Family Snapshots: a Woman's Prerogative

by

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Is snapshot photography a gendered activity? If one counted all the photographs that were ever taken they might come to the conclusion that most were taken by men. However, snapshot photography has always been one area where women have been involved.

Just what is a snapshot? A snapshot is primarily a private photograph – the sort of photograph that ends up in the family album. Various writers will define it by referring to blurriness, tilting horizons, cut off heads, figures too far in distance, poor photographic techniques and strange framing, but with smarter cameras (and more informed snapshot photographers) this may be unfair. It is perhaps fairer to say that family snapshots are of the 'Say Cheese' variety – happy families, relatives and friends at home and on holiday.

An early 1960s birthday party snapshot – tops of heads missing, somewhat blurred, and plenty of smiles.

Snapshotting is photography's only naïve genre. A snapshot photographer differs from an amateur photographer in that they take a photograph without hesitation and with little consideration for the technical or aesthetic. The snapshot photographer 'takes' a photo, while the amateur tries to 'make' one. There is a gender bias towards female snapshot photographers and male amateurs (Evans 2000:112).

This is partly because most snapshots photographs are taken at home. Family photographs are predominantly of babies and children. They record children's growth,

birthday parties and play, along with celebrations and family holidays of both adults and children.

The Golden Age of the snapshot was between 1910 and 1950, when affordable camera's became available, and roll film separated the 'taking of the photograph' from 'processing and printing'. This allowed the masses access to photography as less skill was involved, but before then there is a history that should not be ignored.

Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre developed the first popular process, the daguerreotype in 1839 in France. In England William Henry Fox Talbot soon superseded the daguerreotype by inventing the negative, which allowed printing of multiple positives (Coe 1977). In the same year Fox Talbot's wife Constance was also experimenting and taking photographs, and Anna Atkins printed her botanic collection as cyanotypes (Palmquist). Woman were involved in photography from the beginning and as there were no set standards, they started off on an equal footing (Sullivan 1990:12). Women were also, as Sullivan points out, used to doing things for nothing.

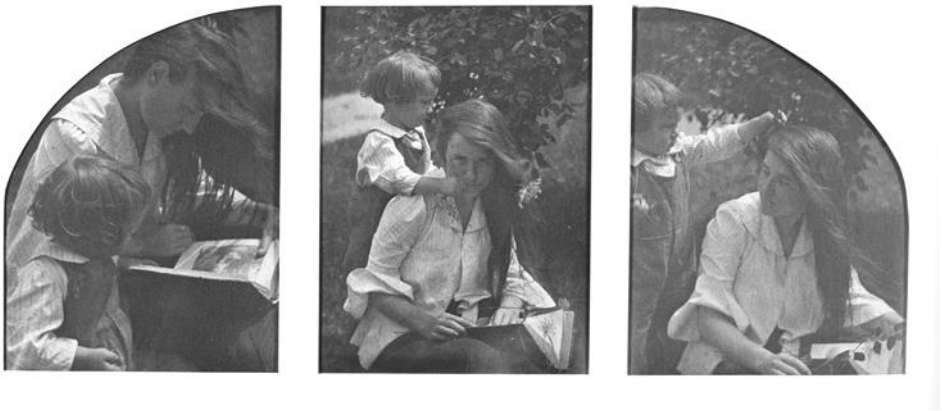
Nineteenth century portrait photographers, Clementina Lady Howarden, Julia Margaret Cameron and Gertrude Stanton Käsebier, who all took up photography after they raised their families, would set the scene for women's involvement with snapshot photography.

Clementina Lady Howarden's 600 pictures, complete with 'snapshotty' torn corners, are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection (Armstrong 2000:110). She photographed her daughters in frills and flounces, using a chiaroscuro effect borrowed from Renaissance painting, but more significantly Clementina was working within the restrictions of her gender in the Victorian sphere of home and family.

Julia Cameron was noted for allegorical photographs and closely framed portraits of notable's like Charles Darwin, and family members including Virginia Woolf's and Vanessa Bell's mother. Julia also documented 'maidenhood, marriage and widowhood' including photographs of babies and weddings (Armstrong 2000:126).

On the other side of the Atlantic, Gertrude Käsebier's personal photographs of a holiday at Rhode Island would show the hallmarks of the snapshot with 'casual framing, cropping, instantaneity, ad hoc and stop-action anecdotalism' (Armstrong 2000:132). Armstrong also notes Käsebier's ability to home in on the child as the

punctum, rather than the centre of the family (Hannavy, p.242). The *punctum* is Roland Barthes 'prick' - the aspect that tugs at your heart and grabs your attention; in this case, the squirming child and the outward glance.



