

Smartphone Photography and Asian Visual Culture: Evidence from Survey and Digital Data

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ABSTRACT

Smartphone photography has become an everyday communicative practice among handphone users in Asian countries. The widespread ownership of smartphones, high internet penetration, and rapid growth of social media platforms have transformed photography from a specialized activity into a daily form of communication, identity construction, cultural documentation, and economic participation. This article examines the impact of smartphone photography by synthesizing survey-based and secondary statistical evidence from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Pew Research Center, DataReportal, ITU, and GSMA. The findings show that smartphone photography is deeply embedded in daily mobile use. In Malaysia, 74.8% of smartphone users reported taking photos or videos at least once a day, while Pew Research data indicate that 69% of mobile phone users across 11 emerging economies had taken photos or videos within the previous 12 months. The article argues that smartphone photography democratizes visual production, supports cultural preservation, enables small-scale digital commerce, and expands citizen-generated documentation. However, it also raises concerns related to privacy, misinformation, beauty standards, and social comparison.

1. INTRODUCTION

Photography has undergone a major transformation in the smartphone era. Once associated with professional cameras, technical expertise, and formal documentation, photography is now an ordinary activity performed by millions of handphone users every day. Across Asian countries, smartphones are used not only for calls and messaging, but also for

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taking photographs, recording videos, sharing visual content, selling products, documenting cultural events, and participating in public communication.

This transformation is particularly significant in Asia, where mobile connectivity, social media use, and platform-based commerce have expanded rapidly. Data from the International Telecommunication Union show that 78% of the world's population aged 10 and above owned a mobile phone in 2023, confirming the centrality of mobile devices as gateways to digital participation (ITU, 2023). In the Asia-Pacific region, mobile technologies and services contributed US\$950 billion to GDP in 2024, equivalent to 5.6% of regional GDP (GSMA, 2025).

In Malaysia, smartphone adoption is especially high. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission reported that smartphone penetration reached 94.8% in 2021, while feature phone use declined to 7.5% (MCMC, 2021). More importantly, smartphone photography is already a routine activity: 74.8% of Malaysian smartphone users reported taking photos or videos at least once a day (MCMC, 2021).

At the regional level, Pew Research Center data show that photo and video practices are common among mobile phone users in emerging economies. Across 11 countries surveyed, a median of 69% of mobile phone users had taken pictures or videos in the previous 12 months, while 47% had posted pictures or videos to social media (Pew Research Center, 2019). In Asian countries included in the survey, 68% of mobile phone users in Vietnam and 65% in the Philippines had taken photos or videos, while 49% in both countries had posted pictures or videos to social media.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Smartphone Photography As Everyday Visual Culture

Smartphone photography has transformed visual culture by making image production immediate, portable, and socially connected. Users no longer need professional cameras to produce and circulate images. Instead, handphones allow users to photograph daily experiences and share them instantly through social media and messaging platforms.

Yang's ethnographic study of smartphone photography in China argues that mobile photography is linked to socio-economic life, digital visual economies, and self-understanding in contemporary Chinese society (Yang, 2021). This supports the view that smartphone photography is not simply a technical function, but a cultural practice shaped by social values, platform norms, and everyday routines.

1.2 Democratization Of Visual Production

One major impact of smartphone photography is the democratization of visual media. Photography is no longer controlled by professional photographers, journalists, or institutions. Ordinary users can now produce visual content and circulate it publicly.

The MCMC Hand Phone Users Survey 2021 shows that taking photos and videos is one of the most common smartphone activities in Malaysia, with 74.8% of users doing so at least daily (MCMC, 2021). Similarly, Pew Research Center found that taking pictures or videos was among the most common mobile activities in emerging economies, with smartphone users significantly more likely than basic phone users to engage in photo and video practices (Pew Research Center, 2019).

1.3 Social Media, Identity, And Self-Presentation

Smartphone photography is closely connected to digital identity. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat, LINE, and Messenger rely heavily on visual content. Through selfies, portraits, lifestyle images, travel photos, and edited posts, users construct and negotiate how they wish to be seen by others.

DataReportal's Digital 2026 Malaysia report shows that Malaysia had 35.4 million internet users and 30.7 million social media user identities by late 2025, equivalent to 85.0% of the population (DataReportal, 2026). In the Philippines, DataReportal reported 97.5 million internet users and 90.8 million social media user identities in early 2025, while Thailand recorded 65.4 million internet users and 51.0 million social media user identities in 2025 (DataReportal, 2025)

1.4 Citizen Journalism And Public Documentation

Smartphone photography also enables citizen journalism. Ordinary users can record accidents, floods, protests, public misconduct, infrastructure problems, or environmental damage. These images can circulate rapidly through social media and messaging applications, sometimes reaching news organizations before professional journalists arrive.

