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Technological Disruption and Identity Reconstruction: Factors Influencing Professional Identity in Documentary Photography in the AIGC Era

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Abstract. In the era of traditional photography, Generative artificial intelligence (AIGC) is revolutionizing the way photographs are taken in the real world. Such progress as AIGC symbolizes is an immediate threat to the reality-based practice that underlies traditional photography. AI-generated images, created through a documentary process, now, for the most part, can match up with an actual image in terms of visual quality, forcing a reevaluation of what "real photography" should look like. This paper explores what has changed since the introduction of AI-based images in photography through interviews with documentary photographers and picture editors, and whether these changes lead to subsequent changes in the perception of professional value and identity for practitioners. Influenced by the 'indexical' approach to research on photography, the study will map out in some detail practitioners' experience of photography in order to identify the dominant ways of thinking that interviewees share, challenge and contest. The paper starts with concrete professional experiences and outlines the identity problems that generative AI has raised, and what the affected authenticity of documentary images and the professional role based on it might mean.

Keywords: digital image culture, documentary photography, ai-generated images, visual ethics

1. Introduction

Emerging Generative AI technology is starting to impact the creation and distribution of visual content. The production of visuals is now much more manageable with the help of text-to-image, AI-assisted editing, and other methods; it is possible to get convincing, realistic images without the use of professional camera equipment or specialized training. On the one hand these technologies are an aid to visual expression. On the other hand, they upset the working methods that photography has been based on and the value judgements at stake, that is to say, what photography is for. Photography-and documentary photography in particular, is tied to the documentation of reality. An image's worth is more than just what it looks like, it is also what it says in response to a fact, a moment in time, a particular setting. An AI-generated picture, no matter how realistic, does not

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necessarily fit in with the objects that were actually shot. This then brings up the subject of what photography should be, and what the authenticity of an image should be. AIGC offers new possibilities for photography: more efficient, more forms, but doubts arise as well: doubts about traditional photographic skills, doubts about the photographers themselves, and doubts about the authenticity of the photographs they make. That is, what is the threshold between a photo and a created image? Authenticity is a fundamental requirement in documentary photography and such questions are most important for this form of photography. The transformation AIGC is working to achieve is more than just an improvement in the process of image-making, then. It has a direct impact on the worth of photography as a career and the understanding of individuals who do it. The literature so far has focused mostly on the technical feasibility, artistic applications and ethical aspects of images produced by AI. However, changes to the students of photography have not been written about nearly so much, and their new outlook on their profession has yet to be explored. With this in mind, the current paper aims to analyse the meaning of AIGC for professional identity based on material gathered from photography students, the accounts of the graduates and a teacher's observations. It examines students' attitudes toward the medium of photography, whether they believe what they have learned is useful or not, and their desired career paths; then explores the evolution of photography in the modern era and the impact of AI on photography.

2. Literature review

Generative AI has paved the way for novel opportunities and difficulties in visual content creation. Generative AI can generate images directly from text prompts, unlike traditional image-editing digital tools, which primarily focus on enhancing existing images. AI has been proven to enhance production efficiency and work with humans to boost creative efforts [1], but with its increasing popularity, there have also been concerns regarding technological dependence, creative practices, and professional positions [2, 3]. These changes indicate that AIGC is not just reshaping the image creation landscape; it is shaping the perception of visual creators and their professional worth.

AIGC has contradicted the conventional notions of creativity and authorship. Technical ability may no longer be the true measure of photographic skill as AI can create convincing images. The importance of creative thinking, visual judgment, storytelling and ethical awareness may rise [4, 5]. These developments give rise to some queries: What makes Human Photography unique in the context of AI-generated images, and what is the role of knowledge and skills for photographers in an increasingly automated creative landscape, so the impact of AIGC is not just about production efficiency, but about the shift in expectations and creative values of professionals.

