How photography helps people to have fun

Photography revolutionised our relationship to time. The assumed transience of all experience was ended by the possibility of freezing a particular moment and retaining it as a record, instantly, without the time and effort required by a painting. Yet this resulted in a paradox. If the intention was to capture and record our transient experience, the photograph itself was a serious act that most often demanded respect. As a result, people usually stopped whatever they were doing and posed specifically for the photograph. So photography is mostly a vast archive of how people posed for photographs. This has its own history, from a time when it was important to look serious to another when you were inevitably ordered to ‘say cheese’. The current demand is for authenticity, avoiding images which look at all formal, but this is equally part of a history of posing.

It is still relatively rare to see photos where people seem to have entirely disregarded the act itself. We might have expected this to have arrived with social media, given the sheer ubiquity of photography today. But an inspection of thousands of Facebook photographs taken of young people in The Glades and posted on Facebook suggests we have reached a sort of compromise. They show people attempting to look more spontaneous, but upon inspection it becomes apparent that this ‘spontaneous’ look is almost as repetitious and rule-based as the prior era of formal posing. Most people now try to look as if their photo is a spontaneous testament to how they are feeling at that moment, but people demonstrate this in a way that conforms to certain genres of poses.

If there is now a responsibility to look spontaneous, as opposed to looking formal or just smiling, this is an awful lot easier to achieve if we develop standard techniques. That way we don’t have to think about this
every time a camera phone is pointed at us. The photographs of these schoolchildren suggest two currently dominant ways to look informal and spontaneous. The first of these is simply to stick out one's tongue (Figs 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3).

This is culturally specific, since we found 127 examples of such images from The Glades, but only five from El Mirador (Appendix Figure 1). Equally common is to make a gesture with one's fingers – usually two (Figs 2.4–2.5).

Sticking out one’s tongue has become a highly conventional pose. Ironically it is most likely an attempt to distance oneself from formal posing.

Gesturing with two fingers is another conventional pose that suggests a ‘spontaneous’ response to being photographed.
Although superficially these might have some similarity to US hip-hop style or ‘gangsta’ style gestures, there is no evidence that they retain such connotations. They seem instead to have become merely another version of sticking out the tongue to show that they are not looking formal or boring.

Exceptions occur when people are supposed to look formal for some special occasion, which for school pupils usually means the school ball. Yet even here they usually manage to slip in a few images that reproduce this distancing from formality (Fig. 2.6). Formal posing or saying ‘cheese’ was clearly a response to being photographed and an acknowledgement of such. By contrast, although sticking out tongues and fingers is just as much a response, this is not what such gestures are intended to convey. They are rather supposed to say something about the experience people are having – in essence that they are having a great time which happens to be captured by the photographer.

This opens up another possibility. Could it be that taking these photographs is not just evidence that they are having fun, but an act which contributes to them having fun? Has taking photographs shifted from being merely a record of experience to a means of enhancing that experience, of making the moment itself better and more exciting?

The best evidence for this shift in the very purpose of photography is to start with their quality, or often their complete lack of it. Many of the party photos posted on Facebook are – to use the modern colloquialism – ‘absolute rubbish’. Below are three such photos taken from those posted by school pupils in The Glades (Figs 2.7, 2.8 and 2.9). These images are just a few that have escaped from the process of editing, but they are the tip of an iceberg. In talking to the pupils themselves, and also observing related events, it becomes clear that the vast number of photos which
are taken today on smartphones are never likely actually to be posted on social media. In a survey of 2,498 schoolchildren we found that the number of photos they take each week is far greater than the numbers they post on sites such as Instagram and Facebook. From our conversations, it appears that many of these photos are taken at parties or other events where people go largely to enjoy themselves. Such photos may be accompanied by texts which attest to how good the party was and point out to others what a good time they missed by not being there.

While at these parties, taking out one’s smartphone for a selfie or another photo is a constant activity. What is important is the reaction to seeing someone do this. The people who notice a camera phone being pointed at them not only make these gestures with face and hands. They also embrace each other, make other gestures, shout ‘woo woo’, or ‘nice one’ and generally let their excitement move up a gear. It seems that people point their phones partly to encourage the subjects to get more excited, and thereby to have more fun. As a result the quality of the photograph may have diminished, but the quality of the experience has been enhanced. Which is why it really doesn’t matter if some of the images look ‘absolutely rubbish’ and are too dark or out of focus to show anything. Their purpose has already been served by the act of taking.

