

From selective indulgence to engagement: exploratory studies on photolurking

Haliyana Khalid, Alan Dix
Computing Department, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YR, UK
h.khalid@lancaster.ac.uk, alan@hcibook.com
<http://www.hcibook.com/alan/papers/HCI2006-indulgence>

Based on three empirical studies of user experience in photologs, this paper introduces the concept of *selective indulgence* as part of user behaviour when lurking and sharing photographs. Displaying personal and domestic photographs in the public domain invites both acquaintances and unknown audiences. Despite the apparently limited communication offered by photologs, the studies reveal how participants allow themselves to spend time lurking on other people's photographs almost every day. The act of photolurking is usually done alone and involves selection from large numbers of photographs of every kind. This careful choice of what to look at, leading to intense emotion and engagement, is what we term selective indulgence. This study opens up new insights to inform the design of user experience in digital photo sharing. In particular the paper highlights the intensity of individual emotion, the phenomenon of using global photo sharing sites to share images with people physically very close, and subsequent gossiping and discussion of the photos not using the supplied commenting mechanisms.

Keywords: user experience, indulgence, engagement, photo sharing

1. INDULGENCE IN PHOTOLOGS

Indulgence is a rather peculiar word to use to describe user behaviour when interacting with computers although some have used it. The word 'indulge' in the Oxford Dictionary means to allow ourselves to have or do something that we know we will enjoy [1]. In real life, we like to eat ice cream especially in hot weather because we know we'll enjoy it. Or we allow ourselves to be pampered in a shopping spree after a rough day at work. And let's just come back to the ice cream indulgence. Imagine yourself walking on a hot sunny day. You suddenly want to have an ice cream. You go to an ice cream parlour and pause ... which flavour will indulge you more? You pick a flavour that you think will give you the most pleasure. You eat and you feel happy. You are practising selective indulgence.

This scenario shows how we make decisions on what will make us happy, and how these decisions are based on our past experience. So can we associate the word 'indulge' with photo sharing? Is lurking among other people's photographs indulging? Our exploratory studies on user experience in photologs do suggest that this is the case.

The traditional way to share photos includes friends discussing their photos, a family sitting together flicking through a photo album and reminiscing their memories, and remote acquaintances sending each other photos by email. But with the advent of digital cameras and camera phones, people can now take as many photographs as they want, ranging from scenery to mundane day-to-day activities. And there is a need to store and to share these massive photograph collections easily [2]. From their research on blogging activity, Nardi et al. [2] found many bloggers have a strong desire to incorporate their photo collection in their blogs especially those who blog about their life. So photologs or photoblogs came into the picture, allowing users to order digital photos systematically, often in chronological order. A photolog constitutes one dimension of photoware [3], with people sending and sharing photos at different times and different places. Among the interesting features available in a photolog is a storytelling column in which people write about the picture, trackback, a feedback column, and some privacy elements. The term photolog is sometimes interchanged with photoblog, moblog, wireless blog or visual blog [4]. For the past two years, increasing numbers of photologs have existed on the Internet and feedback from users is overwhelming. Flickr is home for hundreds of thousands of photographs with a massive user base all over the world, Fotopages.com currently contains more than 50 000 photologs in their directory, from many countries.

Although many photolog applications exist on the Internet, and research on photo sharing has discussed the technical development of photo sharing applications, there is little information on user experience detailing what type of photos they share, what they do when they are on a photolog, and what makes them indulge and engage in lurking. Our research hopes to fill this gap.

To date we have done 3 exploratory studies on photologs beginning with photologgers' experience in photologs, then a quantitative study on the types of photos posted in photologs, and the latest on understanding photolurking. Our studies so far have given us some interesting insights, for example photoblogs have given birth to photography enthusiasts who capture many aesthetically self-posed photos and non-people photos such as scenery and food. They have created a favourite pastime for some: both photoblogging and photolurking; and a business for others. Photoblogs on the Internet have created a new online community that consists of photologgers and photolurkers from different countries, cultures and languages. Users are motivated to use this application because it allows mass photo sharing with remote acquaintances and the ability to socialize with them and others. Storytelling or photoblogging in the photoblog only allows for asynchronous interaction, thus extending the virtual communication to offline communication for feedback.