Gertrude Käsebier, a professional photographer, captures daughter and grandchild on holiday.

Their work covers the path to the snapshot with Clementina's focus on photographing her daughters, Cameron's documentation of family life and rights of passage, and Käsebier's leaning to the candid, holiday shot.

Queen Victoria bought a Kodak No. 2 camera, and her daughter Princess Alexandra enrolled in the London Stereoscopic School (Williams 1986:75). The Queen made annotated albums of her holiday shots. Princess Alexandra exhibited in the first public exhibition of 'Snapshot Photography' in London and New York. This put a layer of respectability on lady snapshot photographers and the keepers of family photographs.

Women had an acceptance in photography that they didn't have in art or many other fields. Both the sewing machine and the camera were attached to women – as was the typewriter. They were extensions of the previous 'soft' arts, with the sewing machine taking the place of hand sewing and embroidery and the typist replacing the letter writer. It was more acceptable for women to paint in watercolour on paper than it was to paint with oils on canvas. Perhaps the photograph was just another picture on paper, and therefore an appropriate leisure pursuit for women. Women were welcomed into photography clubs, schools and classes. By 1900 women were exhibiting photographs at the Paris Exposition (Gover 1988:xi).

Why take a snapshot? The snapshot is taken to record an event, to prove we were there, and to keep the event as part of our lives for much longer than the instant it took to be photographed. Basically, we are cheating time, i.e. the picture will

remain after the event; and also ‘place’, i.e. something that happened in one location can now be viewed elsewhere.

What do we see? If a mother looks at a snapshot of her grown child as baby, she is not only looking at a picture of *a* baby, it is a picture of *her* baby. There is a personal connection to the photograph. The contextual elements will also recall her life as a young mother, with all its joys and tribulations.

The above may be a somewhat feminised scenario, but the experience is not necessarily restricted to the female gender. Barthes eloquently summed up this aspect of our psyche with his response to a photograph of his mother:

> ‘Whereas, contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder’(Barthes 1980:65).

In this one sentence Barthes relives a fragmented memory of his mother, arousing his sense of touch and smell. Of course, if someone else looked at the same photograph the experience would be different. They would just see a picture of a woman and child. It is for these reasons that our family photographs become precious to us as they allow us to connect to our past.

Arthur and Marie Hoskins, Sydney, 1932

If I think of my mother I think of Mills and Boon and pins and needles sticking out of her red cardiganed chest – but if I think of a photograph of her I recall one taken by a Sydney street photographer. She looks swish for the Depression years, captured mid-stride next to her father as he lights a cigarette. I can feel the softness of the fur collar and the weight of her stylish wool coat. My mother has passed on, but in this photo she is alive – it is not only a ‘trace’; a fragment of the moment; an instant in my mothers life frozen in time; her coat attesting to her skill as a fashionable dressmaker in hard times; but perhaps the hint of a wish that I could have known her as a young woman too. I never knew my grandfather. The photograph allows me a glimpse of family history predating my

birth. I do not share Barthes preoccupation with death, or Susan Sontags fascination with 'memento mori' as I think of photography as an extension of ones own life, a medium extending both the spatial and temporal.

However, others will not look at photographs of dead people. This maybe personal, or as with Australian aboriginals, a cultural trait or taboo. In times past when child mortality was high, photographs of dead babies and children were common. The death photos maybe the only keepsake a mother would have of her child. This practice is long out of vogue in Western society and parents are more likely to celebrate the life of a living child by having a snapshot printed poster size on canvas to hang on the family room wall.

One cannot write about women's snapshot photography without mentioning Kodak, because no-one gave woman a greater push into photography than its founder, George Eastman.

Eastman couldn't find a big enough market for his new flexible film in commercial photography, so he looked elsewhere. When the Kodak camera hit the market in the 1880s he did two things: domesticised and industrialised (Grover 1992:140). The photographer no longer needed to develop glass plates and print, as the box camera with flexible film was mailed to Kodak for processing, printing, and a new 100 shot film reloaded and all returned to the customer. This put photography within reach of the home photographer and into the realms of mass marketing.