As so often with innovations, there is a flipside. While having a photo taken can in itself be fun, the threat that it might actually be posted can curb enjoyment. As one school pupil noted, ‘you want to be able to do whatever you like at a party, but can’t cos you are worried someone’s going to take a photo of it. Got to the point where you want to put a phone in a basket’. In short, the true photograph of experience is potentially the most threatening form of image, since it could become a medium of exposure. This is another reason why people may make sure
they respond to the camera by making the appropriate ‘fun’ gesture, rather than just looking drunk or kissing the wrong person.

For these reasons, the dominant image at a certain age is that which provides evidence of enjoyment. Sticking your tongue out and splaying your fingers are the most common gestures, but there are endless ways in which people can don masks, pull a face, look ugly or turn to the side that will have a similar effect. All of these are quite common in Facebook postings (Figs 2.10, 2.11, 2.12 and 2.13).

Featuring this particular style of pose in one’s profile picture seems much more common in The Glades, where there are 72 examples. In El Mirador, by contrast, there are only eight (Appendix Fig. 2).

If we view taking photographs as not just a means for recording experiences, then we can point to an obvious analogy. The presence of alcohol has become the single essential visual evidence that young people are enjoying themselves; like the photograph itself, it possesses

There are many varieties of poses that suggest spontaneity and fun
a dual role, being both the instrument and simultaneously the evidence for fun (Figs 2.14, 2.15 and 2.16).

Clearly the teenagers are well aware of the parallel between these two: when they realise that they are going to be photographed they very often reach for alcoholic drinks, which are often gestured towards the camera (Figs 2.17 and 2.18).

Once again this is more common in The Glades, where in our sample of the 20 most recent postings 19 people posted 62 such images (Appendix Figure 4); in El Mirador seven people posted 11 such images. But what the Appendix does not show is how much this corresponds to the teenage age group in particular. For El Mirador, there is only a single post by a school pupil with a drink, while in The Glades there are nine school pupils who posted 40 such images.

Occasionally they will add comments and memes on the theme of alcohol, but this is much more common for adults (Fig. 2.19).
So far the arguments that have been put forward hopefully provide a convincing answer to the question of why these young people take and pose for photographs. But none of this as yet addresses the question of why they post photographs, nor why they post them on Facebook. Once again, talking with them extensively helps to complement what we can gain from observing their activities. About the most misleading comment one could make about teenage posting is to suggest that it is narcissistic or a form of self-expression. The people who say these things actually seem to have spent no time with teenagers.

In conversation, it becomes clear that these teenagers rarely have sufficient self-confidence at this age to be the sole judge even of whether or not they are having fun. What they require is the constant confirmation of their peers. For this they have to perform some action that will elicit a potential response. Such is the sense of necessity for this peer engagement that teenagers feel they have no choice but to present themselves for inspection. Posting is not about themselves: it is about finding a way to connect to others. Narcissism and self-expression implies an autonomy they simply do not possess.

So to return to those party pictures, it seems that members of this age group find it difficult even to convince themselves that they are having a good time without constant external affirmation that things are good. If, however, the evidence is posted, made public and then affirmed by others, they can finally convince themselves that they did have a good time, that the memorialisation is testimony that this was indeed a memorable occasion and possibly even that they are actually reasonably attractive.

However, the issue of posting such photographs on Facebook has become more complex over the last four years. What started as a peer group platform has changed radically as family and other adults have
colonised Facebook. These days all school pupils over the age of 16 (which these are) are well aware of the negative implications of posting compromising photographs on platforms such as Facebook where they may be seen by parents and relatives. So in a sense, some of the previous argument was coming to an end around the time this research was beginning. It seemed that is how Facebook had been employed between around 2007 and 2011, but things were changing fast.

By 2012 and 2013 it is quite likely that the more exciting and risky the moment, the less likely it was to end up on Facebook. Many of those photographs have recently migrated to WhatsApp instead. Indeed, a noticeable change occurred between when we first started following these pupils on Facebook in 2012 and when it came to selecting examples for this book in 2015. Significantly, in between the two periods many of these pupils had finished school; it may well be that there is a general feeling that one should ‘clean up’ one’s profile and remove images where one looks drunk and disorderly before moving on to college and work. Certainly such photos were much less frequent at the time of selection compared to when we first encountered the profiles.

