefit from weaving such practices into their daily lives. It also gives us more insight into how people themselves conceive of wellbeing.

A popular, but under-researched Internet practice is photo-a-day, also known as the 365 project, where people commit to taking and sharing one photo online, every day, for a year. This is already a popular activity, with many groups on Facebook and Flickr and well-established dedicated sites like Blipfoto. Yet the simple idea of sharing a photo every day is a very rich resource that people realise in many creative ways. The benefits are complex, intangible and self-defined. They cannot be seen as interventions that work in a mechanical way to improve wellbeing, rather it is the choices people make in defining the practice for themselves and the way it affects day to day life, in the context of wider discourses around wellbeing, that produces their effects. Given the importance currently being given to wellbeing, research is needed to map this.

Thus the aim of the paper is to explore how people make use of photo-a-day as a photographic practice to enhance their wellbeing and what this tells us about how wellbeing is understood. The paper is organised as follows. It starts by exploring the concept of wellbeing, particularly in the context of critiques of the pervasive influence of therapeutic and self-help cultures. The relatively limited literature on the link between photography and wellbeing is also reviewed. The method of the study based on thematic analysis of interviews is then outlined. The findings explore why photo-a-day is experienced as positive, the complex way that it is realised as a practice and how identity is represented. The discussion brings together what we have learned and the conclusions include practical implications.

Wellbeing and therapeutic discourses

Economists and psychologists have been at the forefront of raising wellbeing, happiness and quality of life in public and research agendas (Layard, 2005; Seligman, 2002). Yet the definition of such concepts is multiple and contested (Haworth and Hart, 2007). For example, what has been variously referred to as “personal”, “mental” or “subjective” wellbeing is

widely considered to include hedonic (feeling good) and eudaimonic (functioning well) elements (Huppert, 2014; Dodge et al. 2012). But hedonic positive feeling can itself include several aspects, such as happiness, life satisfaction and positive affect. Influential authors such as Ryff (1989) see eudaimonic wellbeing as made up of six aspects: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth, aspirations derived from developmental psychology and philosophy. But these now seem rather normative assumptions. In this context it is useful to turn to examine how people define the feelings and good functioning of wellbeing for themselves (Cieslik, 2015). Clearly it is not enough to treat people's experience of wellbeing as immune to the influence of wider social structures and discourses. Indeed recent research suggests a strong influence of therapeutic discourses in popular accounts of wellbeing (Hyman, 2014).

A specific target of sociological critique has been how self-help advice for wellbeing is driven by therapeutic ideology. Thus for Rimke, self-help writing reflects contemporary society's "unprecedented preoccupation with the self" (2000: 61). It reproduces myths about a unitary, essential self that can be discovered, a "final truth" that can be accessed as the foundation for mental wellbeing - as opposed to a view of identity as multiple, relational, emergent and actively constructed and contested. Further, Rimke (2000) suggests that self-help writing articulates a damaging myth of "co-dependence": a belief that individual woes derive from trying to control others and neglect of the self. This leads to a denial of the sense in which we are interdependent on others. Therapeutic discourse is more than a contemporary fashion, Rimke (2000) argues, rather it is a form of governmentality which itself produces the individualised, neo-liberal subject centred on a fetishisation of choice.

The influence of such therapeutic culture has been found to be an important discourse in lay people's accounts of wellbeing in Hyman's (2014) recent study. Although, there are a number of discourses in common use, Hyman suggests that the therapeutic culture

characterised by Rimke (2000) has a pervasive place in everyday thinking about happiness, which is seen as “individualised, internal and self-orientated” (Hyman, 2014: 147).

Relationships are important to people, but intimate and sexual relationships were often seen through an asocial perspective or seen through a therapeutic lens e.g. as merely a support to the individual in an insecure world. Happiness was perceived as an individual experience, with few feeling that happiness arose from the happiness of others or society as a whole.

