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Smartphone photography of everyday life.

Reflection of a screening workshop of an ethnographic documentary

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Abstract

How can we make the most of smartphone photography, which has become so familiar in our lives, as 'documents of life' that help us understand our lives, rather than just immediate and transient data/media? We organised and held a screening workshop for the ethnographic documentary film *Transition*, which was made using smartphone photography, and discussed the meaning and potential of smartphone photography with the workshop participants. In this paper, after introducing an overview of the film *Transition*, we will report on the background of the workshop's planning and design, the implementation process, and the participants' reactions. Finally, we will summarise the findings from this workshop on how to make the most of smartphone photography as key 'documents of life' that help us to understand our lives, rather than just immediate and transient data/media.

Keywords

Smartphone photography; Ethnographic documentary; Screening workshop; Future-proof documents of life; Fieldwork in Japan

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Introduction

The world is crammed full of human, personal documents. People keep diaries, send letters, make quilts, take photos, dash off memos, compose auto/biographies, construct websites, scrawl graffiti, publish their memoirs, write letters, compose CVs, leave suicide notes, film video diaries, inscribe memorials on tombstones, shoot films, paint pictures, make tapes and try to record their personal dreams. All of these expressions of personal life are hurled out into the world by the millions and can be of interest to anyone who cares to seek them out. They are all in the broadest sense ‘documents of life (Plummer 2000: 17).’

The exploration of ‘documents of life’, deeply rooted in people’s sensitivities, is an important approach to a humanistic understanding of social life (Plummer 1983). In the age of smartphones, the digitisation of documents of life has accelerated. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications’ 2021 White Paper on Information and Communications in Japan, smartphones are the most widely used information devices by individuals in Japan, with a usage rate of 89.4% (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan 2021). People use smartphones to create various documents of life consciously or unconsciously on a daily basis. Among these, the number of visual documents of life has increased dramatically.

According to the results of a survey of 2,000 men and women aged 15-69 across Japan conducted by MOBILE MARKETING DATA LABO. and the Japan Photo Imaging Association in 2023, when asked what they own as a device for taking photos, the most common answer (multiple answers possible) was ‘smartphones (Android, etc.)’ at 50.8%, followed by ‘smartphones (iPhone)’ at 49.7%, and ‘compact digital cameras’ at 34.7%. It can be said that the smartphone is now perceived more as a photographic tool than a phone. When asked if they take photos at least once a week, 74.9% of smartphone users (iPhone) (n=993), 58.6% of smartphone users (Android, etc.) (n=1,015) and 38.9% of tablet users (n=559) answered ‘yes’, depending on the device they own (MOBILE MARKETING DATA LABO. 2023). These results show that smartphone photography has become a widespread, common and everyday activity in Japan.

Thanks to advances in digital technology, anyone can easily take photos and create visual data daily, but they are not being actively viewed, interpreted, or utilised. According to the results of a survey conducted in Japan, when asked about the organisation and storage status of photos taken with smartphones, the most common response was ‘I don’t do anything special or leave them as they are’ with 36.5%, followed by ‘I check my folders from time to time to organise or delete’ with 27.6% (Cross Marketing Inc. 2023). As Van House (2011) pointed out, digital technology has made images immediate and often transitory.

How can we make the most of smartphone photography, which has become so familiar in our lives, as ‘documents of life’ that help us understand our lives, rather than just immediate and transient data/media? We organised and held a screening workshop for the ethnographic documentary film *Transition*, which was made using smartphone photography, and discussed the meaning and potential of smartphone photography with

the participants. In this paper, after introducing an overview of the film *Transition*, the background of the workshop's planning and design, the implementation process, and the participants' reactions will be reported. Finally, the findings from this workshop on how to make the most of smartphone photography as key 'documents of life' that help us to understand our lives, rather than just immediate and transient data/media will be summarised.

