

# Curation, Provocation, and Digital Identity: Risks and Motivations for Sharing Provocative Images Online

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## ABSTRACT

Among the billions of photos that have been contributed to online photo-sharing sites, there are many that are provocative, controversial, and deeply personal. Previous research has examined motivations for sharing images online and has identified several key motivations for doing so: expression, curation of identity, maintaining social connections, and recording experiences. However, few studies have focused on the perceived risks of posting photos online and even fewer have examined the risks associated with provocative, controversial, or deeply personal images. In our work, we used photo-elicitation interviews to explore the motivations for posting these types of images and the perceived risks of doing so. In this paper, we describe our findings from those interviews.

## Author Keywords

Flickr, photos, digital rights, privacy, identity, sharing

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## General Terms

Design, Experimentation

## INTRODUCTION

Online photo-sharing sites have become invaluable social, creative, and educational resources as visual repositories for a wide range of pictures that depict the human experience. Amongst their vast archives, there are a startling number of deeply personal pictures that reveal facets of life not ordinarily shared online. Examples include brutal acts of violence, women in labor, and innumerable other topics. These photos provide value for contributors who want to preserve them and share them with others. Viewers benefit from images that allow them to explore unknown places, learn about other's experiences, and find new inspiration.

Though the nature of what makes a photo provocative, revealing, or controversial is influenced by the subjective values held by both the sharer and the viewer, our definition is adapted from the concerns of social network users. As discussed by boyd and Ellison [2], such content would

involve the disclosure personal information, damage to one's reputation, or the risk of physical or emotional harm. The sharing of this photographic content online is important because of its value for understanding how we manage personal aspects of our identity, but there are a number of open questions that surround this phenomenon. What are users' motivations for sharing provocative images? What are the perceived risks of sharing these images, and how do they influence how we curate and express our identities online?

In this paper we discuss the phenomena of posting personal, revealing, and controversial images online, and how the curation of digital identity and expectations about risks and audience influence the contribution of those photos. We performed a qualitative study of contributors of provocative online photos to learn about issues of sensitivity and risk. Our findings, drawn from interviews and surveys, explore how users conceptualize their digital rights, motivations for putting these photos online, and expectations and perceived risks in doing so. We conclude with opportunities drawn from these findings.

## PHOTO SHARING ONLINE

The rise of cheap, portable cameras has led to an increase in social uses of photographs [4]. While they were once reserved for special occasions, cameras are now used to document our everyday lives. As a result, the expectations and culture surrounding the use, value, and appropriateness of photography have shifted.

In a research study centered on the popular online photo-sharing site Flickr ([www.Flickr.com](http://www.Flickr.com)) and photo-sharing in general [5], Van House *et al.* wrote that people contribute photos to define and record their identity, maintain relationships, curate and cultivate a self-representation, and express themselves by sharing their work. Work by Cox *et al.* [3] supports these findings, adding that digital photo-sharing provides greater opportunities for self-expression than traditional hobby groups or photo-clubs, because of the freedom associated with Flickr's weak social ties.

Content and risk are at the center of ongoing discussions about what is acceptable to share online. Increasingly, news stories describe the repercussions people face when sharing sensitive photographs and other information. Despite this, little has been done to explore how users perceive these risks and how this perception is influenced by use of social photo-sharing sites. Ahern *et al.* conducted interviews with Flickr users that assessed the extent to which their privacy concerns were related to the ideas of security, social disclosure,

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identity, and convenience [1]. The study revealed two related findings: that participants' concerns about privacy vary based on factors like who appeared in the photos (*i.e.*, family, children, friends), and that participant's pre-study predictions about their privacy preferences differed greatly from the choices they made when posting photographs [1]. However, this work did not address the nuances of these risks in depth, nor the motives for the contribution of provocative images.

Though provocative and revealing images are a subset of the larger collection of photos shared online, the growing prevalence of photo-sharing tools makes exploration of these issues increasingly important. Not everyone posts pictures from weekend parties or protest rallies, but millions of people share photos online that reveal facets of their own identity, or the identity of others. Individuals cannot control all aspects of their digital identity because photos shared by others are often beyond their control.

Our study examines the ways in which people establish and curate their identities online. In a study of Facebook users, Zhoa et al. [6] found that users intentionally create profiles that represent an idealized version of themselves. They suggest that this behavior is tied to Facebook users' use of real names and the high percentage of relationships on the site that are "anchored," or tied directly to offline relationships. They contrast this finding with research on digital anonymity, which they suggest has shown that people use anonymity to act out their underlying impulses.

#### **The Digital Landscape of Photo-Sharing Sites**

Our work contributes information about provocative or risky images and identifies divergences between previous observations of general image sharing behaviors and those of our participants. We chose to focus our study on Flickr and its users. We recruited from Flickr (rather than competitors such as Facebook or Picasa) because of the open nature of the majority of the photos shared on the site. However, we also collected data about other sites where our participants shared photos for comparison. In this way, our contribution is relevant to topics far broader than just Flickr and addresses the general phenomena of sharing provocative photos online.

