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Love through the viewfinder:
Practices in contemporary snapshot photography
of live music performances

Abstract:

This paper records two cultural studies that took place in Finland, 2011 to
answer these questions. By interviews and a survey, I found that people
predominantly record digital photos instead of video. Live music photography
calls for planning ahead, but results in little publicly usable memorabilia.
People identify the need to create memorabilia out of the attended events, but
they do not necessarily utilize them as such. These findings seem to reflect
general increase in the availability of technology in our lives, rather than a
surge of interest in mobile digital imaging as such.

Introduction

People's passion for music is finding ever new channels as novel technology emerges. The last hugely influential technological fad were music games, but they hardly the only change we are seeing around popular music. Photo and videography at live music events seems to be a norm in the early 21st century. But they are not a new trend. Musical recordings go back in history almost as far as photography. Despite the ubiquity of recorded music, live music remains a hugely important source of revenue for the music economy. This is only possible because of the people supporting it.

Live music is not just passive reception, but involves audience-artist interaction. This is increasingly technologically mediated. For instance, illegal bootleg recordings have troubled the music industry since 1970's. Anecdotal observations in Finnish live music venues suggest that the past ten years have brought a new wave recording boom that eggs on artists and peers in the audience. This begs the question has the availability of new mobile photography and videography equipment (particularly smartphones) transformed the culture of attending live music performances? What is the nature of live music photography practice, what are the motives for recording live music known to the recorders, and what is the afterlife of these recordings? Do the users master technology to achieve their means or have they become enslaved by it?

To understand the practices in contemporary snapshot photography, two complementary studies were conducted. Their aim was to understand the motivations and practices of the photographers. I wanted to see what is the real situation of live music photography in Finland in 2011.

Methods

Interviews

The first study consisted of 104 short, **structured interviews** at a music festival. The chosen festival was outdoor rock and pop music event Provinssirock, taking place in Seinäjoki, Finland in June 2011. This three day event is the second biggest festival in Finland, attracting daily well over 20 000 music enthusiasts to central Finland. The study was conducted in the area publicly accessible for the people paying an admission to the event (3-day pass appr. 100€). The interview study started with some pilot tests to develop initial questions on the first day. Based on these responses, 8 closed questions with were formulated and used in the interviews on the second and third day of the festival. The questions concerned their photographic activities at this particular festival and they were:

- Device used for recording
- Number of recordings
- Has previewed recording
- General music photography practice
- Plan on sharing publicly
- Gender
- Age group

The possible informants in the festival were selected pseudo randomly (randomizing intent, but real random sampling impossible). The visitors judged by the interviewer to be having a break from active attendance to any ongoing event were approached. They were introduced to the study and asked a screening question about whether they had taken any photos or videos during the festival. If they agreed, they were invited for the interview. No record was made of the people who were ineligible or uninterested in the study. The interviewer's perception was that 90% of eligible subject volunteered and more than half of the approached people were eligible.

The people who volunteered for the interview were immediately interviewed

using he protocol. The interviewer recorded the responses on paper, including any elaborate responses the informant might have had in addition to the pre-determined response options. Interview took from one to four minutes. People were commonly interviewed in small groups, from two to four people. In these circumstances, all the qualifying people were independently interviewed. Given the social nature of the situation, it is clear that peer presence may have influenced their responses, although the spontaneous discussions sparked by the interview among the interviewees indicated that people were openly willing to discuss the differences in their ways to use recording technology.

The same person carried out all the interviews and digitized the results after the event. The data were further processed on MS Excel and SPSS.

Survey

The second study was an **internet-based survey**. In September 2011, an electronic questionnaire was anonymously accessible at University of Helsinki web server (https://elomake.helsinki.fi/lomakkeet/29566/lomake.html). This survey was designed based on the preliminary results from the interviews. It contained nine items, some with sub-items and three background questions about gender, age, and work status. The nine items were mostly structure questions and concerned:

- Number of music events attended
- Frequency of recording
- Number of recordings
- Device used for recording
- Which artist did you record
- Why did you record these artists
- Recording afterlife
- Photo archiving and manipulation
- Media sharing in social media

48 survey responses from Finnish Internet users were collected over three weeks. The respondents were recruited through personal acquaintances and snow balling. An inspection of the open questions did not reveal any signs of misbehavior

sometimes associated with internet-based studies.