Cieslik (2015) has argued that indeed sociology’s treatment of wellbeing has been dominated by a view of it as a problem. Furedi (2004) has suggested that in a therapy culture people mistake pleasure or fun (often through consumer experiences) with wellbeing and have an expectation that it is easily attained. However, Cieslik (2015) makes the case that in constructing these critiques, sociologists have neglected to investigate sufficiently how people themselves conceive of and experience wellbeing. His own research, based on life history interviews, shows that sociological critiques do not seem to reflect how people think about wellbeing in their everyday lives. People recognise that it requires effort and sacrifice to achieve wellbeing. People are not narcissistic: they recognise the importance of others to their wellbeing.

Further, while the critiques of Rimke (2000) are compelling, Kline argues (2009) that the range of self-help practices is very wide. Dolby (2005) identifies four different notions of self-hood as evident in self-help works, including an important one directed to social activism. There are strands of thinking in self-help that are hard not to recognise as liberating for marginalised individuals. Self-organised groups are as much a feature of self-help as texts. Kline sets out some principles for what a “pro-social self-help” might look like: it would be one whose result is self-determination understood as “the facility of agentic subjects to participate in the meaning-making processes of self-identity.” (Kline, 2009: 202). Rather than defining a single path, the group would undercut normative narratives, identify a

range of trajectories and enable the individual to make their own choices from them. It would be a collective activity, with an emphasis on sharing personal experience as its foundation (but able to integrate the insights of professional expertise) and based on an assumption of social parity in relation to shared experience. These arguments prompt us to investigate the range of self-help practices to find out how self-help is realised and to explore how wellbeing is conceived within them. It asks whether they perpetuate the myths of self-help such as of the essential self and therapeutic discourses or whether they can realise the more empowering potential of a “pro-social self-help”.

Digital photography and therapeutic photography

One interesting context to explore for new insights into how people seek to improve their own wellbeing is online. The advent of social media sites and the emergence of a body of people with long term Internet experience, ubiquitous internet access and greater bandwidth have created new conditions to refashion these kinds of possibilities and for people to manage their own wellbeing. The visual turn in social media is a particularly interesting aspect of such changes. The explosion of the quantity, range and mobility of images as an aspect of social media has been analysed by a large number of authors (e.g. van Dijk, 2008; Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008). Suler (2009) suggests that among the many photographic practices transformed in the digital revolution, their potential use for “self-insight and personal change” has also expanded. It has become both easier to take photos and also to manipulate them, as a means to explore the self. The potential of photos, like other artistic activities, for self-exploration is widely recognised. In the world of therapy, for example, the term therapeutic photography has been coined to refer to the use of photography for such purposes as “increasing self-knowledge, awareness, and well-being” (Weiser n.d.) unmediated by a professional therapist, as opposed to mediated “phototherapy” (Weiser and Krauss, 2009). Outside the therapeutic context, Craig (2009) recognises that photography can promote

communication, aid memory, improve self-esteem, strengthen relationships, support change and is simply an enjoyable hobby. Yet while there has been much research on digital photography, such uses for wellbeing have been relatively under-researched. Cook's (2011) thesis is one of the few works to directly explore the link between digital photography and wellbeing, outside a therapeutic context.

Cook's (2011) conclusion is that while photography and wellbeing are connected, there is no simple or uni-directional relation between them. This is partly because of the complexity of the concept of wellbeing but also the multiple character of photography. Thus a major type of work within home mode photography he uncovers is maintaining and creating social connections. This contributes to "positive relations with others" as an aspect of eudaimonic wellbeing. Introspective photographic work, where the audience is the self, helps people identify their level of happiness (an aspect of the hedonic perspective); it also contributes to them having a "sense of autonomy". Interest/hobby work, another but less pervasive use of photography, is its use to support other hobbies. Again this can be seen to address the social aspect of wellbeing, and other eudaimonic themes such as "environmental mastery". Thus different types of photography map to different aspects of hedonic or eudaimonic wellbeing; however the three types of photographic work are not entirely unconnected. Cook's (2011) work also recognises that efforts to use photography to improve wellbeing may not work. He suggests that aspects of photography, such as organising material, can be boring or even unpleasant, but are necessary to achieve the benefits. This points to the need for more work which examines how wellbeing is affected by particular everyday photographic practices.