Zeng et al. (2019) argue that citizen journalism has gained importance as ordinary people contribute eyewitness images, videos, and accounts during crises. However, the same speed that makes smartphone photography powerful also creates risks because images may be shared without verification, removed from context, edited, or used to support false narratives.

1.5 Economic Participation And Social Commerce

Smartphone photography also supports digital entrepreneurship. Small businesses in Asia increasingly depend on mobile images to sell food, clothes, cosmetics, crafts, homestay services, and local products. Product photos taken with handphones are used on Instagram, TikTok Shop, Facebook Marketplace, Shopee, Lazada, and WhatsApp Business.

For micro-entrepreneurs, smartphone photography reduces marketing costs. A visually appealing product photo can create trust, attract customers, and improve perceived professionalism. In this sense, smartphone photography functions as a low-cost business tool.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a conceptual narrative review supported by secondary survey and statistical data. The article synthesizes academic literature and publicly available data from reputable organizations: MCMC Hand Phone Users Survey 2021, Pew Research Center Mobile Technology and Its Social Impact Survey 2018, DataReportal Digital country reports, ITU Facts and Figures 2023, GSMA Mobile Economy Asia Pacific 2025, and selected peer-reviewed literature on smartphone photography, mobile media, citizen journalism, and digital self-presentation. This design is appropriate because the article aims to develop a conceptual and evidence-supported understanding of smartphone photography in Asian contexts. However, the study does not claim to provide new primary survey findings. Instead, it uses existing data to support theoretical analysis and identify future empirical research directions.

3. FINDINGS

The evidence indicates three important patterns. First, smartphone photography is a routine daily activity, particularly in Malaysia. Second, mobile photography and photo sharing are strongly connected to social media participation. Third, Asian digital environments provide strong infrastructure for smartphone photography because of high internet penetration, high social media adoption, and expanding mobile connectivity.

Table 1. Key survey and secondary data supporting the study

Dimension	Evidence	Source
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Smartphone penetration in Malaysia	94.8% smartphone users in 2021	MCMC, 2021
Daily smartphone photography in Malaysia	74.8% take photos/videos at least once daily	MCMC, 2021
Mobile photo/video activity in emerging economies	Median 69% took photos/videos in past 12 months	Pew Research Center, 2019
Posting photo/video to social media	Median 47% posted pictures/videos to social media	Pew Research Center, 2019
Vietnam mobile visual practice	68% took photos/videos; 49% posted photos/videos	Pew Research Center, 2019
Philippines mobile visual practice	65% took photos/videos; 49% posted photos/videos	Pew Research Center, 2019
India mobile visual practice	45% took photos/videos; 28% posted photos/videos	Pew Research Center, 2019
Malaysia digital environment	35.4 million internet users; 30.7 million social media identities	DataReportal, 2026
Philippines digital environment	97.5 million internet users; 90.8 million social media identities	DataReportal, 2025
Thailand digital environment	65.4 million internet users; 51.0 million social media identities	DataReportal, 2025
Global mobile ownership	78% of population aged 10+ owned mobile phone	ITU, 2023
Asia-Pacific mobile economy	US\$950 billion contribution to GDP in 2024	GSMA, 2025

Source: Compiled by the authors from MCMC (2021), Pew Research Center (2019), DataReportal (2025, 2026), ITU (2023), and GSMA (2025)

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Smartphone Photography As Everyday Communication

The evidence shows that smartphone photography has become a major form of everyday communication. In Malaysia, the fact that 74.8% of smartphone users take photos or videos at least once daily suggests that photography is no longer occasional. It is embedded in daily routines.

This supports the argument that smartphone photography functions as a visual language. People use photos to show where they are, what they eat, who they meet, what they buy, and how they feel. In this sense, images operate as social signals that communicate lifestyle, taste, memory, emotion, and identity.

4.2 Cultural Documentation And Memory-Making

Smartphone photography contributes to cultural documentation. Across Asia, users regularly photograph festivals, religious ceremonies, food traditions, local markets, clothing, weddings, family gatherings, and community events. These images create informal archives of everyday culture.

This is particularly important in culturally diverse societies such as Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Mobile photography allows ordinary people to document traditions without relying on formal institutions. However, cultural documentation through social media is selective and often shaped by platform aesthetics.