In contrast to this, we are starting to see a trend towards the reproduction of images taken from Snapchat on to Facebook. This implies that people have screen captured such images, intended by the senders to be merely fleeting, and in effect negated the ethos of Snapchat by placing them in the relatively long-term storage of Facebook. While some Snapchat images are more risqué than typical Facebook images, however, others tend to be quite innocuous, as is the example shown here (Fig. 2.20).

If our evidence was only from The Glades, one would be tempted to argue that as photographs taken with a smartphone have become
ubiquitous, they have also become more inconsequential; people would therefore pay less attention to their appearance in these photos. Generally the young people in The Glades don’t seem to have arranged their clothes when posing for pictures. This may have already been the case with the decline of more formal posing for photographs, and it also may be a harbinger of adult life. As we shall see in Chapter 4, adults from The Glades seem little concerned with what they wear or how they wear their clothes when it comes to photographs posted on Facebook. The problem with this argument is that it is conspicuously not true of some of our other field sites, such as those in South Italy\(^2\) and Trinidad, as evident from this volume. This supports our view that a comparative perspective is important when considering conclusions from the trajectory of a single case.

The ‘social’ in social media

No one would be surprised that the Facebook profiles of 16–18-year-olds are replete with pictures from parties. An equally predictable genre which is shared with adults is pictures taken on holiday (Figs 2.21 and 2.22). There is something about this genre for teenagers that has more in common with party photos than the vacation shots posted by adults.

If you try and use these images to find out where the young people went on holiday, in most cases you are likely to draw a blank. In previous genres of holiday photography, the whole point was to show where you had been; it was essential to include the iconic images that stand for that place, for instance its most famous monuments (Fig. 2.23).

Such photos do exist from teenage holiday pictures, most commonly when visiting Paris or the centre of London (Fig. 2.24). Yet by
far the majority of holiday photos continue the prior theme of showing the subjects with other people having fun. They focus on being in the pool, at the bar, on a pedalo, with a cocktail, enjoying the sun and being friendly with each other, but pay little attention to the background.

This extends even to the use of photographs at English music festivals. When attending such events it is impossible not to be struck by the sheer volume of phones being pointed at the stage. So we might have expected that many such images would appear on Facebook (Figs 2.25 and 2.26). More commonly, however, the photos that appear on Facebook will feature the friends they went to the festival with, enjoying themselves or just comprising the audience (Figs 2.27, 2.28 and 2.29).
In general, it is quite rare for these teenagers to post photographs on Facebook without other people – in contrast to the Instagram photographs posted by this same population, which are analysed in Chapter 3 of Social Media in an English Village. So the term ‘social media’ seems particularly appropriate to young peoples’ Facebook use, with regard not only to sharing and viewing but also, especially, to the content. The only place on Facebook where it was reasonably common for an individual to appear alone was in profile pictures, consistent with the way in which teenagers discuss Facebook in interviews. They note that Facebook began as a place for interacting with peers, but as those interactions have migrated to Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter, Facebook turned into the site for sharing with a wider social universe which stretches beyond their family. They are reaching an age when they have part-time jobs, and their work mates are becoming part of their Facebook network.

In testimony to this concern with showing one’s social life, perhaps the most common response to being photographed is not just to make a face but also to put your arm around the person next to you – whether

If anything, music festivals provide another excuse to post pictures showing the subject having fun with friends.
this is your boyfriend, your mother or even someone you barely know. To fail to do so might expose you as an unfriendly person or someone who is stiff or formal. In many cases, it appears as though people were asking for a photo to be taken at that moment as an opportunity to make a gesture of friendship such as pointing at each other. Another way of emphasising friendship is simply to be silly together, and many of the photos already shown are examples of this. Sometimes photos posted by teenagers almost look like a competition to see who can look the silliest.

Some friendships count for more than others. Boys have a greater need to be shown alongside girls, especially good looking girls, than the other way around. Furthermore, boys want to be shown with a variety of different girls rather than one regular girlfriend. In conversation, they readily agree that this is an essential part of male machismo and innuendo for when boys are gossiping with other boys. Typically they don’t admit this is true for themselves, but say that it is a valid generalisation about other boys in their class. By contrast, girls are much more likely to appear with other girls, and indeed in a twosome with one other girl. Taking 10 examples of each gender from our sample of school pupils, boys had an average of 26 photos taken with just one girl, while girls had an average of 10 photos taken with just one boy. Indeed there are some females where there are virtually no males present at all in their range of photos, other than family members. Whether this is because they are concerned about their reputation, or simply are not yet comfortable with the challenges of cross-gender relationships, is unclear.