Women in general were wanting more than domesticity out of life. The suffragette movement was well underway. Women not only wanted to vote, but to have a right to higher education and a right to work. From the 1850s on Isaac Singer had successfully marketed the Singer Sewing Machine to women in both the US and England as a labour saving device. He had also cunningly invented time payment to pay for it (Singer 2009). Housework was becoming easier, birthrates were declining in the Western world, but although woman wanted equality, consumer advertising was still aimed at products women could use in the home.

George Eastman, in 1885, launched his mass marketing campaign to 'populize photography to an extent as yet scarcely dreamed of' and would back it up with a simple camera that would 'furnish anybody, man, women or child who has sufficient

intelligence to point a box straight and press a button' and would use one of the worlds most successful advertising slogans of 'You press the button, we do the rest' (Gover 1988:13, Hannavy p. 1278). No time payment was needed in this case – the price of his 1900 Kodak Brownie would seal the deal – one dollar.

Singer had it's 'Red S girl', and Eastman would follow suite with his 'Kodak Girl', in the form of an attractive, happy girl, in a eyecatching striped dress who would be seen 'everywhere' with her camera for 30 years. The black and white striped dress changed with the fashion, and so did the cameras, with Kodak's in pinks, blues and greens and 'Vanity Kodaks' with matching lipstick, mirror and compact holder in the 1920's (Wells 2000:143).

Kodak also had enormous influence in Australia with 3000 Kodak pocket cameras being sold in two months in 1895 (Willis 1988:126). Kodak encouraged women to document family life and in 1915 released autographic cameras that put captions and dates on the negatives. (Willis 1988).

Kodak "Happy Moments" contest winners, Australia, c.1914

The *Australian Photographic Journal* considered photography as 'an outlet for the dormant artistic tendencies locked up in the minds of so many women' (Hannavy, p. 101). With World War I on the horizon Kodak launched a 'Happy Moments' contest where half the winners were women. The subjects were the type of snapshot that would survive the test of time – children, animals, boating, swimming, surfing and life at the seaside. Around the same time, the YMCA launched a 'Snapshot from home' scheme. The YMCA printed the photographs and returned them to the family to send overseas to the soldier in their family, a move that Willis says ideologically put the role of the family as an alternative support to national support (1988:131). Photography was now upholding the concept of the modern family as a 'picture of a soldiers' mother, father, sister, wife or child will reach his

heart more quickly than anything else in the world. It will make him feel what he is fighting for' (Willis 1988:131).

From around the 1950s, and at a time when ideology was to get 'women back into the kitchen' and 'men back into the workforce' after WWII, the Single Lens Reflex (SLR) camera was released. The SLR offered interchangeable lens' of different focal lengths, and a mirror mechanism between film and lens, to accurately observe what was seen through the lens'. Colour film was readily available and the 35 mm colour transparency popular and cheaper than film. This should have appealed to women – especially those who had worked on a variety of equipment in war years, but it was men who reveled in the new camera technology with the interchangeable lens', filters, lots of options, levers, buttons and dials, and who headed for photography clubs to hone their skills. The magazines and clubs steered photography out of the home with amateur photographers turning to nature, wildlife and scenery.

Women, as The Other, are not expected to be part of the technological world. Margaret Brenston (1990) points out that society expects men to "learn about machines, tools and how things work' and that this technological viewpoint developed with industrialisation. Men basically like being the 'experts' and in control. Sherry Turkle's research with children showed that in computer cartooning, the boys wanted to master the technology, whereas the girls interest was artistic which may suggests innate, as well as learnt, inclinations (Brentson 1990). It is not that women can't operate cameras – there have been many excellent women photographers – but it does seem that men are interested in controlling what technology can do. Women prefer to "press the button" and let technology figure out the rest.

In 1963 the Kodak 'instamatic' camera was aiming at the 'happy snappers'. With film in a cartridge it was simple to load, had a built in flash and fitted easily into a woman's handbag. The flash opened the door to the household interior: the woman's domain. It was ideal for quick party shots, the baby in the highchair, the belle of the ball or the Christmas tree. By the 1970s the camera clubs were waning, and as more and more compact cameras hit the marketplace women were being enticed once again.

Many changes relate to family structure and economic conditions. As families got smaller, more dispersed, and migration spread them even further, there was a need to send photographs to keep in touch. When photography first became popular, families were geographically closer. A woman would organise her family to be

dressed in their best, and ensure they all got to the photographers studio on time. Families are much more mobile now, so it is difficult to get everyone together in one place for a family photograph. Photographs of extended families are more likely to be shot at weddings and funerals than in the studio.