These concerns are especially relevant to documentary photography, which has always been tied to notions such as reality, evidence and direct observation. The significance of a documentary photograph is dependent on its appearance, its connection to the event it documents, the photographer's experience, and the social context of its creation. Differentiating between AI-generated images and photographic records becomes more challenging due to the growing realism of AI-generated images. Studies have explored how "photo-realistic" AI can make and how this can affect viewer perceptions of authenticity [6]. AI-generated visual content has been a topic of concern regarding authenticity, authorship, bias and misinformation in other studies [7]. These discussions are about the need to rethink how documentary photographs are able to connect with reality.

In addition to the changes to image production, AIGC might also be changing the way photographers see themselves. It is through the development of professional identity, which is formed by professional knowledge, practical experiences, and social recognition. As new technologies threaten current practices, people may question occupational values and roles [8]. In

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the field of photography, the automation of several technical aspects could lead photographers to re-imagine their connection between technical and creative skills. Digital transformation does not necessarily mean discarding existing skills, but for some professionals, it might also entail a blend of traditional skills and technological capabilities [9]. This attitude will give us a starting point to consider professional identity as something that is not fixed and can evolve with technological evolution.

The students of photography are in this discussion very relevant because they are still in the process of creating their professional values and their expectations on this field before starting their professional lives. Students may be less confident about their abilities than more accomplished photographers are, especially when new technologies come along that threaten their newly acquired techniques. AIGC can impact their perception of the significance of camera operation, composition and post-production and their perception of creativity and career opportunities. Their responses thus can provide insight into not only their attitudes towards AI but also how they negotiate meaning and value of their chosen profession.

These responses can be exacerbated by educational contexts. As generative AI takes a more active role in creative production, there is a need for educational programs to focus on creativity, authenticity, and ethics in photography, in addition to technical training. Human-centred approach: it focuses on how AI can be used to augment human decision making and creativity, instead of replacing it. In the same way, "co-intelligence" introduces the idea of how AI can complement human abilities via collaboration. Such views imply that student AI understandings could be partially influenced by how they interact with AI and how their learning experiences prompt reflection about the capabilities and constraints of AI.

While there has been some research on AIGC in the context of visual creativity, authenticity, ethics, and technological change, less work has been done on the impact of AIGC on the professional identity of documentary photography students. Specifically, more studies are required to comprehend student recollections of photographic authenticity, professional worth, and their future place in the discipline. The significance of this gap is that technological developments can impact on professional practice but also student understandings of their role in the photography industry.

This study uses the theory of Media Authenticity Theory and Technological Mediation Theory in examining these issues. Media Authenticity Theory can be used as a lens through which to view how the image-reality connection helps to shape the meaning and authenticity of the image. Technological Mediation Theory posits that technology is not a neutral instrument but can influence human perceptions, practices and relationships. These views, taken as a whole, can be used to understand how AIGC might affect the perception of photographic authenticity and professional worth for participants.

This research is conducted to fill the research gap by applying a semi-structured interview with four university students, one graduate, and one photography teacher as the informant to get the informant's responses of how AIGC affects professional identity for photography students. This study does not only consider the question of whether AI will replace photographers but also delves into the understanding of technological change among its participants and their re-evaluation of the value, boundaries, and the future trajectory of documentary photography in the age of AIGC.

3. Research method and design

This qualitative study draws primarily on semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine photography students' understanding of photography. It considers how they perceive AIGC's

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influence on their professional identity. A qualitative approach was adopted to examine individual experiences and views of photography, professional value, and career prospects in the context of AIGC. Students' acceptance of AI was only one aspect of this inquiry.

AI can now assist with work previously dependent on shooting and post-processing. This change prompts reflection on photography education, career prospects, and professional direction. Interviews were chosen to examine participants' reasoning and specific study and work circumstances in greater depth than questionnaires or multiple-choice items would allow.

Six participants were recruited: four undergraduates in photography-related programmes, one postgraduate student in photography, and one university teacher, as listed in Table 1.

3.1. Participant information

Five research questions guided interviews on professional identity and the aspects most affected by AIGC. Topics included participants' understanding and experience of photography, their views of its professional value and role, and their expectations of future work. Follow-up questions were guided by participants' responses to clarify their accounts. Each interview was transcribed for analysis, retaining participants' own words wherever possible.