Photo-a-day

One of the numerous new practices of digital photography is photo-a-day. The idea is to take and upload one photo every day for a year, usually starting on January 1st. Photo-a-day has

proliferated on photo sharing sites like Flickr (Barton, 2012) and Facebook, even spawning dedicated web sites such as Blipfoto and 365project.org. Web sites offering advice on how to complete photo-a-day have also multiplied. It is difficult to establish either numbers of users and purposes of conducting photo-a-day, but Blipfoto is estimated to have around 4000 users (mostly UK based), and two significant Flickr groups (project_365 and project365) have approximately 37,000 members. The dedicated website 365project.org claims to have over 160,000 members.

Photo-a-day echoes well-established social practices such as diary keeping and journaling, as well as of some forms of related online practices such as personal blogging (and status updating). Like diaries, journals and blogs there is a sense of photo-a-day being an attempt to change one's life: diary writing is often a new year's resolution. The idea of a resolution to establish new routines is a prominent in self-help advice for wellbeing. Photo-a-day is ripe for consideration as the type of practice people employ themselves to improve their wellbeing, in ways that echo features of positive psychology interventions.

There has already been some instructive research on photo-a-day. Piper-Wright, coming from an art practice background, argues that photo-a-day is a genuinely reflexive, "critically creative" activity, that resists "the casual, the disposable and the spectacular" (2013: 216). For her, a key aspect of such photography is that it forces the user to select a single photograph per day, thus emphasising quality, rather than just the sharing of an indiscriminate "stream" of photos. Maintaining the habit over 365 days enforces a long term commitment, rather than promoting a search for an instantaneous response. Piper-Wright finds an emphasis on "documentation, diary and self-examination" (2013: 220) - in tension with van Dijk's (2008) suggestion that it is rather in communicative uses that digital images are now most often used. The emphasis is on photographing for the project rather than

making social connections. It generates an “internal dialogue” (ibid. 237). Such themes resonate with the wellbeing literature and its emphasis on mindfulness and reflection.

Barton (2012) writing from a digital literacy perspective finds that the talk that is generated around photo-a-day shares a particular vernacular discourse of learning. Often unexpectedly to themselves, participants find that learning is central to the experience: they report experiences of learning about photography, themselves and life in general. The learning is active in the sense of involving a challenge and experiment. Learning is “a good thing, it is fun, it involves other people and people can be both teachers and learners” (Barton, 2012:142). Like Piper-Wright, Barton sees the practice as reflective, but places stronger emphasis on the social aspect of the photo-a-day practice. He finds that the discourse fits models of adult learning which characterise it as self-directed, active, lacking a focus on a teacher, situated and social. Certain elements of this discourse resonate with Kline’s (2009) definition of pro-social self-help, e.g. the social element and the displacement of the expert.

Thus photo-a-day is an interesting context in which to explore how people use photography and photo sharing as a means of shaping their own wellbeing. It is also an opportunity to explore how wellbeing is understood within a particular practice. However, in the light of debates in the literature about the nature of wellbeing and the role that online self-help communities may play, there are critical arguments to explore about appropriate models of self-determination or empowerment as realised through such activities. Should photo-a-day be understood through the lens of positive psychology that construes wellbeing as promoted through simple interventions; does it align with seemingly pervasive discourses around therapeutic self-help; or can it promote more progressive models of pro-social self-help?

Methodology

Given that the study sought to discover how participants themselves perceived photo-a-day, it was appropriate to employ a qualitative method within an interpretive methodology. The data for the study was semi-structured interviews. Interview participants were recruited through an open invitation that explained our interest in the potential relation between photo-a-day and well-being. This was disseminated via Facebook, Twitter and on the Friends of Blipfoto group on Facebook, and asked interested participants to respond via email. Some participants were recruited by snowballing from initial respondents.

The interviews themselves were framed by an understanding that the underlying question was the impact on wellbeing. Questions focused on why people had decided to undertake photo-a-day, the value they placed on it, and how they defined the rules or conventions of the practice. We also asked questions about the most recent photo taken, discussing how it was chosen, what the subject was, and whether it was typically representative of the project as a whole. This sought to capture the concrete processes of photo taking, sharing and use, to help understand how it was acted out as an everyday photographic practice. Other questions sought to discover how the participant felt that their wellbeing was impacted by the practice, and were inspired by the five simple mantras “connect, be active, keep learning, give to others and be mindful” developed by the New Economic Foundation and promoted by the UK National Health Service.