Results

Interviews

Interview results showed that much of live music recording takes place using dedicated hardware, not with multi-purpose devices such as smartphones. People predominantly capture artists they perceive as generally important memorabilia ("it is important band"), even if not necessarily to themselves. It was less evident if the recordings are eventually used as memorabilia or not (43% interviewees had no intention to share the recordings). Recording are exclusively photos, not video (75% took only snapshots). The interviewed people were primarily young, between 20-25 years of age, with only few individuals over 35 years. Women were likely over represented in the sample (71% female), although the unconfirmed impressions of the reviewer was that a higher proportion of approached males were either ineligible or unwilling to participate. 4% of the participants were considered be slightly intoxicated, but their data was used nevertheless.

Sharing music through social media was practiced somewhat, only 22% said that they would not share anything. Facebook was the most common sharing channel (30%), Flickr, Picasa and blogs remaining pretty marginal. There is reason to believe that the probe was not extensive enough and the situation not perfect to retrieve reliable information about this.

The extent of still photography varies hugely and the number of exposures demonstrates a long tail distribution, concentrated on the low end, few shots per event, but ranging to (semi)professional photography of hundreds of shots. Many respondents expressed their frustration towards the obscure and changing policies

regarding photography on gigs, .e.g can you bring in and use a DSLR or not.

Survey

The questionnaire provided a bit different type of view into the phenomenon. The number of shots made were comparable to interviewees, but the equipment used was clearly more biased to smart phones (75%) instead of point and shoot digital cameras (56%). In the other end, one third of survey takers had used a DSRL, demonstrating much more heterogeneity than among the festival goers. In a similar way, the gender balance was almost opposite of the interviews, 63% male. The respondents were also older, averaging 32 years of age.

Interesting tendency was revealed in the way people deal with their archives, called "preview browsing", resulting from the gap in the number of people who had viewed and shown some photos directly from the device (83%) versus number of people who browsed through all of their

photos (75%). Facebook was again the most common outlet for sharing, 60% were using it. Photo sharing on Facebook was selective, two thirds shared the photos only with their friends.

The stated reasons for shooting were various. Creating photo s as memorabilia was repeatedly mentioned. These findings suggest that the general popularity of the artist relates weakly but positively by the interest of audience to capture these acts.

Mean =49.02
Std. Dev. =87.521
N =91

How many photos did you take?
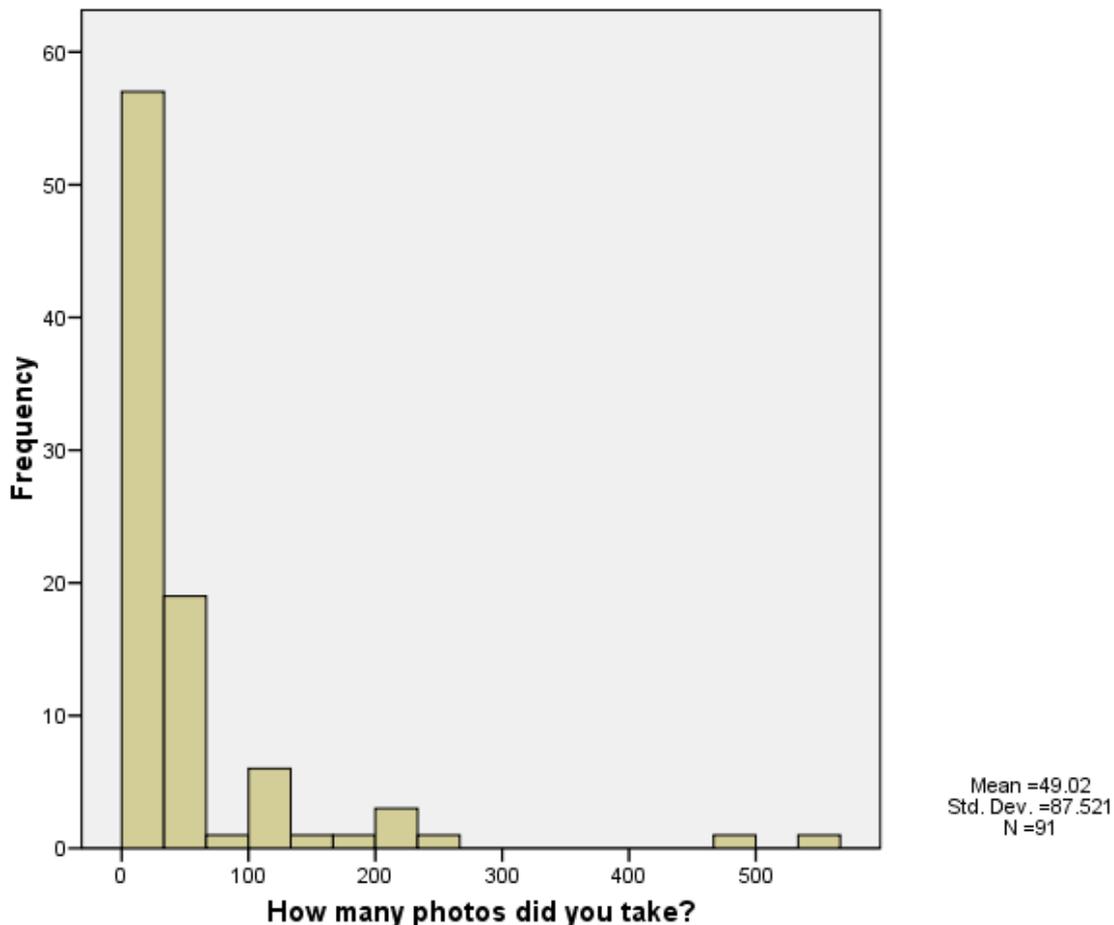
Discussion and Conclusions