Overview of the ethnographic documentary *Transition*

The production process of *Transition* has been described in detail in a separate article (Ohashi and Mizuno 2021), but the content necessary for the discussion here is reiterated. The film is an ethnographic documentary that depicts the rapid life transitions experienced by the second author, Mizuno, and his family through photographs and videos taken daily with a smartphone camera (*Transition* is available at a private URL on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/369453515/db2680dffc>). Mizuno's partner, Mie, was diagnosed with stomach cancer in May 2017, shortly before the birth of their son, and subsequently passed away three months after their son's first birthday. Since Mie's cancer diagnosis, Mizuno has tried to document the changes in his and his family's lives almost daily with a smartphone camera. Mizuno began working with Ohashi to understand and express his family's unpredictable and rapidly changing lifeworld. For nearly a year, Mizuno and Ohashi conducted almost weekly online interview sessions in which they shared diaries and visual data generated on Mizuno's smartphone and collaboratively interpreted their content. This repeated weekly research activity deepened the understanding of Mizuno's life transitions through dialogue. Figure 1 illustrates this research activity, but to simplify the model, Mizuno's position is described as 'participant' and Ohashi's as 'researcher' (Figure 1).

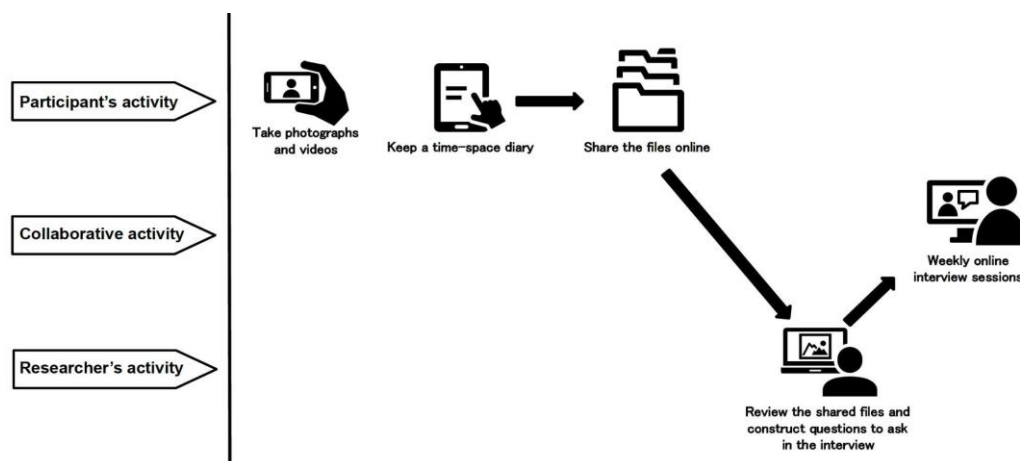


Figure 1 Set of weekly research activities to understand life transitions
(Adapted from Ohashi and Mizuno 2021)

The film *Transition* was then produced based on the visual data and interpretations shared during the weekly research activities. The production process is illustrated in Figure 2.

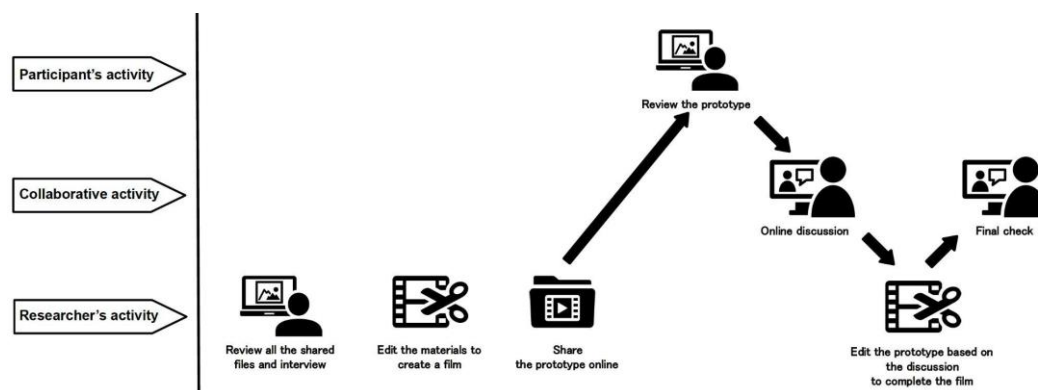


Figure 2 Production process of the film *Transition* (adapted from Ohashi and Mizuno 2021).

In this project, smartphone photography of everyday life became an important research activity to document and share objective facts about Mizuno's life transitions and his physical and mental state while experiencing these transitions. The visual data generated were shared and interpreted in regular interview sessions with Ohashi and transformed into a documentary film. Here, the visual data generated by the smartphone were not 'transitory' but became key 'documents of life' for understanding lived experiences. The film was not only viewed several times by family members, but also screened at three international film festivals and several workshops in Japan, where many people viewed it.