**English modesty**

This preference for showing social situations rather than the individual represents a general trend towards relative modesty and self-effacement that becomes a core theme of the later chapters of this book, where we discuss adult photography from The Glades. Even among English teenagers, we can see that Facebook reveals a world entirely different from Trinidadian teenagers; it also refutes previous claims in the media that teenagers display excessive self-absorption on social media. For example, there are almost no photographs in the English sample showing young people trying to be in juxtaposition
with a celebrity or some kind of important person. These photos are also largely not materialistic, in the rather literal sense that they pay very little attention to anything material. This also means that surprisingly little attention is paid to the subjects’ own bodies. Outside of occasions such as school dances or weddings, or the Instagram selfie, there are surprisingly few images in which these teenagers appear to be trying to look sexy. Again, outside of these genres few photos show that they have spent money on fashion, although in conversation it would seem many of them care quite a bit about clothes. Shoes seem to appear mainly because the shot is taken from a long distance, not because they posed deliberately to show off their shoes, in contrast to Trinidad. Males more than females occasionally post photos of objects of desire such as this pair of trainers and a car (Figs 2.30 and 2.31), but these are still rare. There are very few shots that highlight jewellery (Fig. 2.32) nor is there anything comparable to the ‘bling’ culture we see in Trinidad. Exceptions are the few ‘selfie girls’ (see below). For everyone else, the focus is largely on an ability to express enjoyment mainly through the face, arms and hands. Clothing is usually

![Picture 1](image1.jpg)

Pictures showing purchases or objects of desire, such as these trainers and car, are quite rare

![Picture 2](image2.jpg)

Showing off ‘bling’ is uncommon in postings within The Glades
incidental and merely something a person happens to be wearing, in
the same way they happen to have necks and shoulders.

For some of these school pupils, personal modesty is also evident in
their embarrassment at being photographed. Some of the girls in partic-
ular have on their walls a complete lack of photos relating to most of the
categories so far described. They never pull faces, and their overall look is
one that is pretty and constantly smiling. They never appear with boys or at
parties. Possibly they have been warned about future employers’ investiga-
tions, or by their parents, or they may simply be naturally cautious. Some
girls also concentrate more on posting in domestic settings and other con-
texts more commonly associated with adult posting (Figs 2.33 and 2.34).
Occasionally they may show images that comprise the same genre of direct
self-effacement that becomes a major element of adult posting (Fig. 2.35).

Despite concerns with modesty it is noticeable that in this study
no young people at all, including these girls, opted to make their tagged
photos private. So although teenagers may cull tagged pictures, they
clearly feel it would be wrong to be seen as someone who has failed to
share. The implication may be that at this age tagged photography is

Pictures indicating modesty are
more common, though domestic
settings such as here are rare

A genre of photos around self-
effacement and self-deprecation
emerges in teenage years and
expands with adulthood
seen more as a gift, an element of collective sharing, appreciated in that someone has acknowledged you – rather than, as it is for some adults, a threat or intrusion. As a result, there may be clear differences in the type of photos that appear as self-posted and tagged. In some cases girls seem to be careful to post only demure and respectable images of their own, but have nevertheless allowed plenty of silly expressions and fun posturing to appear on their tagged images.

Other genres

The discussion so far has been dominated by informal settings such as parties and hanging out with one’s friends. However, there are also some formal photographs included in these profiles. The most ubiquitous examples would be the school graduation ball since almost all pupils post a large number of these images. For this event the girls wear formal long dresses in bright colours and the boys wear suits. The photography follows long-held traditions of relatively formal posing, both in individual portrait shots and in those of large groups, usually strung out in a line (Figs 2.36, 2.37, 2.38 and 2.39).

The school graduation party is one of the few occasions for formal posing for teenagers.
Similar genres might include family weddings or other family occasions in which again the boys wear suits and the girls evening dresses. Occupying a kind of midway position between the more formal and the informal shots is a common genre consisting of around four or five individuals seated on a crowded sofa, with some perched precariously on its arms (Fig. 2.40).