Table 1. Participants

Participant	Role/background
S1	Fourth-year undergraduate, canvard college, beijing technology and business university
S2	Third-year undergraduate, canvard college, beijing technology and business university
S3	Fourth-year undergraduate, canvard college, beijing technology and business university
S4	Graduate of the sichuan fine arts institute (graduated one year ago)
S5	Fourth-year undergraduate, beijing film academy
T1	Photography teacher, canvard college, beijing technology and business university; graduated from shandong university and later pursued further study at the university of london

3.2. Core research questions

The research is exploratory and qualitative. It is organised around five questions, without hypotheses specified in advance for testing.

Q1. In the context described above, how has photography students' professional identity changed?

Q2. Of the two kinds of factors AIGC involves, which has a greater influence on professional identity?

Q3. How can professional identity in the context of AIGC be understood through students' photographic knowledge, practice, and views?

Q4. How can the reconsideration of photography's professional value prompted by AIGC be understood?

Q5. What views do students now hold about their future careers in photography?

The questions move from a change in one's professional identity to one's expectations for the future of one's career. Q1 focuses on changes since the advent of AIGC, and Q2 looks at the key

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features of this change. Q3 focuses on how students have experienced learning about or using AIGC, and how their thinking, feeling and judgements have changed about photography. Q4 asks "Why do students question the meaning, or status, of the profession of photography now? Q5 relates these to the expectations and evaluations of the future work of students.

3.3. Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and revised to grasp the context of each story and to determine what was said that was pertinent to the research. Focus shifted to comments on the nature of the photography industry, education and work in the field, a sense of meaning or identity as a photographer and future careers. The common ground was compared and similar views were observed with differences still existing. Conflicting or divergent responses were not discarded, but understood as a function of the participants' study/work backgrounds. The material was then categorized by the five research questions. They analysed how often participants mentioned specific views, but they did not count the number of times.

3.4. Research credibility

The views of current undergraduates, a postgraduate, and a teacher provided perspectives from various stages of education and working life. Small qualitative sample was used to explore individual experience, rather than to seek statistical generalisation. All interviews were conducted using the same protocol and core questions, to ensure credibility of the results. A series of follow-up questions were asked to help determine what each participant's situation was as accurately as possible. Dissenting and contradictory interpretations were analyzed together with the interpretations which were consistent with the existing interpretations. The conclusions relied on the material of the interviews and were analyzed in relation to the theory of the photograph instead of the researcher's own unconfirmed speculations.

4. Findings

4.1. Rethinking the value of photography as a profession

The participants reported shifts in their awareness of working as a photographer after the implementation of AIGC. Until now, many had considered that shooting technique, camera handling, composition, lighting and post production were the only elements of the training. The advent of AIGC prompted students to begin to look at the role these skills play in what they thought a photographic education was. In fact, as S1 said: "I used to believe that the greatest benefit of studying photography was learning how to shoot and how to use cameras, but since the advent of AIGC I feel like there might not be just one advantage that anymore". S3 also remembered that the difference between a photography student and an amateur is the shooting and post production. With AI being able to replicate techniques that only came with years of training, S3 wondered: "Are the skills we have spent years learning going to stop mattering, bit by bit? ".

The interviewees, however, still saw photography as being meaningful, focusing on the non-technical and psychological aspects of it and its relationship to reality. In talking about the importance of photographic education S5 focused more on 'whether you have your own visual expression and aesthetic judgement, and whether you can get a well-thought out idea across'. T1 also noted a change in the focus of young people on Truthful Recording, Narration, Aesthetics and

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Human Relationships. These accounts imply that AIGC was a catalyst for students to rethink the importance of photographic education. The expressive qualities, reflective content and relation to reality of an image were still accompanied by the technical skills.