Studio (or formal outdoor photographs) of the nuclear family are still taken, with the family in their best clothes or matching outfits. Computer enhanced sexy dress up "glamour" shots of women would confound the 1970s feminists, but also confirm that many women enjoy their femininity. Wedding pictures have moved from the studio to professional shots of bride and groom at beach or park. Disposable cameras are often supplied for guest snapshots at indoor wedding receptions and produce even worse snapshots than the blurry ones of the 1950s.

Men may have taken more pictures than women, but it has always been the women who kept them (Seabrook 1991:171). Right from the outset photographs were displayed, either framed, in protective cases or in albums. Countless photographs have survived generations and migrations in shoeboxes and biscuit tins.

Vanessa Bell, a painter and member of the Bloomsbury group around the turn of the 20th Century, created eleven annotated albums of her bohemian family lifestyle. She shows an idyllic life with picnics, dressing up and people doing silly little things, including one of her daughter Angelica dressed as Peachblossum, unsmiling, and with one drooping wing – not a 'happy snap', but definitely a 'family snap'. She balanced family life in amongst tragedies and infidelities, but little of this shows in the photographs. She showed her life, in small family snapshots, as she wanted it to be.

Vanessa Bell would not be the only one to do this. Most family albums are put together as a narrative that shows the best side of the family regardless of how dire their circumstances may be.

Why do women keep the family photographs? It has become a tradition for women to look after generations of photographs. Perhaps the basic nurturing instinct extends to caring of the family images as well as the family. Albums are edited - unpopular family members may be left out, or minimised. Ugly, unhappy shots are usually avoided. The happy memories are the ones that people keep – the ones that will say they had a good life. Holiday photographs show good times (even if they weren't), and also that we were affluent enough to take a holiday. We want everyone to see us in a good light.

In patriarchal Western society men carry their surname throughout their life, but women generally change theirs on marriage and lose their identity. Are women making a statement with their albums by confirming where they fit into the family, and attesting to their ability to care about the family? In the 'Golden Age' of snapshot photography women were expected to be homemakers and had the time to make albums. Now women have a career to combine with home and family and time is of the essence, however, there is little to suggest that their interest in snapshot photography is decreasing.

What has changed is the amount of photographs and one wonders whether the increase in photographs will lessen their preciousness. Snapshots have also become precarious. The old black and white's in my mothers shoebox are still fine after 100 years, whereas my 1970s slides have gone fungussy and many colour snapshots have faded. Currently most snapshots reside on computers where hard drives fail, files get written over, and there seems to be no consensus at all on just how long a CD or DVD will last. We live in a throw away society. What becomes precious in the future may be a matter of what survives, rather than what is considered worth keeping.

There are few households that don't display photos (Williams 1997). Andrew Gorman-Murray studied gay and lesbian people in their homes, and found that they displayed photographs to affirm their identity in the domicile, as it was a private space where they felt that they did not have to cover anything up (Gorman-Murray 2007). Maybe that is the crux of the matter – displaying photographs puts our private life on on view – but only what we choose to show, and only to those we choose to show it to.

Do women and men see things differently? There is some evidence in a Stanford University study that women recall emotional events in photographs better than men and have better memory encoding (Moeller 2002). Could this mean that women recall photographic emotional attachments that men can't?

Another report on Online Journalism Review in 2007 also stated that men and women use their eyes differently. When looking at a figure women look at the face, men look at face and crutch. A more serious Japanese study showed that women were detail oriented, i.e. looking for longer periods of time in fewer places, whereas men eye's scanned frequently over the whole image (Mitchell 2009). The same article also noted that the subject is likely to act differently if given time to pose, depending on whether the photographer is of the same sex, or the opposite. There appears to be

subtle gendered differences which could impact on viewing and posing, but further research would be needed to deduce that women find what they are looking for in a photograph quicker than men, and may get more out of the experience of emotional recall.

It is said that men 'take', and that women 'look' at photographs (Slater 1995:141). It is also said that men look at women. John Berger points out that women are not only the objects of The Gaze, but are always aware of being looked at. Is this why women are more inclined to smile in photographs? Do women smile because they have been conditioned to do so?.

