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RESEARCH PLAN FOR A DOCTORAL THESIS

Photo messaging
Camera phone photographs in the context of communication and photography

Objectives of the study

In my doctoral thesis I study photo messages, i.e. photographs taken with a camera phone (mobile phone with built-in digital camera) and sent to another mobile phone. A more general term is "MMS message"; MMS stands for Multimedia Messaging Service. However, MMS is, rather, the technological platform behind photo messaging. MMS-enabled mobile phones allow users to compose and send messages with one or more multimedia components (text, image, audio, video, animation). I want to distinguish photo messages from MMS or multimedia messages, as I am interested in photo messages particularly in relation to photographs, not text, audio, or other types of media content.

The focus on is on new communication practices that are presently forming and will be forming in the near future. My aim is to study the potential changes in communication and photography[1] brought about by photo messaging. I suggest that photo messaging will have an impact on communication practices, especially in mobile phone communication.

Due to the novelty of camera phones and photo messaging, research in the field is in its early stages. Until now photo messaging has been studied mainly in computer and information sciences. In the field of communication studies the phenomenon has been almost totally ignored, at least according to my observations. Therefore my doctoral dissertation has an important role in introducing the concept of photo messaging to communication studies.

When cameras are built into mobile phones, imaging capacity becomes a potential part of perpetual visual contact.[2] Camera phones make possible an almost synchronous photographic contact with distant others. In my view *mobile interpersonal photographic communication* constitutes a new genre in communication. Instantaneous or even synchronous visual contact has been made possible for common people by introducing

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[1] I will concentrate mainly on personal photography, and will only shortly discuss other genres, such as journalistic or art photography.
[2] Koskinen 2005b, 340–341.

webcams and instant messaging (IM) systems, but the mobile phone lets the user move freely and thus communicate without any restrictions regarding mobility.[3]

What distinguishes camera phones from other cameras is the fact that the photograph can be sent immediately to someone else. The different uses of "traditional" personal photographs (taken with a standard camera) have been classified as documentation, memory support, and definition of cultural membership.[4] In my opinion, personal photographs (e.g. family photographs) are intended mainly to be documents or conservers of memories, something to return to after many years have passed. Photo messages, on the other hand, are characterised by their transience – they are often sent forward almost instantaneously after taking the photograph, and not always saved for future reference. Photo messages are momentary, immediate and ephemeral messages sent in a certain situation to some specific person or a small group of people, and thus can be described as a form of interpersonal communication.

Photo messages can act as a contemporary form of testimony and authentication of one's presence in a certain physical space. By sending a photo message, users aim to narrate what they are doing and experiencing right then, right there.[5] According to research findings the sense of capturing and sharing real time ("Power of Now") seems to be important to the senders.[6] This is significant in the context of photography, because contrary to the "what is" of photo messages, ordinary photographs are normally used to show "what was" – they work in the past tense. A photograph is a document of me having been there, a photo message is a document of me being here – a way to share the moment visually with someone. The *phone* enables immediate and interpersonal communication, and the same characteristics can be found in mobile photographic communication.[7] From this follows the central question in my research: *how does the convergence of photography and mobile phone communication affect our communicational and photographic practices.*

Connected to photo messaging is the idea of *pictorial conversation* – conversation or dialogue with photographs, where people use their mobile phones to send photo messages back and forth to each other, commenting pictorially on the photo messages they receive. My hypothesis is that photo messages are turning visual communication and photography in particular into a more interpersonal direction. I can find support for this view in the study Mobile Image[8], where one of the central findings was that interactivity and pictorial conversation are essential attributes of photo messaging. It is much easier to communicate with a camera phone (telephone) than with an ordinary camera apparatus.

An important aspect in my work is the transmission/ritual model of communication formulated by James Carey[9]. In the transmission model communication is perceived as

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[3] Of course people can try to form a visual connection on the move from a laptop computer using WLAN. Also, live video calls using mobile phones will become more common in the future. However, at the moment MMS messages are the most convenient way to perform mobile interpersonal visual communication.

[4] Chalfen 1987

[5] Scifo 2005, 368–369; Kindberg et al. 2005a

[6] Van House et al. 2004

[7] However, it is important to notice that only a small portion of photographs taken with a camera phone are sent forward as photo messages.

[8] Koskinen et al. 2002

[9] Carey 1989

one-way transfer of messages, and defined by terms such as sending, transmitting, or giving information to others. In the ritual model communication is connected with such concepts as togetherness, participation, and partnership. It is relevant to study these two models in the context of photography, as personal photography in particular has not been extensively studied in relation to them. Another fresh angle is to review the ritual model in the context of one-to-one interpersonal communication.

Based on previous research it can be concluded that photo messaging is strongly connected to the ritual model of communication. Research subjects have explained that they send pictures of daily life to members of their intimate sphere for information, but even more for *connection*.[10] The combination of camera and direct sending capabilities lets people use images to bring remote others into an experience.[11] The camera phone seems to respond to a need on the part of users to embed their social relations within a context, as well as a need to appropriate their social spaces visually.[12] Drawing someone visually into an experience in real time despite being separated by distance represents a compelling way to stay close (and is an example of strong "telepresence").[13]

I will divide the aforementioned dimensions of photo messaging into a six-fold table:

	Visual mobile communication	**Photography**
Time and distance	Photographic communication over distance in almost real time	Photographs as a form of telepresence; transient photographs
Interpersonal communication	Interpersonal visual communication using a mobile phone	Pictorial conversation using photographs
Transmission model and ritual model	Photographic messages communicated from a mobile phone; convergence of phone and camera	Photographs as a connection

The topics of my research will arise from this general framework, and I will study *photo messaging in relation to all the six sections in the table*. I will not include a separate empirical part, but will rather apply the results from my empirical study throughout the chapters.

I will carry out a small survey between November 2006 and February 2007, in which I will study the photo messaging practices of a group of students at Arcada University of Applied Science in Helsinki. I will ask students attending the "Critical Media Analysis" course to fill out two questionnaires, and I will elaborate the study by interviewing 10 students. The study will be implemented in cooperation with PhD Matteo Stocchetti from Arcada.

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[10] Van House et al. 2005, 1855

[11] Kindberg et al. 2005b, 48

[12] Scifo 2005, 370-373

[13] Kindberg et al. 2005b, 46

In addition to my own empirical study, I will examine recent empirical studies concentrating on camera phone photography and photo messaging.[14] Most of the studies can be called "design studies" – studies of technology that does not yet exist,[15] still they provide a lot of insights into the ways users conceive of photo messaging and the possibility to communicate visually over geographic distances. The studies have not been made in the field of communication research, but I will analyze them in the context of communication theory.

The theoretical background of my research is in communication studies, although the phenomenon is relatively new to the field. My study offers understanding of photo messaging and its position in people's everyday visual communication practices. I will write the dissertation in English. My supervisors are professor Merja Salo, DA, and professor Ilpo Koskinen, D.Soc.Sc., from the University of Art and Design Helsinki.

Keywords

photo message, MMS, photography, visual communication, mobile communication, camera phone

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[14] Such as Davis et al. 2005; Frohlich et al. 2002; Kindberg et al. 2005a; Koskinen et al. 2002; Kurvinen 2003; Ling & Julsrud 2005; Mäkelä et al. 2000; Sarvas et al. 2004; Scifo 2005; Van House et al. 2004; Van House et al. 2005.

[15] Koskinen 2005a

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