4.2. Changes in how photography is understood and judged

Participants spoke about a process of change in their professional identity that was incremental. The initial discovery they made was that AI can generate images that look like traditional photography. Through experimentation, they then rethought what it means to be a photographer and what it means to pursue a career in photography. The initial step in this reconsideration was to distinguish between an image made by an AI system and a photograph. S1 shared: "I used to believe that capturing reality was the most significant aspect of photography but now with AIGC, there are many AI-generated images that resemble photographs, so "S1" asked whether the photography tends to make pretty pictures or simply documents and re-presents facts and reality.

Through hands-on experience with AIGC, participants were able to better understand the differences between these types of image-making. S5 said AI could be helpful in brainstorming ideas, verifying facts and providing an outline of initial thoughts, which could help in the early stages of the process. Even in the shooting days, the photographer had to deal with persons, evaluate the circumstances and react to unforeseen events. With S4, AI helped in identifying which tasks could be automated and which would require the presence of a photographer.

These experiences also led to students' assessments of the value of photographs. In the concept of S3, it is about changing from beauty and technical achievement to truthfulness, emotional content and depth of thought. T1 also noted students taking into account the perspective, emotion and intent behind a photograph, as well as its visual qualities. Through practice, students gained insights into the different applications of AI and photography, as well as a reassessment of the significance of photography for them. The mere use of AI could not be blamed for their acceptance or rejection of photography.

4.3. Employment pressure and skill development

In addition, participants reported changing their outlook about their employment choices following graduation due to AIGC. Some students were concerned about the future of conventional photography roles, due to AI's ability with basic visual tasks. Although S1 felt that their career opportunities were stronger when they were taking photos or doing some basic production work, they now feared that "basic shooting/post-production jobs may be replaced" by AI. S3 expected to see a decline in the number of traditional photography content as companies start to embrace AI for basic visual tasks and have identified certain skills that AI is unable to replicate.

Job-related questions also influenced students' evaluations of their skills and needs for training. S2 believed that future photography projects would involve working with creative techniques and new technologies. S5 said that they are actively researching the use of AI and digital imaging to acquire further skills. T1 noticed that students were creating work using photography and AI, video and other digital media. Students' employment struggles did not always result in their giving up photography. Most of the time, it made them wonder, "so what else can I do if it is not taking photos?". S1 had started looking at visual design and content planning and S3 had started exploring video and other digital media. S4 focused more on communication, client understanding and project completion. Some of these participants wanted to build up larger skills because they were not sure

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about the employment prospects of AIGC. They saw the traditional approach to photography as one strand of a wider skill base.

4.4. Redefining the role of the photographer

As AI began to take on technical duties that used to be conducted by humans, the participants rethought the profession. "The person who takes the picture" was the general impression of the photographer; the participants outlined a wider picture of the photographer. "I always used to think that a photographer was just a guy who takes pictures; now I would say the photographer should be a visual author, content creator, not a camera man". S3 hinted that the ability to apply new techniques and to put forth facts correctly might be more important in the future than perfect technical details.

S4 explained how the transition happened from her personal experience of going straight into the industry upon graduation. The clients still wanted "somebody who could take good photographs", he said. They also wanted that person to know the brief, present a proposal and make the appropriate use of the available resources. This account puts as much emphasis on the conception, organisation and expression of content as on shooting and technical operation. Through observing the students, T1 also noted that students were understanding the role of the photographer including creativity, communication, judgement, and observation as a part of the technical work. In all these accounts, professional work was creative and judgement was exercised in a real-world setting. Students also considered a body of work of photographs as needing a considered purpose.

4.5. Imagining a future eole: from "photographer" to "image-maker"

Students' expectations of their future roles changed as a result of these changes. Most wanted to do photography work, but few imagined their future work to be limited to photography. As S1 says, "I want to be a visual creator not just a photographer. The goal of S2 was to use photography, AI, and other digital means to produce art. S3 had a dream to be a photographer, and said, "I wanted to be someone that tells stories through photography". S5 likewise had no intention of being only "someone who can take pictures", but rather "someone who can express ideas and convey information through images". S4 started out as a photographer, but evolved to become an image-maker.