Do girls smile more readily than boys?
c. 1950

An American study based on high school year books found that young girls were more likely to smile than boys, but the National Science Foundation study said that women smiled more than men unless they were at the same job level, and that smiling was a function of culture or nationality, as much as gender (Yale University 2009). Smiling is very much part of snapshot culture. Starting in the 1970s, when feminism was on the rise once more, women took snapshot photography in a different direction. In England, Jo Spence, noticed that there were conventions controlling what, and what wasn't shown in a family photograph. Why were there no photographs of people in the 'workplace, on shopping trips, or on visits to the doctor?' she asked. Also absent were 'photographs of angry children, divorcing and rowing parents, sickness or sibling rivalry' and Spence claims that it was the parents ideals that were being shown in the family photographs, not those of the pictured children. When editing albums, why were some people left in and others taken out? She concentrated on the issue of how 'social conventions of class, culture and taste regulate what can be said in public' and noted that issues of class and shame were hidden from view (Evans 2000:113).

When Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer, she allowed her body with misshaped left breast, mutilated via lumpectomy, to be photographed. She was dealing with life as it was, rather than as it was presented. Her work led into the use of snapshots for phototherapy sessions (J. Spence and P. Holland 1991).

For over 30 years psychologist Judy Weiser has worked with phototherapy, using snapshot photographs of her client, photos by the client, self-portraits of clients and family albums. Weiser uses her holistic approach to probe and trigger forgotten, unacknowledged memories and past concerns that are at the heart of current psychological problems (Weiser 2008).

Where is the family snapshot heading in the 21st Century? Roland Barthes has reminded us that it is not the physical paper and emulsion photograph we see, it is it's referent, and this aspect has also allowed snapshot photographers to rapidly dump film cameras for digital: the paper photograph, by and large, replaced by the computer screen. Is photography entering it's next 'Golden Age'? Women, particularly those watching the purse strings, can shoot off many shots as they like - unconcerned about processing and printing costs. Snaps are viewed on computer or TV screen, manipulated in programs like Adobe Photoshop, and only the favoured few printed.

As digital SLR cameras have become more affordable, camera club membership is starting to rise for the first time since the 1970s. The amateur photographers are keen to master the SLR once again, now that increasing megapixels allow good quality enlargements. However, only 30% of members of the Australian Photographic Society are women, and this has not changed since 2004, which suggests that women are still not increasingly joining the ranks of the amateur photographer (Australian Photographic Society, 2009).

People are photographed more than ever. In 1997 twenty billion photographs were taken in the USA (Prosser 1998:69) – and that was before the digital boom really hit. My own family's experience of digital photography is probably similar to many others. The first thing my granddaughter saw when she emerged from her mother's womb was the flash of a camera. She is now three – photographed thousands of times and with a ready smile. Her sister, a year older, also has a ready pose – she has already learnt that females are there to be looked at. Their images reach me via email and Facebook as well as print. They are on calendars, flip books, and an Officework photobook celebrates a holiday at the beach. Having a photo taken is part of their daily life.

Kodak's advertising still strives for the woman's interest at the lower end of the camera market. Kodak's Easyshare system to transfer digital photographs from camera to computer has a neat slogan in 'dock and touch the button' to convince us how easy it is. Kodak also offers online advice and software to help take even better

snapshots of subjects they know women will take – children, babies, people, pets, mother nature, holidays and events – and a fashion bundle of patent red camera with handbag in white, blue or pink if you so desire. As the market for digital compact cameras becomes more saturated, fashion is pulled out once again as a trump card for consumerism.

Nikon are less sexist with their current Coolpix compact camera brochure cover showing three men and three women with an emphasis on 'joy' and 'fun', but if you look at Nikon's SLR marketing it is clearly aimed at the male market with more expensive camera models backed up with write ups of assignments undertaken by men. These brochures move away from the family to shots of cars, sport and glamour girls and have an adventurous and broad geographical outlook with slogans of 'Discover new territory' or 'The world is your studio'. Canon have also jumped on the bandwagon with Canon ImageANYWHERE. The stereotyped advertising persists.

In recent times an old pastime of the Victorian era has been rejuvenated once again as scrapbooking - either conventional or digital. Women are ferreting through new and old snapshots to put together family histories or sentimental pages on family outings and events – embellished with lace, shells, buttons, bows, tags and text. Workshops and scrapbooking magazines abound. Workshops are taking the place of the old "knitting circle" and substituting for lack of nearby mother, sisters and childhood friends to chat to as the nuclear family becomes increasingly mobile.

A Victorian scrapbook kept by Lady Filmer, c.1864 with photographs of ladies of the court and watercolours.