Mizuno was both a researcher and a research subject. His knowledge and research experience were reflected in his actions as a research subject. This particular context certainly made the project possible. What are the challenges for people (including non-researchers) to use smartphone-generated visual data as key 'documents of life' to understand their lives, rather than just immediate and transient data/media? We organised a screening workshop on *Transition* to explore this question in dialogue with participants.

Purpose of the screening workshop and data collection methods

In her previous research, Ohashi conducted workshops in which the film, as a result of ethnographic research, was screened and discussed with participants in different locations, which she calls 'mobile experimental environment = mobile laboratory' (Ohashi 2019). There, participants do not simply watch the film and leave. However, after watching the film, they write what they felt on a reflection card and engage in further dialogue with other participants and the ethnographer. In this dialogue, the ethnographer who made the film and the participants, or among the participants, talk about and learn from each other's feelings and thoughts. The ethnographer can discover new research questions and ideas from the dialogue. In this sense, the workshop site is called a mobile laboratory. This concept was also used in this study. It is a practice of involving non-academics in research and could also be positioned as 'mediated public ethnography' as described by Vannini (2019).

To understand how participants responded during the screening workshop, we drew on the concept of the 'pedagogy of screenings' proposed by Mitchell et al. (2017). This

idea focuses on the learning spaces that emerge between the people involved in preparing for, during and reflecting on the screening of the film. The data we collected included photographs taken in preparation for and during the workshop; records of the authors' interactions during the preparation phase; media used to invite participants, such as websites and flyers; records of on-site observations on the day of the workshop; sticky notes written by participants during the workshop; transcriptions of audio recordings of participants' dialogues; transcriptions of later meetings by the authors; and audio transcriptions of interviews with two participants.

Regarding ethical considerations, permission was obtained from 16 workshop participants after explaining on the application form that photographs, audio and other data would be collected for research purposes and that the data would be used anonymously. The same information was explained verbally on the day of the workshop, and permission was obtained again. Although the photographs taken during the workshop included the faces of individuals, it was confirmed by all concerned that there were no ethical issues as they were to be used as a record of the workshop process in a way that did not connect them to personal information or individual statements. Two participants who could be contacted later were also asked to participate in the interviews. Consent was obtained in advance, explaining the purpose of the study, how the data would be collected and handled, that pseudonyms could be used, that participants could request to stop at any time during the interview, that they could withdraw any data they did not wish to have used, and that they would not be disadvantaged in any way by these decisions. The interviews were conducted by Ohashi in a semi-structured manner via video call. Each participant was interviewed for about an hour and a half, focusing on questions about their feelings and thoughts during and after the screening, during the group and plenary dialogue time, and after attending the workshop. As a token of appreciation, participants received a 1,000 yen gift voucher.

The following is a summary of the background to the workshop's planning, design, and process. It then uses interview data to reveal what participants thought and felt during and after the film's screening, as well as during the post-screening dialogue and at a later date.

Background to the planning of the workshop

The workshop discussed in this paper was held on 17 September 2022 at the Community Café EMANON (hereinafter referred to as EMANON) in Shirakawa City, Fukushima Prefecture, as part of a programme of the Fukushima Biennale 2022. The Fukushima Biennale (<https://shirakawa-art.com/>) is an art project that has been held in Fukushima Prefecture since 2004 in collaboration with local residents under the leadership of Fukushima University.

EMANON, the venue for our workshop, is a community facility open five days a week as a third place for high school students and a café where local people can drop in casually. EMANON is run by the General Incorporated Association, Future Preparatory Office, of which Aoto is the representative. Aoto was a member of the Executive Committee of the Fukushima Biennale 2022, and based on the theme 'Borderless' set by

the Chair of the Executive Committee, Koichi Watanabe, he organised the screening workshop of *Transition* for the following three reasons.

First, he hoped that high school students, the primary users of EMANON, would have an opportunity to reflect on the meaning and challenges of 'life transitions'. As there are no universities in Shirakawa City, many high school students who go on to university will experience relocation. It was thought that through the film, high school students and the people around them could share the meaning and challenges of 'relocation', a major 'life transition' for high school students. Second, some people evacuated due to the accident at TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. They live in Shirakawa City, approximately 70-80 km from the plant. It was hoped that the film would provide an opportunity for residents and evacuees to reflect together on the 'life transitions' associated with evacuation. Thirdly, Aoto hoped that the workshop would become an opportunity for participants to learn about 'documents of life' through expressive activities using their own visual data generated by their smartphones. Based on Aoto's intentions, we prepared the workshop.