Ethical approval for the study was given by two University Research Ethics Committees, and all participants gave written consent for interview. Interviews were predominantly conducted over the telephone or skype by a research assistant, with one conducted face-to-face by one of the authors. Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

Interviews were conducted in April and May 2015. Sixteen people volunteered to be interviewed, eleven women and five men. Participants were aged between their mid-30s and early 70s, with six participants reporting that they were retired. This seemed to reflect the age structure of communities such as Blipfoto, though no definitive data on this exists. Most had been conducting their photo-a-day project for over a year, with one person's project running for eight years. Ten participants shared their photo on Blipfoto, with other platforms used including Facebook, Flickr, Tumblr and sharing via Twitter. Devices used to capture photographs varied, with many using more than one type of digital camera to take photographs, depending on circumstances – camera phones, tablet computer cameras and digital SLRs were all mentioned. Most participants shared their photo-a-day work openly on the internet, though some were in Facebook groups with a defined membership, meaning that their photographs were not shared as widely.

Data was analysed using the six step process defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, consisting of data familiarisation, generation of initial codes, searching for themes and reviewing, naming themes and reporting findings. Rather than a linear process the analysis used these steps iteratively. Code generation mixed deductive and inductive approaches, with some derived from the literature; some grounded in the data.

Findings: Photo-a-day as a positive intervention

Photo-a-day has some of the qualities of the interventions recommended by positive psychology. For example, the idea of doing something new every day to create a positive new habit is a common feature of such interventions, e.g. journaling. Similarly, in photo-a-day people commit to the discipline of sharing one photo every day, often in the form of a new year's resolution.

Furthermore, photo-a-day is “positive” because of a number of given features of both photography and online activity. In photography, by convention, people typically turn their camera on beautiful things or try and make things look beautiful. They spend time selecting the most aesthetically pleasing images from all those taken. They may be limited by their current photographic skills, but they are usually seeking to learn to present things in a pleasing way. They also spend time looking at photos others share, and can select a path through beautiful images. Browsing popular photographs will offer a pathway through aesthetically pleasing images). Thus there is a strong focus in photography on the beautiful. This is part of why people like to take photos and experience it as positive.

“The basic premise is that I actually enjoy taking photos.”

Also, in terms of content, Chalfen (1987) suggests that in home mode photography people typically take photos of positive events (such as family occasions or holidays). Specifically photos of positive events are the ones that are chosen to share. Cook (2011) confirms this broad pattern, though he suggests that emotions can be more complex and conflicted around positive events, such as weddings, than this assumes. Yet as a result of this focus on aesthetically pleasing and positive events, photo-a-day can become something like a book of abundance: a daily listing of good things in a person’s life.

In addition, some participants explicitly took photos to be positive:

“It sort of stopped me thinking negatively if you see what I mean, I could do something positive every day, although I was having *trouble finding another job*.”

“I specifically made the decision that I was going to do things that would make me, when I looked back at them, would remind me of good things that happen and good things that are going on. Positives not all the negatives. [...] So I will take photos of those and then

when the weather is really, really icy I went and took photos of the ice crystals that formed, so I hate icy weather but there is always something there that I can sort of turn *round and say well, that was actually beautiful even though I don't like icy weather.*"

These conventions of photography that make it "positive" are reinforced by some features of online behaviour. People tend to prefer to share positive things online (Shifman, 2014), because it projects a positive image of themselves. The commenting on photographic sites like Flickr has also been observed to be largely positive (Cox, 2008). This may reduce its value in improving photographic skills, but it does create a pleasing sense of positive reinforcement. On Blipfoto this was a valued feature, indeed commenting was experienced as entirely positive: Interviewees struggled to recall any conflict. Together these features of photography and online sharing make it a positive practice, and mean photo-a-day is likely to directly enhance the affective, hedonistic side of wellbeing.