The photolog has also changed our belief and behaviour when collaborating with other people. From our studies, we found that the photoblog has become a virtual family album that portrays many ordinary family photographs, including group photos and events like birthdays, travelling and graduation ceremonies. What was personal, belonging to and treasured only by close families and acquaintances, has now become public viewing like a big billboard or a reality TV show. And to some people, seeing other people's photographs (strangers, celebrities, long lost friends, exes, and secret admirers) is fascinating and unconsciously it is an act to know ourselves [5]. In a photolog, one can freely look without the owner's presence and awareness.

In this paper, we will concentrate on users' selective indulgence in photolurking, which was discovered in our latest study. It is supported by findings from our previous two studies on photologs.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

While it is a recent phenomenon, photo sharing has already stimulated much research. For example, Frohlich [3] discusses possible photo sharing applications to suit different locations and times, and introduces a system called 'audiophotography' [6], in which photographs can combine with an audio track. Balabanovic et al. [7] developed a device to support storytelling in photo sharing and there are other research developments in photo sharing. However, whilst growing fast, research into photologs in particular is still in its infancy. Doring et al. [8] describe the phenomenon of moblogging on the Internet. Moblogging is a new concept introduced by Justin Hall and Adam Greenfield, in which people can update their moblog from camera phones. In their writing, Doring et al. describe general issues pertaining to moblogs including the usage and the architecture of the application. Van House et al [9] also provide findings on the usage of camera phones and what types of photos people like to share. Unlike Doring, Van House et al [9] constructed a web blog that allows numbers of participants to share their photographs.

3. METHODOLOGY

Six participants with mixed educational background, age and gender were chosen to participate in our latest study (study 3). Participants that were chosen either have a photolog or are familiar with the application. All of them have digital camera and camera phone. Participants were visited at their homes and interviewed in front of their desktop. The study was conducted in two sessions. In session 1 participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire to gauge their demographic background, Internet usage and photo sharing practice. Participants were also asked to list all photologs that they have visited. In session 2, interviews were conducted with a fixed and open-ended questionnaire. Participants were recorded as they browsed photologs during the interviews. In this study we seek to understand photolurking, where users view other people's photologs but post very few or no messages in the photolog. Our findings in this study are motivated and supported by our previous two studies on user experience in photolog. Briefly, the first study (study 1) focused on photologger experience using photologs. Here, we sought to understand the types of photos shared, what users do when sharing, their communication and their perception of the application. Another quantitative study to see types of photos posted was conducted in August 2005. A random 255 photologs were visited and their photos were observed (study 2). In total, 4883 photos were collected and they were categorized accordingly. This quantitative study strengthens our initial study on photologs. The depth of understanding that we have gained from these exploratory studies and the new insights to emerge from them, balance and justify the limited generality of our focused sample and methods.

4. PHOTOLOGGER AND PHOTOLURKER

From our constant observations on several photologs, and findings from our studies, photolog users consist of photologgers and photolurkers. These groups together have created the new online community of the photolog. Our emphasis on photolurking in this paper results from our findings in studies 1 and 3. In both studies, we found participants do more *photolurking* than *photoblogging*. A person who most often views a photolog is what we call a *photolurker*. The word photolurker is derived from 'lurker' which means an online user who posts very few or no

messages in an online community such as interactive mailing lists and bulletin board systems [10]. Based on this, we have coined *photolurker* to mean a person who likes to view other people's photologs but posts very few or no messages in the photolog.

A *photologger* is a person who uploads their photographs in a photolog. Our participants are less frequent photologgers. They do photolurking more than photologging. They upload their photos occasionally based on events. Their photologs are intended for small audiences consisting of family members, friends and online acquaintances.

Our participants are also *frequent* photolurkers, visiting other people's photologs almost every day. They are often motivated or inspired by professional photographers or other people's photographs, which explains their frequent photolurking. In online photolog communities like Fotopages, a photologger is usually also a photolurker but a photolurker is not necessarily a photologger, although, in some cases, a photolurker later becomes a photologger.

5. INDULGENCE IN PHOTOLURKING

Eighty per cent of our participants visit a photolog everyday. Participants usually visit photologs during their free time and breaks. Photologs are also visited when they need to relax. One of the participants said:

P4: "Before I have my own photolog, I always visited my friends' photologs. I browse my friends' photologs during my free time and when I'm bored with my work. Usually it takes about 5-10 minutes in one photolog. Then I click other friends and other links as well. Sometimes it did get carried away especially when there's interesting stories and photos."