Participants were invited through the Fukushima Biennale and EMANON websites and SNS accounts and by distributing flyers in Shirakawa City. The invitation and an overview of the film clearly stated that the workshop would include a dialogue to think about 'documents of life' after viewing the film. Participation was free of charge and required an online pre-registration. The number of participants was 16, more than the expectation of 15. Some participants were teenagers, as planned, while the rest were people from different backgrounds, ranging from their 20s to their 70s.

Design and process of the workshop

The workshop lasted 90 minutes. Ohashi and Aoto were responsible for preparation and facilitation on site. The approximate time allocation for the workshop is shown in Table 1. All participants wore masks, as it was recommended in Japan at the time to wear masks as a precautionary measure against COVID-19 infection.

Time	Activities
16:00-16:15	Introduction Aoto explains the planning of the workshop, Ohashi explains the background to the production of the film and the collection and handling of data for research purposes, and obtains participants' consent. (Figure 3)
16:15-16:35	Screening of the film
16:35-16:40	Break time
16:40-16:50	Participants' reflections (Figure 4) Participants are given pens, sticky notes and clipboards. 'If you were faced with an unexpected life event, what would you do with the various documents of life on your smartphone?' The answers to this question are written on sticky notes and pasted on the sharing paper.
16:50-17:15	Dialogue in groups (Figure 5) Participants are encouraged to form groups with people they have never met before, and are divided into four groups of four people each, where they share their sticky notes and exchange ideas within their groups.
17:15-17:30	Sharing and dialogue in all participants

Table 1 Timetable of the workshop

(The letters A and O in the table stand for Aoto and Ohashi respectively.)



Figure 3 Introduction to the film's background by Ohashi (photographed by Aoto)



Figure 4 Participants wrote on sticky notes and pasted them on the shared paper (photographed by Ohashi)



Figure 5 Dialogue in groups (photographed by Ohashi)

During the group dialogue sessions, participants were encouraged to form groups with people they had never met before so that dialogue could occur between participants of different ages, affiliations and life backgrounds. The question was posed, 'If you were faced with an unexpected life event, what would you do with the various documents of life on your smartphone?' Participants wrote their thoughts on sticky notes, pasted them

on the sharing paper, and then engaged in group dialogue. Participants had time to verbalise and organise their thoughts by writing them on sticky notes first so that they could speak up smoothly in the group. Some participants held the sticky notes on which they had written down their thoughts and checked them as they spoke.

Finally, the content of the dialogue held in each group was shared with the participants. In addition to the visual documents of life such as photos and videos, which were mainly used in *Transition*, the participants also shared ideas on how they already use or would like to use other documents of life, such as a history of messages with loved ones, LINE messages sent to themselves as a personal record, playlists of music they have listened to at different times, voice memos for their records, and so on. Some also expressed the fear that if they keep a record, it will be all they have, so they want to imagine what is not recorded or dare to delete the record to get a sense of loss and think about the future.

The results of the interviews

Two participants, Saeka and Rie, both in their twenties, were interviewed. They revealed what they felt and thought during and after the screening of *Transition*, during dialogue with the group and the participants as a whole, and after taking part in the workshop.

1) The feelings and thoughts of the participants while watching the film

Saeka's case

The film showed Mie losing her energy more and more. When we preserve memories through photos and videos, we often preserve less sad scenes, but this film also showed the painful parts. The most powerful scene was when Mie's body was carried away at her funeral. Usually, such scenes are only seen by people close to the family. It is a record that is not left behind or shown in ordinary family records. I think it would be called 'inappropriate' in Japan, so it was shocking. I was upset. My closest family members who have already passed away are my grandfather and my dog. When my dog died, there was time before the body was cremated, so the body was in the kennel for a while. He was different from when he was sleeping as usual. His stomach was not moving. He was not even warm. He was like an ornament. The sadness that he no longer moved. The feeling of not wanting to think about anything. The feelings of that time came back to me. At the end of the film, there was a scene in Kyoto where Mizuno's little son walked in front and Mizuno walked behind. In a fictional story, there may not be much to talk about after the death of a loved one, but in the real world, their daily life goes on. It was a powerful scene to show this. The trivial event of walking down the street goes on as usual.