#### **STUDY DESIGN**

We recruited participants using advertisements that called for people who had used Flickr, generally, to post personal photographs publicly online. These advertisements were posted to online research boards (*e.g.*, Craigslist), social networking sites (*e.g.*, Twitter and Facebook), and around our university campus. We also directly contacted Flickr members either through local area group discussion boards or by sending messages to individual users. All of the people who responded to the advertisements were screened to ensure that they had posted photos to Flickr that were relevant to our work. More specifically, we were interested in people who had posted photos containing nudity or sexual situations, that expressed strong political or religious beliefs, that depicted physical ailments and harm, that

documented criminal acts and, more generally, that revealed unconventional or "risky" aspects of their identity.

#### **Participants**

There were 10 participants in our study. Participants had a wide variety of backgrounds and occupations, although all of them had attended at least some college. The average age was 39 (S.D. = 14). Three participants identified as female, six identified as male, and one identified as gender queer. The participants shared a wide range of photos, including naked photos, sexually explicit art, photos depicting them engaging in criminal acts, and photos depicting political viewpoints such as support for gay rights.

We met with each participant for a single 1-2 hour session focused on exploring their experiences with photo-sharing sites and their feelings about sharing provocative material. Participants began by completing a short survey to tell us about their Flickr use (frequency, number of contacts, and so on) and any other photo-sharing sites they used. Next, we conducted a semi-structured interview. We used photo elicitation as a central part of our interview process. Photo elicitation incorporates photos into interviews as a way of stimulating conversation and focusing discussions. During the interviews, the participant and the interviewer both shared a computer screen and discussed the photos that were publicly viewable on the participant's stream. The photos served as a starting point for conversations about image sharing and as memory aids for participants. Interviews were conducted in person (9 participants), and over Skype with screen sharing (1 participant).

#### **FINDINGS**

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and coded. We used affinity diagramming to identify connections and draw findings from that data. Coded pieces of the transcripts were physically arranged into clusters based on themes present in the data. This allowed us to explore relationships between participants.

#### **Support for Previous Work**

Broadly speaking, though no two participations shared the same combinations of motivations, our participants were motivated to share photos for the same reasons that have been observed by previous researchers. For our participants, the provocative or personal photos they posted online were largely a reflection of their offline identity. As such, they had the same general goals for posting these photos as they would for any photo. Indeed, most of the people we spoke with did not feel that their content was "provocative" *per se*, but rather that it was a reflection of themselves, their interests, and their values in life. This reinforced the broad applicability of the frameworks described in the previous literature.

Even though participants posted photos that others might find inappropriate online, all of the participants demonstrated an awareness of social norms associated with the websites they used. Off-line networks, like family and

friends, were reflected in the facets of identity they displayed in different online contexts. Several of our participants described intentionally filtering their photos in response to contextual norms based on both the content of the images and the interests of the audience.

We did observe a degree of reticence about posting images and information online because of the potential ways in which they could be used by others. The Internet was generally viewed as a public domain, and most people recognize that posted information is not “safe” from theft or misuse. Participants also had a general distrust of the public—not because they mistrust people at large, but because of the vast nature of the Internet.

While our findings partially confirmed existing theories about online photo sharing, they also extend previous research by providing insight into the particular concerns of people who post provocative and personal photos online.

All of the users we spoke to expressed clear personal motivations for posting provocative photos online, but were also highly aware and respectful of the rights of others. We observed conflicting motivations among everyone we interviewed: between their desires to explore and expand their sense of personal identity and/or that of their group, *versus* their desire to protect their identity (or that of others) from possible harm. Specifically, our analysis identified three unexpected trends with regard to provocative content: (1) people advocate for the right to be themselves, (2) they advocate for the rights of others, and (3) they seek to protect others. These findings, outlined in Figure 1, are



**Figure 1.** Motivations for sharing images online identified in previous research [5] (blue text) can be divided across two principal axes relevant to sharing provocative content: the desire to improve myself while considering others (horizontal), and the mutual desire for growth and safety of expression/identity (vertical). Our three main findings reflect the mechanisms that people use to accomplish these goals (green box). Specifically, people are motivated to advocate for the rights and protection of others because they perceive the direct personal benefits of being pro-socially active. Note: the focus of our study (i.e., people who post provocative photos) largely excluded the lower left quadrant.

described in detail in the following sections.

### 1. Advocating for the Right To Be Yourself

The first novel trend we observed was the importance of a concept we call self-advocacy, wherein people advocate for the “right” to be themselves online. Despite an acute

awareness of social norms, six participants expressed strong feelings of entitlement to be themselves online, which superseded concerns about the implications of their actions. In several of the interviews, participants expressed feeling indignant or upset by the need to censor themselves to conform to social norms. Here P4 describes her thought process: “[my family members] already know I’m [a] weird artist person anyway, and my mom doesn’t really approve of me photographing burlesque dancers, but she already knows that about me, is that I’m like that.” She balanced her initial misgivings about publicly posting these pictures against her wish to promote her experiences and beliefs.