Although the participants live near to each other, they prefer to view photographs alone in their room. Viewing photographs alone might appear boring, but it gives total freedom and concentration to the viewer. Concentration does affect indulgence.

P3: "Although my friend just lives next door, they often asked me to upload my photos on photolog"

P4: "I know I can view my friends' photos by going to her room, but we'll end up doing something else. When I view photos in the photolog, it's like I'm in my own world and always indulge in the photologgers' photos and their experience. I look very closely to her photos, and really wish I have the experience too..."

Photo content plays an important role in determining user indulgence. Participants in study 3 like to look at 'people' photos. They also like to see holiday pictures that combine beautiful scenery and people. Wedding photographs also attract our participants.

P2: "I like to browse 'A' wedding photolog. Browsing his photologs makes me dream about my own wedding; what theme colour I want to use, what dress I want to wear and where to get all the services."

Although a 'people photo' is considered as mundane by some viewers, there is a demand for it in both photolurking and photologging. Generally, most of the photos posted in photologs are of the 'people photo' type. Our studies 1 and 2 support this general observation. In study 1, of 470 photos observed in participants' photologs, 75% were 'people' photographs, and in our later quantitative experiment of the 4883 photos classified 61.5% are people photos. One interesting observation is that there are often self-posed photos or self-portraits posted in photologs. In our studies, participant 1 from study 3 described how she likes to see her own face in her friends' photologs.

P1: "I like to see people's photos. But I'll spend more time looking at my own face. And when my friends upload photos, I'll spot my face and take a closer look. You just can't do it with others presence..."

Since a photolog offers thousands of photographs, the photolurker unconsciously selects photologs that they want to see. Their preferences are based on their past experience photolurking. From their selective indulgence comes emotion. Lurking among photographs alone reveals emotions and these are usually natural, not expressed for others to see, as described by Buck:

"When a user is alone, she has little pressure to present a proper image of herself to other people, thus any emotion expressed under these circumstances is likely to reflect a natural emotional/motivational state [11]."

During our interview, users described their emotions when lurking.

P1: "It makes me happy to see those photographs.....It reminds me about everything that happens in the event"

6. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

This study has improved our knowledge and understanding of user experience in digital photo sharing. The birth of the photolog has sparked new phenomena. To some, it has become a virtual family album that portrays many ordinary family photographs, including group photos and events like birthdays, travelling and graduation ceremonies. However, what was personal, for family and friends only, has now become public for all the world see. There are some photologs that act as a gallery, portraying fine quality photographs for others to learn and envy. Cohen [12] describes how photobloggers like to take 'real life' pictures; life as it happens, the small stuff, candid shots and anything that can tell the readers about the photoblogger's life or that she wanted to tell to others. The variety of real life photographs offered by photologgers invites many visitors, both acquaintances and strangers. Photologs are visited to keep update with friends' and strangers' lives, and keep up to date with the latest technology and photography skills.

This paper has provided some insights on photolurking and introduces the act as an indulgence for some people. But since a photolog site is a big public space with massive numbers of photographs of every kind, the users select what they want to see that will give them pleasure; so this interaction is a selective indulgence; and with it comes engagement and emotion. Although it is hard to justify explicitly, their ability to remember what they have seen and to describe emotionally, suggests they are deeply engaged in their experience of photolurking. Our participants chose to be alone to enjoy the photolurking experience. The freedom of being alone allows people to concentrate on their lurking, to be in their own world, to fantasize, to laugh and to remember. Most of them recall what they see and are able to discuss the photos later with their friends outside the photolog. They like both their own photographs and those of strangers. The fascination with images by and of others brings to mind Barthes' analysis of published photographs in *Camera Lucida* [13], which focuses on the *punctum*, the detail of very personal significance in a very public photograph.

For designers or builders and researchers on photo sharing applications and online communities, this introduction to photolurkers and their indulgence in photolurking provides new challenges for the management and support of online photo sharing applications and opportunities for future research. The two obvious uses for a photolog are to display photos for distant friends and also to show them publicly to unknown people. The latter is implicit from the public listings of photos and so in some ways photolurking is an expected phenomenon. However, this paper highlights unexpected aspects of photolurking: the intense emotional engagement of the indulgent experience, the sharing of photos with those near by through a global website, and the out-of-band discussions about photologs whilst not leaving online comments.

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