In Victorian times scrapbooks could be a chaotic mix of family studio photographs, bought photographs and *cartes de visites* of notable people, overseas photographs of The Empire, annotations and watercolour sketches. In contrast, current

scrapbooks are often very focused, with perhaps one or two photographs per page – the whole page devoted to one event or person. This suggests that women are looking for self-expression, as well as a leisure time activity.

From babyhood to motherhood in one page – 1943-1960s in 1970s plastic pocket album

A digital scrapbook cover, 2009

Scrapbooking remains a gendered mission as women have always been the keepers of the past, the family histories, hearsay and secrets and in this respect women have not changed.

Liz Wells points out that the computer has given us the ability to 'communicate across physical and national boundaries'. It doing so it gives us unprecedented access to our family and friends snapshots. In 1991 only 5% of internet users were women, but by 2000 the proportion had risen to over half (Herring 2001). In 2008 there were 79.5 million people in the USA using social networking sites (www.emarketer.com). If just over half of all internet users in the USA are women, then it is reasonable to assume that there are a lot of them using Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. In England around 15 million people use social networking, and emarketer states that British women are 'warming to them'.

Although women are using the internet in greater numbers, it is still men that have the power of creating and controlling content. There has also been a shift in the type of women dominating. The 1990's female users were from educated, feminist backgrounds. By the 2000s economic prosperity has meant that internet users are young, post-feminist women with an emphasis on individualism rather than sisterhood (Herring 2001).

I had a look at my Facebook site to analyse what kind of pictures people were posting. I have a small sample of 36 ‘friends’, ages from 16 to 78, but between them they had uploaded over 1000 snapshots. Was there any suggestion of difference between the sexes? Not significally, but the men did have photos of cars and boats and the women weddings and babies. There was greater disparity within age groups. The younger, single people were into ‘fun’, so lots of party shots and pictures of themselves with friends. Those with young families predictably uploaded photos of their children, friend’s children and camping holidays. Older people were keen to show pictures of their overseas holidays, children and grandchildren. Both sexes put on more holiday and party snapshots than anything else, all showing the ‘good life’ that they have been fortunate to be born into.

A family photo on Facebook.

My grandchildren showed tendencies of what might be expected of their gender. My 21 year old granddaughter’s pictures were almost all people snapshots, usually her with university friends at parties. My 19 year old grandson continued in the male tradition of ‘seeing what the technology can do’ and making retro snapshots - blurry and light streaked, ‘torn end of film’ and under/overexposed photos - with his digital camera and computer manipulation.

The current craze is that of the mobile phone camera. The growth of mobile camera phones has been phenomenal, making Nokia the worlds biggest camera manufacturer. A UK study in 2008 shows that mobile phones are widely used by women to record and circulate images of their family (McKee 2008). They are the newest ‘snapshots’ and the least likely to be printed. The pictures are generally looked on as ephemeral and often taken at times when a person needs a camera but doesn’t have one with them. It is much easier to delete a picture from your mobile phone than it is to tear up a paper snapshot.

Women use the telephone to extend their 'mothering' range, so can instantly send or receive illustrated versions of their, and their families, everyday lives. Proof that they have done something, been somewhere, or to confirm that the latest grandchild really does have a new tooth. I've seen women in shop dressing rooms photographing themselves in new clothes to get an immediate second opinion from friends or relations elsewhere, or photographing a shop 'special' to see if a friend wants to buy one too. McKee likens the mobile to the 110 format cameras of the 1970-80s, but there is also a hint of the 'detective cameras' of the 19th century.

Men and women wear their mobile phones differently – men keep theirs in their pocket, whereas women put theirs in their handbag. McKee describes the phones as a 'memory prosthetic situated at the interstices of the public and private' as the snapshots are no longer the private little memento's that they used to be, as they can quickly be spread around the public with increasing concerns for privacy.

Is snapshot photography really a women's prerogative? In many ways snapshot photography has been market driven with continuing input from Kodak to get the women's market. Behind this there have been technological advances in camera manufacture, film and information technology. It is difficult to say that snapshot taking is a gendered activity, it is probably more one of gendered slants in advertising of photographic products. Easy to use products have appealed to women, whereas greater technological control has appealed to men. There is nothing to indicate that snapshot photography has decreased in recent years, but there may be a shift to equality of men and women in taking family snapshots now that women have less time at home and men more involved in raising children.

When looking at photographs I suspect that women would have the edge. The one area that has really been women's prerogative is as keepers of both the present and the past. Women have always treasured, organised and kept family photographs, and will no doubt continue to do so.

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