Positive but not simple

Whereas positive psychology tends to present such interventions as "simple", and so do not ask questions about how exactly it is carried through, an important aspect of photo-a-day was that it had a potential to generate a complex chain of activities woven through the day, and through other practices. It was this way that taking and sharing a single photo subtly and positively reshaped many other daily practices that was key to the strength of its impact. It was true that photos could be quickly taken and uploaded, almost without thinking. One interviewee described her process as often "spontaneous" and "impulsive." This is what Cohen's (2005) early photobloggers wanted: that one could take photos by blinking, so that all "barriers" to taking more photos have dissolved. For this interviewee the technology had become so natural it feels as if there is no mediation. For many participants the sense of

photo-a-day being “technically” easy was important to it being positive; there was a lack of technology annoyances.

However, while one could take a photo and quickly upload it and so complete the project with little effort, it was common that the enjoyable aspects of the practice were extended and elaborated. For example, participants often spent the day searching for better photos. Looking for photos became a preoccupation across the day, not a brief, quickly completed act. Indeed one of the major effects of this was to “transform how I look at the world”, as one participant put it.

“I notice all sorts I never would have noticed before. You are kind of scanning around all the time you are *outside*. *Noticing things.*”

People were taken out of their other routines, because after a while it becomes challenging to find new things to photograph. Often people had deliberately adopted photo-a-day for that reason:

“So it was really a way of getting myself away from my desk and out taking a lunchtime. [...] *You know it is still quite a good way of forcing myself to think about something else other than work.*”

Often participants referred to doing things specifically to get a photo.

“If I have a spare 5 minutes on my way home I will walk down a side street I have not been down before, or take a different turning in the car, just to see what is down there, in case there is anything that would make a good photo.”

“One of my favourite things to do is just to go on what I call a Blip walk, and I will just *leave the house with a camera and I won't have any idea of where I am going or what I am doing other than I am just looking for something to take pictures of and sometimes you*

get the best stuff like that *and sometimes you don't get very much at all but I like the walking.*"

Thus photo-a-day was linked to breaking of existing routines to do something positive.

Rather than being a simple one-off act, searching for a good photograph added a positive interest to the whole day – there was always a chance the current best photo could be improved upon. Also, while in theory the photo could be quickly chosen and uploaded, often careful choices about editing the photo and adding text that explained it further elaborated the simple practice. One participant talked about the enjoyment in reflecting on the day and selecting a photo:

"I will upload them into Lightroom on my laptop, you know as you are having a beer or whisky or something, and I will just see what jumps out at me and it might jump out at me because I think it is evocative and will remind me of something that was pleasant or fun or nice, or it might jump out at me because it is strong photographically, or it might be both."

So it was important that photo-a-day is technically easy, but that people could select how to elaborate and prolong parts of the activity if these tasks are enjoyable or rewarding. This often included mundane aspects of managing photos, what Cook (2011) dubs "procedural work". But whereas Cook sees these as merely as a necessary chore, our data suggested it could be seen as inherently interesting and potentially contributing to wellbeing itself.

As well as being elaborated itself, photography is often a subsidiary hobby, supporting another interest or stimulating another interest or form of learning (Cook, 2011).

"I have become interested in birds through the photography and capturing a decent sharp colourful photo, and it gives me great satisfaction ... and you know people talk about 'you

have really come on in your garden birds. ' And yesterday I got a greenfinch. I had only had one in the garden that I had seen before in the past year, and it came on this new bird table and I was just so pleased with myself. So I think in miniature that is a good example of the spreading of interest and spreading of [the] way you conduct yourself."

Thus photography enhanced the interest and enjoyment around other activities, indeed created whole new interests.

In addition to these elaborations of the simple act of taking and sharing a photo, there was a strong obligation to look daily at the photos uploaded by those one was following too, which was a further extension of the activity generated by photo-a-day. To some degree looking at and favouriting others' photos could be seen as using the obligation to reciprocate to gain attention for one's own material. But many clearly had a sincere interest in others' lives and photos. They felt the way that they conducted themselves in relation to followers was a part of the ethic of photo-a-day.

As well as the choices around the photo to share and commenting on other's work, a further elaboration was the way that looking back, the participants' own photos acquired new meaning. Lister (2014) suggests that photos are taken for memory but rarely actually revisited. This did not seem to be the case with photo-a-day.

"I am now 6 or 7 years in and what it has become is a valuable... history of my life. [...]

some photographs that I take are very important to me in terms of memory but the memory that I know they will evoke is completely private. So I might write no words at all because I have nothing that I want to say in public, even though I know the photograph will evoke something for me in the future."