Similarly, in response to unwanted attention received after posting a picture of her navel tattoo, P10 noted “the fact that these people were infringing upon me and being rude to me I felt was their mistake and I shouldn’t have to change my behavior for their being an asshole. I’m very indignant about that.” While she was uncomfortable with viewers’ comments, she later explained that she kept the photo online because of its value to her as a representation of something she loves and wants to share with her friends.

These examples illustrate the tension between the differing values and actions of our participants. Those same participants who expressed concerns about judgment from their social circles were nonetheless willing to post images that could elicit disparaging responses. This discrepancy is similar to that identified by Ahern *et al.* [1]: when it comes to privacy online, people often incorrectly predict the choices they will make when sharing photos. The key difference is that our participants were clearly aware of their seemingly contradictory motivations—expressing their true identity and protecting themselves—and were actively choosing to accept the risks involved.

### 2. Advocating for the Rights of Others

A complementary thread in our interviews was the motivation to advocate for the rights of others. Three of our participants viewed their photos as a means for expressing their allegiance to the identity of differing groups. P6 spoke about feeling a sense of responsibility to use his educational status to support the gay community in Taiwan, his home country. He said “I’m ... higher educated than most the people in Taiwan, and some of my friends they ... just graduate from high school. But I want to, by posting the picture to Flickr and show the link of my Flickr pictures on Facebook... to show to my friends and try to influence them, and just that being gay is not really a terrible thing.”

In another example, a participant who has posted nude images of herself online discussed her advocacy for peoples’ rights to represent themselves honestly. P1 said, “I find it very important for me to be that way in terms of educating people or teaching people to be who they are, and to be honest, and to be real. Be real, and whether that’s on a personal basis with my family or like on Flickr, with the world at large.” She described how she has received messages from people who viewed her photos and who have

thanked her for being honest and encouraging them to be more comfortable with expressing themselves in a similar way. People are motivated to advocate for what they value, and the growth of others is important to their curation of self. Indeed, advocating for the rights of others to express their identities not only ensures people's right to express their own identity, it acknowledges that ultimately identity is socially constructed. People advocate for others' rights because they know that their identities are shaped by processes beyond individual control.

### 3. Protecting Others

Despite participants' willingness to violate numerous social norms, we found a universal cautiousness about putting others at risk. Although the degree to which they shared compromising pictures of others varied, all ten participants in our study expressed the desire to protect others through their actions. Sharing potentially risky content online was viewed as a personal choice, and participants did not want to infringe on others' rights to make that choice.

For example, P5 discussed his experience posting pictures of a friend who had expressed concern with revealing damaging details of his personal life to his students and colleagues. P5 mentioned that his friend "*is very concerned about his privacy. And also just of sort of generally about the Internet, he is also just very concerned about that. So I have to be very cautious and I've had to remove photographs of him.*" Although the participant was using his photos as a venue to express his beliefs, he did not want to put anyone else at risk to do so.

Only one participant in our study explicitly declared that her goal for posting photos was to provoke others. Even given this extreme ambition, she was careful to protect the identities of the other people, like friends and strangers, who appeared in her photos. Though she did post sensitive pictures of her friends, she described how she deliberately left out any information that could be used to identify them. Thus people are motivated not only to advocate for others' rights to express their identity, they actively work to protect those same rights.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Ultimately, the value of digital photographs as identity-building resources makes it important that we (1) encourage the growth and development of photo sharing sites, (2) provide users with tools to make informed decisions about what to share online, and (3) develop systems that are sensitive to users' concerns. Our findings suggest several ways to support these goals.

First, there is an opportunity to motivate people to be confidently different by encouraging them to express who they already are. Online image sharing environments are promising forums for this kind of self-actualizing behavior. Although it is impossible for people to objectively know how much information to reveal online or how inhibited to be when

expressing themselves, and despite the potential risks of alienation from identity-supporting online groups, we nevertheless feel that photo-sharing can be an effective means of personal growth and that posting "boundary-pushing" content should gently be encouraged by interactive systems.

Second, while people are afraid to damage their reputation among anchored relationships, they are nonetheless motivated to advocate for what they value in others. As a consequence, systems should be designed that strengthen users' ability to celebrate and personalize community norms through the curation of photographic social media. This highlights the need for systems that are sensitive to people's decision-making processes and to their desires to both express opinions, protect themselves, and protect the subjects of their photos.

Finally, while it is risky to trust others online because their motivations are opaque, people nonetheless demonstrated universal respect for the rights of friends and strangers to choose how to express their identity for themselves. There is therefore an opportunity to support online behaviors and etiquette that sets clear expectations around the importance of protecting these basic "online identity rights." We recommend that future researchers interested in studying the propagation of identity online in contemporary life—where the lines between real and virtual are increasingly blurred—pursue efforts that further elaborate the ethical and practical implications of these rights as they pertain to the expression and curation of identity.

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