There are a wide range of other genres present which cannot be covered here, since this book cannot hope or pretend to be comprehensive. For example, quite a common theme is photos of having fun in the snow or at home (Figs 2.41 and 2.42).

The figures in the Appendix give some indication of which genres are more or less common for The Glades compared with those for El Mirador. Perhaps the most striking difference is the general avoidance in The Glades of pictures taken at school or in the context of work. If school pictures appear at all, they are most likely to be ways of marking the fact that one is about to leave school, with appropriate captions such as ‘the last maths lesson’ (Fig. 2.43). Another photo from this genre shows a typical disruption of formality (Fig. 2.44).
Perhaps the most gendered element of these photographs lies within the genres of sports-related photographs. Males very commonly include such images, which range from going to see football or rugby matches and playing sports to enjoying themselves on winter holidays. Some males post few of their own pictures of any kind, but they seem to have initiated themselves into posting on Facebook (at around 14 years old) by using images of football shirts to mark their team affiliation, such as in early profile pictures (Figs 2.45 and 2.46).

Teenage girls, on the other hand, may post photos of sports (Fig. 2.47), but they do so with much less frequency. A few of them are
posed with a horse or pony, usually when they were only around 13 or 14 years old, in a genre that appears to be exclusive to females.

There is very little political comment present on Facebook, other than in the form of jokes. Nor is there much direct comment upon gender relationships of the kind that can develop into often antagonistic banter on Twitter, as described in Chapter 5 of Social Media in an English Village. Within more serious postings, gay rights would be one of the topics more commonly referred to (Fig. 2.48).

### The English schoolgirl selfie

One of the key problems with the very word selfie is that it sounds a bit like ‘selfish’. The term implies individuals both taking the photo and taking it of themselves. As such, the selfie has become a staple of the media who look for confirmation of their desire to project consumer narcissism on to young people, rather than to conduct any proper appraisal of the phenomenon. The selfish ‘selfie’ obviously also implies individualism, but this is simply not borne out by our evidence. In the albums we examined there are up to five times as many group selfies taken with other people as there are individual selfies by this age group. This would suggest that, far from being yet another act of teenage narcissistic self-expression (as is generally assumed), the selfie is more a repudiation of the mere self. The single most common purpose of the selfie is to acknowledge a friendship. Quite often it is also the product of time spent with a friend. Sometimes simply taking joint selfies was something to do together for fun. These images are then consistent with what we have argued to be the core role of Facebook: a place where people conduct, display and enact sociality. So it is better to see these as Facebook images rather than ‘selfies’ (Figs 2.49, 2.50 and 2.51).

The kind of selfie that has been popularised in the media as iconic does exist, but is now more associated with Instagram; if it does appear on Facebook, it is often because it has been re-posted...
By far the most common form of selfie posted on Facebook is intended to show friendship rather than individual glamour.

from Instagram. This is appropriate since Instagram has become a key site for photography as craft – a genre in which the subject is also something that has been crafted, often food but also clothing and the body, as discussed in Chapter 3 of Social Media in an English Village. Out of the 12 male and 17 female school pupils we followed on Instagram, the males had an average of 33 posts each while the females had an average of 147 posts each: that is, around 3,000 images.

Unlike Facebook where, as we have seen, there is relatively little focus on the quality of the photograph, Instagram is much more concerned about photography itself. Even when the same genre appears on both sites, as for example with holiday photography, in the case of Instagram it tends to be just a few selected images that appear – usually chosen because they are the most impressive images rather than the most interesting things seen on that holiday. Instagram filters democratise the kind of photographic filters and techniques that were once the preserve only of professional photographers.⁷

Even on Instagram, there is nothing like the proliferation of selfies that has been assumed in the media. Females do post occasional images in which they look particularly good, but at least for this case study there turned out to be only two females who seemed to stand out from the rest in their continual devotion to the posting of individual selfies, thereby matching the popular perception
of ‘selfie girls’ (significantly not a category used by teenagers themselves). A key difference between The Glades and El Mirador is that in the English village such selfie posting seems restricted to the most attractive females who would be seen as appropriate to this category. In El Mirador, by contrast, we shall see that females regard such posting as appropriate irrespective of how ‘fit’ others may consider them to be.