Rie's case

I came to the workshop without knowing much about the film. After it started, I realised it was a film about facing death. It was hard from the beginning because I lost my father when I was 20, and my memories overlapped with that. I couldn't cry much because I was in front of people. I struggled to separate my memories from the story of the Mizuno family. I was shocked to see the

stretcher on which Mie's body was carried after her death, like a thing. It was the same with my father. I had a hard time separating my emotions from the film.

Both Saeka and Rie referred to the scene in the film in which the body of Mizuno's partner, Mie, was carried to the funeral after she died following a battle with illness (Figure 6). In Japan, it is sometimes considered 'inappropriate' to photograph funeral ceremonies or the body of a deceased person. Consequently, they said they were 'upset' and 'shocked' to see such a scene. As well as feeling surprised, they also found that seeing the scene brought back personal memories of the loss of their 'loved ones.'



Figure 6 Screenshot of Mie's funeral scene in *Transition*

There are many indications that death and death-related topics have been tabooed, concealed, segregated, excluded, denied and repressed in contemporary Japanese society (Sawai 2002). In recent years, however, notices have appeared on the websites of major funeral service providers stating that it is OK to take photos at funerals as long as good manners are observed. The ways in which smartphone photography can contribute to understanding the process of death are changing and being debated.

Although Rie did not mention any other scenes, Saeka also referred to the scene of Mizuno walking with his son in the neighbourhood of his house, stating that 'the trivial event of walking down the street goes on as usual', which made a strong impression on her (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Screenshot of Mizuno walking with his son in *Transition*

2) The feelings and thoughts of the participants during the dialogue after the screening

Saeka's case

My group consisted of two elderly women and a university student. The two elderly women seemed upset by the fact that someone younger than them had died. I thought that talking about death must be a big issue. Emotions move a lot. Everyone's eyes are on it. But for me, in this film, death is of course a big event, but it's not the only one. Mie's death is a big, painful event, but the fact that her son learned to walk is also a big event. Time always moves on inconspicuously.

Rie's case

My group included a university student, a junior college student and an elderly woman in her seventies. The younger ones had no one around them who had died. The elderly woman told us she had never experienced anything like this because she was not married. Each of them talked about how they wondered what they would think when their loved ones died because they had not had similar experiences. I did my best to suppress the emotions that were building up as I watched the film and remembered my father's death.

During the dialogue after the screening, participants who had never met shared their views. It became clear that people of different ages, affiliations, and backgrounds had different ways of perceiving the film and, in particular, the death depicted in it. Through this dialogue, the participants could clarify and relativise their feelings and thoughts.

3) The feelings and thoughts of the participants after attending the workshop

Saeka's case

If I were to record the changes in my life, I might not record sad scenes. I would take pictures because the scenery is beautiful. If it wasn't beautiful, I wouldn't photograph it. When I'm with friends, I'll take a picture if it's fun. If it's not fun, I don't take it. I just keep the fun and the beautiful parts. But when you are alive, there will always be sad scenes. I don't know if I'll ever look back on them, but I thought it might be worthwhile to have sad records to remind me of myself. To capture myself with continuity. Actually, there was no record of when I was sad. I haven't been conscious of keeping records. There was a period not long ago when I suffered from an adjustment disorder. During those times of mental depression, I wrote down my feelings in notes on my smartphone. On Instagram, I only put the good things. I only put things about going out with friends. I take videos and photos when it's fun, happy, delicious or positive. I found it interesting to document my life and keep photographing both the good and difficult times. Watching the film made me realise that I exclude myself from documenting some things. I thought that if I recorded them, they might have meaning later.