“I have learnt a lot about memory, and how I remember and how I think memory has in some way become more valuable through me because I experience pleasure from memory in a very simple way when I flip back through my journal.”

Because only a single photo was being collected every day making sense of a year's collection becomes possible. Participants had a sense of their own life being revealed to them.

Social aspects of photo-a-day

One of Rimke's (2000) critiques of self-help in a therapeutic culture is that it creates a “myth of codependence”, in which it is suggested that a person's ills arise from depending on others and so promotes a neo-liberal, independent, choosing subject. But social networking is social. Photography is connective (van Dijk, 2008; Cook, 2011). Photo-a-day is social generally in ways we would expect from a social networking site. Thus another way that the practice can be elaborated, is through incorporating more people in different ways into the practice. Photos frequently include family and friends as subjects. Often the family participated by viewing the photos but also suggesting ideas for photos.

“It has brought me closer to the family as well, because they follow it and they have got really interested in what image is going to be there for the day.”

The practice was often shared between pairs of relatives or friends where they undertook photo-a-day in parallel.

Beyond this there was the obligation felt by participants to those who followed them (to be interesting and engage them) and those they followed (to give them attention and support). Because photos were positive, sharing photos was seen in itself to be giving something positive to others.

“I have had several people say to me that my photos make them feel better when they see *them in their day.*”

Participants enjoyed the insight into other lives:

“It is just an interest and almost a privilege to be able to eaves drop in on their lives and see what they are doing.”

“It is just nice to get glimpses into [...] their everyday life.”

The commonest reason for feeling Blipfoto or the Facebook group was a community, was the sense of concern showed to people.

“It is an odd thing to say but I have got to know people without meeting them. There are people now if they walked in and said I am so and so off Blipfoto it would not feel awkward to talk to them because you get to know bits about their life which are sometimes quite intimate. People ask me about my illness. I have had conversations with people about illness and cancer and all the rest of it, so you know it can be fairly heavy stuff really and through that you do get a sense of mutual support. People are concerned for you, and you are concerned for them.”

This suggests that for some quite deep mutual revelation could occur. For others disclosure and concern was more circumscribed, but still of value.

“I think they [contacts] have become important, I think it is now as I have got to know them a little bit better, although I have no idea what they look like [...] it is not a kind of personal relationship in that way, but you do develop little friendships where [...] they might put that they are having a bad day [...] or something and you have a little glimpse into their life and you do end up feeling concerned about them.”

Relationships felt significant, if ultimately limited. Even keeping up contact with a large number of followers by looking at their photo every day, could feel difficult but this reflected a desire to maintain regular contact. Participants talked about showing concern to others, but also the strength of feeling they got when others responded to something they posted.

“So I just posted the photograph and then there was just this wave of emotion that was [...] is there anything we can do, please give her our love, you know let us know when we can come and visit her, is there anything we can do to help out with your other daughter? [...] We were just overwhelmed by [...] people sending presents from different countries to the hospital.”

This level of concern from people one did not know could be almost over-whelming.

An interesting extension of this was one interviewee who had terminal cancer and who was concerned to create a record for his family, also wanted to participate in creating some sort of collective social record. It had been announced that the site was to be web-archived by the British Library (n.d.).

“Recording stuff is a contribution [for] my kids and my friends, that I can leave something that shows what I did during the last year or two. I would say that motivation has grown during the year [...] could it be a way of just creating a snapshot of life, could it be a way of enabling me to leave something behind?”

“This is a record of my year and if you multiply that up it is a huge research resource. People’s lives, [...] it is akin to an oral history because people are talking about what motivates them and so on. ”

Thus there are multiple levels to the sociality in photo-a-day: for friends and family; online contacts; for wider society. This is far from the critique of self-help writing, that suggests that

it propagates a “myth of co-dependence”. Photo-a-day is only meaningful as a deeply social practice.

How identity is performed

It will already be apparent that the common accusation that such practices are narcissistic misses the mark. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the way that an identity is constructed through photo-a-day. It is rather different from what is typical on social networking sites. Sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, are based on self-consciously created profiles, with carefully honed text and a self-portrait. Certain expected narratives are written into the web site design (van Dijk, 2013). It is assumed that a single, coherent narrative of identity is desirable.