Numerous learners had embraced AI as a tool for enhancing efficiency and generating concepts, viewing it not just as an enemy of photography, but also as a potential ally. S1's main concern is not if photography vs AI will finally die, but how someone with a photographic understanding can use AI better. T1 said that students were willing and able to work visually and in a variety of media. The interviews indicated that AI influenced their thinking about their professional identity, but they were able to maintain a sense of the professional significance of photography. As time went on, the concept of "becoming a photographer" was slowly evolving into "becoming an image-maker who communicates ideas through photography, AI and more". The core of photography, observation, thinking, aesthetic judgement, expression and the link to reality were still considered as professional capacities that had to be developed and that remained constant.

5. Discussion

Based on the results, it is found that AIGC has made students consider the importance of the profession and their role in it. Once, it was believed that the students should master the aspects of

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shooting, composition, lighting, post production, etc., to learn photography. The equipment and post production training no longer equals success as AIGC involves more types of image processing, and students are now the ones who have to learn to shoot and have the sense of aesthetics, creativity and visual language. AIGC has thus altered the value of what is considered to be a study of photography. The change was very slow. Traditional photography can be directly compared with AI-generated images when AI is applied to topics of discussion, storyboards and visual references. While the creative process is still a responsibility of the photographer, AI can be useful in some respects to make the process more efficient. Armed with that experience and comparison, students are able to analyse the photographs they view. Feeling, and saying something, in an image are now part of their criterion, beyond beauty and technical finish. The other reason for the shift in professional identity is pressure from the job market. After seeing AI doing some shooting and retouching, and even designing some of the images, students start to question their career trajectory and some even wonder if they should continue along the traditional photography route. Pressure forces them to seek out AI, imaging technology, digital media, etc., and related visual labor, but the work challenges that are associated with AIGC have not caused students to give up on photography; rather, they have been considering what additional knowledge to gain and how to prepare themselves for the jobs of tomorrow. AIGC is also changing the role of the photographer. The word "photographer" used to refer to the person who took the picture, set up the camera and did the post-work. Now a greater emphasis is placed on observation at the scene, imagination, expression and judgement. Collectively the interviews tell of the transformation rather than the transformation of the work of the photographer, and of the profession, rather than its abolition. Value of the image is increasingly in the visual language and the form of the image, as well as technique and technology has made some photographic tasks easier, practical, aesthetic reflection and creativity have become more important.

6. Conclusion

Based on interviews with students from photography related programmes as well as one graduate and one teacher, this paper examines the impact of AIGC on professional identity of photography. They are still very dedicated to photography and now AIGC has provided them another opportunity to consider professional value and their direction.

First, AIGC has shifted the perception of students about the profession of photography. They are not just focusing on operating the camera, creating the composition, working with light and post work anymore, and students are better prepared to acknowledge that lived experience, aesthetics, creative feeling and individuality matter. Second, students' experience with AIGC, and how they feel and learn from their experience, affects how they evaluate photography. Sometimes it helps to juxtapose common photos with the AI-based images to better understand how direct observation, on-site experience, visual emotional appeal and narrative value are relevant. Thirdly, employment pressure now becomes a factor in professional identity. Students are mindful that simple photo or visual work could shift due to AI, and they are starting to learn about AI, imaging, digital tools, and content-and reimagining their journey. Lastly, the photographer is now not just a person whose job is to take the picture and do the post production, but also an image maker who observes, creates, expresses ideas and is confident with the use of digital tools. Adaptation is the best word for the impact of AIGC upon professional identity in photography. Students are not afraid of photography just because it has the technology, AI does not have to be directly connected to problems with employment, students should be allowed to reflect on the value of photography and where it can fit in the world of the image. Professional photography now depends on putting thought into images and turning new tools into professional opportunities, as well as on taking pictures. There are only a

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few samples and the outcomes of the sample may not represent the situation of all people working in photography. Future studies might involve expanding the size and diversity of the sample, and delve deeper into the impact of AI-generated content on professional identity within photography.

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