Rie's case

After I went home, I gradually found things I wanted to say. I wanted to tell someone, so I contacted my partner the night after the workshop. There, I was finally able to tell him what I was thinking. I should have taken more photos of my father, like Mizuno had done. I had been hurt. I realised that it was my regret that had caused the hurt. My father died in December, and he was healthy until August. My father got weaker and weaker, and suddenly, he died. I should have taken photos, but I wasn't in the habit of regularly taking photos with my father. There was one day when my father's condition got really bad, I rushed home from university and I only took one picture of him when he was dying. That's all I have. That was the only picture I took, so I'm forgetting more and more. Mizuno took a lot of photos and videos, and I think he has a very strong spirit. I thought I was foolish for not taking many photos of my father. For eight years, I thought I had got over my father's death. But I thought I hadn't got over it at all, that I was running away from it. I didn't even realise the regret until I saw the film. I think it's a positive thing that I realised I had regrets. Now I am thinking about how I can create a medium to express the memory of my father. I want to preserve my father's memory in some way. I could not make documents of life with my father in real-time. I think about how I can restore memories that have already been lost. I am glad that I saw this film. For the first time, I came across a film that made me want to express myself.

Saeka and Rie's feelings and thoughts about the film deepened after some time since they attended the workshop. A common theme in their narratives was about events not recorded by their smartphone photography. Saeka realised that there was no record of times when she suffered, such as when she had an adjustment disorder, and that she 'excluded' such records. She takes photos with her smartphone when she feels a positive emotion, such as 'fun', 'happy' or 'delicious.' These photos are also shared on Instagram. These choices were found to reduce the 'continuity' of the documents of life. Rie, on the other hand, regretted that she had very few photos with her father, who had died, and realised that this had hurt her. This led her to ask how she could express herself in a new

way to replace the photographs she could not take in real-time and the documents of life that did not exist.

Concluding discussion

Based on the results of the workshop dialogues and subsequent interviews, the following three challenges were identified as important for people to use smartphone-generated visual data as key 'documents of life' to understand their lives.

The first is not to photograph on the assumption of immediate public sharing. If immediate public sharing on social media is assumed, one will be photographing with the audience's evaluation in mind, for example, not wanting to be perceived as 'inappropriate' or only showing the 'nice parts'. In the *Transition* project, Mizuno assumed that the images would be shared and interpreted in a closed relationship with his co-researcher, and so he photographed things that represented everyday events and emotional movements, without worrying about external evaluation or criticism. The basic ethical principle of photographing in a way that did not violate one's own or others' dignity but withholding some judgment as to whether it was inappropriate as an expression resulted in thick, redundant visual data. This led to an editing process that made it possible for others to understand the lifeworld and for the film to be made as key 'documents of life'. Rie's statement, 'I should have taken more photos of my father like Mizuno had done', is a testimony to this.

The second is to photograph in a way that maintains continuity from a long-term perspective. As Saeka pointed out in the interview, 'to keep photographing both the good times and the difficult times' creates documents of life that have 'continuity' when viewed in the long term. In the *Transition* project, Mizuno's approach to smartphone photography was to photograph as a record rather than to focus on something. When he did not know how his life would transition, he took a long-term perspective, recording fragments of his days until his life settled down to help him understand it later. Maintaining 'continuity' with such a long-term perspective is an important keyword in smartphone photography to understand lived experiences.

The third is to explore alternative forms of expression. This is related to the question Rie raised with regret in the interview: How can we express something that can replace photographs that could not be taken in real-time, documents of life that do not exist? Suppose photographs and videos are seen only as a means of objectively recording facts. In that case, nothing can be expressed in cases where they were forgotten to be taken or where they could not be taken for ethical or other reasons. However, photographs and videos are media that can be interpreted in many different ways. In the *Transition* project, for example, Mizuno took photos of empty parks and streets at night when he went for a walk after Mie's death because he could not sleep. These photographs were not of observable events, but of his physical and mental state at the time. Exploring alternative forms of expression can also lead to ethical representation without falling into sensationalism, as Van Der Walt (2023) argues. Smartphones are already integrated into the daily lives of many people and are non-invasive media. It is, therefore, necessary to be aware of the negative effects of smartphone photography, such as the violation of

privacy and the dignity of oneself and others. The search for alternative and ethical forms of representation will be a very important issue in the creation of 'documents of life' through smartphone photography.

If we clear the three challenges above and practice smartphone photography, we can use visual data not just as immediate and transient data but as future-proof and rich documents of life. Finally, the screening workshop featured in this study was a practice of 'mediated public ethnography' (Vannini 2019), which involved non-academics in research. Using a community café as a venue, as was done in this study, was seen as easier to maintain a connection with participants after the workshop and to create a cycle of developing the research, for example, by asking them to collaborate in interviews, and beyond that, feeding the research findings back into the community.

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