In conclusion, the emerging picture of snapshot photography practices refutes anecdotal evidence. Concert attendants are not slaves to the affordances of mobile technology, in contrary, the interviewees seemed quite thoughtful and deliberate in taking snapshots. However, the later use of the recordings was less systematic, implying that users found the act of recording the performance satisfying in its own – as if expressing their love for the artists through the viewfinder. It seems as if an unconscious process of identification with the artist drives audience to record moments of music for its own sake. Further research could possibly compare this hypothesis against ideas of behavioral contagion ("because everyone does that") and the needs of social identification, i.e. sharing and active use of recordings. It seems likely that all of these together motivate the current practice.

One perspective to current development is to compare to general mega trends of consumption. One of those trends is the decreasing prices of consumer goods. People across the world have an access to a wider variety of technological goods than ever before. This includes photography equipment. The implication is that people are better equipped for photography, but less time for that, as the overall burden of goods is greater. This leads to a hypothesis that consumption and use will become ever more specialized and clustered so that the special technologies we possess will be used under only special circumstances. Such as a point and shoot camera at a festival.

Smart phones on the other hand demonstrate an opposite trend. Their extensive computational capacity and involved sensor allow multiple functions be neatly packaged into one device. However, in the current study, the use of smart phone for photography did not particularly show underneath the use of dedicated equipment. Two possible explanations exist: the diffusion of second generation smart phones (Android, iPhone 3G and the like) has not reached equally all levels of users. The devices are relatively expensive (more expensive than point-and-shoot cameras) and the young cohorts that attend music events are not necessarily wealthy enough to have one. The other explanation also relates to monetary value. Smart phones are sensitive devices and the conditions at music events can be adversary. Users may not want to risk bringing or using their fancy phone in such environment. Some interviewees indicated this also for camera equipment.

Different type of explanation for gig photography could be found in group behavior and social learning. Maybe the appeal of photography in a mass event such as a concert is a combination effect of having the devices and picking up them for use just by following an example. This explanation does not fare so well in the light of pressure of social conformity, which would predict uniform behavior, which in this case would default to not taking photos. This proposal lends itself to experimental testing, which might be one approach to understand this phenomenon in the future. By recruiting volunteer photographers and asking them to shoot actively, one could try to manipulate the masses and observe the proceedings.

Future of this type of research is open to many directions. Additional, more detailed observations of audience at different types of concerts, e.g. dedicated band concerts instead of a big festival, might attract different types of attendants and thus evoke different type of behavior. One would need to a sample a few of these events in order to make any conclusions. A constraint on the research is that the technological landscape is rapidly changing and the snapshot of history fades fast, so data collection should occur in a rapid succession.

The survey methods did not yet reach its full potential. Attracting more attention to the study would be desired and the opportunities to use real world databased, such as Facebook photo galleries as grounding data could be sought.