On Blipfoto, in contrast, profiles tend to be brief. They do not contain a picture of the author. Self-portraits are fairly rare among the photos taken too. The camera is turned outward onto what the photographer sees, not the self. It is what the author notices through a photo or where they are located that becomes focal. Thus the self commentary on the photographer’s identity is indirect, circumstantial. It reflects a relational sense of identity where the author is talking about themselves by making statements about objects or places they connect to, rather than depicting themselves directly.

A narrative of identity emerges through choices of photo, over time. This leaves scope for multiplicity and even for some contradictory elements. A picture of a person emerges from the series of photos they have taken (what they have noticed) and chosen to share, and the text they write about it. The identity is let out, rationed in its expression through a daily series of revelations, rather the self-consciously constructed through a definitive profile portrait or biography. Truths escape gradually.

“It is not a diary it is much more, and it is what takes me.”

The story is not complete. Tomorrow something new may emerge. Much also remains mysterious to the viewer. The meaning of photos are often not clearly defined. Photos often have quite private meanings, leaving the viewer with an ongoing sense of mystery of the author. Furthermore photos have the quality of acquiring meaning themselves, through time and association, that means the sense of emergence is experienced by the blipper themselves.

“I think probably the one with the most impact, a ridiculous one actually is a picture of a Give Way sign when I was coming back from a night out and it was the night I met my now wife, for a drink.

Interviewer: So because of the impact it had on your life?

Yes because we had known each other years ago, and we literally met for a drink because I knew she was back in the country through Facebook, and we met for a drink and we hit it off incredibly well and I just got a picture of a ridiculous like a bollard or a street sign or something from that night, but what is interesting has fixed that *night for me in my mind.*”

While this account of the self is clearly not without lots of conscious shaping, and also coloured by the positivity of photography, it does have an “authentic” feel in being indirectly presented, multiple and retaining an element of incompleteness and mystery. In this sense the approach resists normative views of identity as essential and unitary.

Discussion

Thus photo-a-day was experienced as linked to wellbeing. This was partly because of the conventions of photography that focus on the visually appealing and on sharing images of positive events, and was supported by a culture of positive commenting. This made taking and sharing photos a pleasing, happy experience. Technically photo-a-day was seen as simple, with relatively few technical annoyances. Participants who used Blipfoto often

attributed the positive culture to the founding ethos of the web site that had established guiding principles of treating others well (Blipfoto, n.d.), and that were also reflected in the Blipfoto site design, for example, in the centrality of the photos rather than the user profile. However, a similar culture had emerged on a small scale within the private Facebook group too. Although we have no definitive data on the age structure of those undertaking photo-a-day, it did appear that people were in older age groups. Age may well have been a factor in how the site was used.

Yet photo-a-day was more than a simple, mechanical intervention as imagined in positive psychology and positive computing. Taking and sharing the photo could be elaborated or extended in various ways through the participant's life and through other daily practices and became an interest across the whole day. Photography was a support to other valued activities. Sharing a photo every day is a simple idea, yet its rich and deep effects arise from the way that it adds interest and pleasure to many other daily practices. Even the procedural aspect of photowork, of managing photos could itself also be positive, not just a chore as Cook's (2011) interviewees seemed to see it. Thus the way that positive psychology construes such activities as simple interventions fails to recognise how their effect on wellbeing really comes about through choices made about how they are realised.

The aspects of the experience that seemed to relate to eudaimonic wellbeing (functioning well) according to participants were the impact on noticing things around them, which implied both escaping routine and a sort of mindfulness; the way it was social, reinforcing and expanding relationships; and the sense the practice gave people of learning and creativity. Barton (2012) has already established that photo-a-day generates a strong ethic of informal, social learning, both about photography and many other things. Participants in the current study also talked about it being an outlet for creativity.

“I have always been told I am not creative and I think actually by my photos I am so it has changed how I view myself as well.”