4.3 Identity, Beauty Filters, And Social Comparison

Smartphone photography also transforms identity construction. Selfies, edited portraits, and lifestyle images allow users to curate their public image. In many Asian contexts, beauty filters and photo-editing applications are widely used to adjust skin tone, facial shape, lighting, and body appearance.

This creates both opportunities and risks. Users gain creative control over self-presentation, but heavy reliance on editing can intensify unrealistic beauty standards. Prior research has linked photo editing to self-objectification, appearance comparison, and self-esteem concerns (Boursier et al., 2023).

4.4 Economic Empowerment Through Mobile Visual Content

Smartphone photography supports economic participation by enabling small businesses to market products online. Food sellers, beauty services, home-based entrepreneurs, clothing sellers, and tourism operators can use smartphone photos to reach customers at low cost.

The connection between smartphone ownership and mobile commercial activity, as shown in Pew Research data, suggests that mobile devices are not only communication tools but also economic tools. In Asia's social commerce environment, visual content is central to consumer trust.

4.5 Citizen Journalism, Public Visibility, And Misinformation

Smartphone photography strengthens citizen journalism by allowing ordinary people to document public events. This can improve accountability and visibility, especially during disasters, accidents, protests, or infrastructure failures.

However, smartphone images can also spread misinformation. A photograph may be real but shared with a false caption, taken from another country or another year, edited, or used to provoke emotional reactions. In highly connected societies, misinformation can spread quickly through messaging apps and social platforms.

4.6 Privacy And Consent

The widespread use of smartphone cameras creates privacy challenges. In crowded Asian public spaces, people may be photographed without consent. Viral images can expose individuals to embarrassment, harassment, or public judgment.

This raises ethical questions. Public visibility does not automatically mean consent. Smartphone users need clearer awareness of digital ethics, especially when photographing strangers, children, religious activities, accidents, or vulnerable individuals.

4.7 Theoretical Contribution

This article contributes to mobile media and visual culture studies by proposing that smartphone photography in Asia operates through five interrelated dimensions: visual democratization, cultural archiving, platformed self-presentation, digital economic participation, and ethical or psychological risk.

This framework helps explain why smartphone photography should be studied not merely as a technological feature, but as a socio-cultural practice that reorganizes everyday communication, commerce, memory, and public visibility.

4.8 Practical Implications

First, educators should integrate visual literacy into digital literacy programs. Users need to understand how images persuade, mislead, represent identity, and affect privacy. Second, policymakers should strengthen public awareness about consent, non-consensual image sharing, and visual misinformation. Third, small businesses should be trained in ethical and effective smartphone photography, including honest product representation, image quality, lighting, and responsible editing. Fourth, social media platforms should improve image verification tools, reporting systems, and user education related to manipulated or harmful visual content.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article is based on secondary surveys and statistical data. It does not include original fieldwork. Therefore, future studies should conduct primary empirical research using surveys, interviews, or ethnographic methods.

Future empirical studies could survey 400 to 600 smartphone users across selected Asian countries and use regression or structural equation modelling to test relationships between photography frequency, social media sharing, self-presentation, cultural documentation, privacy concern, and social comparison.

6. CONCLUSION

Smartphone photography has become a powerful force in the everyday lives of handphone users in Asian countries. Survey and secondary data show that taking photos and videos is now a routine smartphone activity, strongly connected to social media use, identity expression, cultural documentation, and digital commerce.

In Malaysia, 74.8% of smartphone users take photos or videos at least once daily, while Pew Research data show that mobile photography and photo sharing are common across emerging economies, including Vietnam, the Philippines, and India. These findings support the argument that smartphone photography is not merely a casual pastime. It is a visual infrastructure of contemporary social life.

The impact of smartphone photography is both positive and problematic. It democratizes image production, supports cultural memory, enables small business visibility, and strengthens citizen documentation. At the same time, it creates challenges involving privacy, misinformation, beauty standards, and mental health pressures.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial, or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests related to this study.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Adzrool Idzwan Ismail: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft preparation, and supervision. Siti Irna Mustajap: Conceptualisation, literature review, data curation, and validation. Mohd

Amirul Helmi Ismail Hassan: Data collection, formal analysis, visualisation, and manuscript review. Nazrul Azha Abu Hassan: Conceptualisation, supervision, writing – review and editing, and validation.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used AI-assisted tools to improve language clarity, grammar, and readability. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study utilised secondary data obtained from publicly available sources and published literature. No human or animal subjects were directly involved in this research. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this study.

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