Discourses about both learning and creativity seemed to be important reference points for people talking about the eudaimonic wellbeing that they achieved through photo-a-day, linking to broader discourses of self-improvement and betterment. But, interestingly, participants did not draw on discourses around “self-actualisation” or therapeutic discourses. Thus while Hyman (2014) finds these pervasive in talk about wellbeing, the current study shows how within a particular practice alternative discourses are sustained. This reveals the complex and local nature of the understanding of wellbeing.

The aestheticisation of experience through photographic conventions and the focus on primarily recording happy events might seem to be a form of escapism and actively limit realising the potential of photography to tell the truth or even to actively unsettle and disturb. Yet effective, indirect ways were found to surface personal issues which gained empathetic support. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that an open site like Blipfoto is suitable to support people with serious mental health issues. The purpose is as a supportive community to share daily life, not a therapeutic community, as modelled by Kline (2009). Yet the strongly social nature of the practice dispels any sense that it might promote the “myth of co-dependence” associated by critiques of therapeutic thinking.

Critically the way that identity is constructed through looking outwards, avoided the more “narcissistic” focus on self-branding implicit in the design of social networking sites, and central to usual Facebook use, according to van Dijk (2013). But Facebook is not monolithic (Zhao et al., 2013), as the thriving Facebook photo-a-day group illustrates. Photo-a-day seemed to produce a richer, less constraining articulation of identity. It avoids the kind of essentialist constructions of identity that seem to be promoted by self-help and therapeutic

discourses, and as critiqued by authors such as Rimke (2000). The study supports Kline's (2009) optimism that there can be a "pro-social self-help". Piper-Wright's (2013) argument that the selectivity of the practice promotes reflexivity, seems to be partly confirmed by those who talked about the way the practice enhanced their use of photography for memory. Thus it seems that particular practices (and the communities around them) can embody local constructions of wellbeing, including ones that resist wider discourses.

Concerns were relatively few. Surprisingly, in the light of current debates about online privacy, this was not a concern for participants. Part of the character of photo-a-day as it affected wellbeing was that it was enjoyed in a relatively unqualified way. However, a major concern for Blipfoto users, that did threaten their sense of wellbeing, was the sustainability of the practice given the business problems of the organisation running the site (BBC, 2015). Most people had a copy of the photos they had shared, but given that the text and comments received, and the ongoing connections with others, were as important as the photos, this was a major worry. Interestingly subsequent developments suggest a genuine community willingness to crowd source the site, to avoid its loss.

Conclusion

There is increasing interest in designing specific tools and apps to support people to improve their lives, often based on the precepts of positive psychology. However, people already use practices with an online element to shape their own wellbeing. The originality of this paper lies in how it begins to uncover how this works, recognising the complexity of wellbeing as a construct and in the light of an understanding of the debates about the impact of therapeutic discourses and online identity construction. It has sought to unravel how people employ one particular practice, photo-a-day, to improve their sense of wellbeing. Significantly, for the understanding of wellbeing, the paper has explored how photo-a-day is a complex

intervention, woven through and reshaping other daily routines; reinforcing other personal interests; and expanding and deepening social relations. Critically it seems to be premised on a construction of identity, which is multiple, emergent and also partly withheld, retaining a certain mystery. These aspects mean that within photo-a-day an understanding of wellbeing is developed that is much more complex than imagined by positive psychology but equally resists self-help and therapeutic discourses. In the context of the wider debate about the effect of social media on wellbeing this offers an alternative viewpoint. Rather than examining the effect of social media use as a whole, it may be more productive to examine the daily practices that people carry through, of which online sharing is just a part, to see how these effect wellbeing and how wellbeing is understood within those practices.

The findings have implications for web sites and apps, if their aspiration is to support wellbeing, both for functionality and interfaces and for the building of a community culture. For example, it directs attention to the importance of less direct forms of the representation of identity. It is striking the way that the basic conventions of the practice are varied and adjusted to fit in with people's needs and the complex ways that photo-a-day is woven through other practices in people's lives. Future research could examine further how individuals on Blipfoto (and on comparable web sites) embed such practices into their daily lives as a strategy of self-change. The amount of data used in the study is quite small, and participants were a self-selecting sample, so more work needs to be done to explore how many and in what ways people are benefiting from this practice. Understanding how this works could assist in web site development but also be of interest to supporters who seek to help people improve their own wellbeing.

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