

A photo-a-day practise in capturing moments of everyday life: Exploring the influence of photo-taking on wellbeing

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Abstract

The prevalence of mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, highlights the need for accessible and practical methods to enhance wellbeing as a preventative measure. Over half of the global population (54%) owns a smartphone, and the number of mobile users worldwide was projected to reach 7.49 billion by 2025. With smartphone cameras widely available, individuals can easily document daily moments, potentially benefitting their emotional wellbeing. This qualitative study explored the impact of photo-taking on individual wellbeing through a 3-week intervention grounded in positive psychology principles. Nineteen participants, recruited via social media took a daily photo for 3 weeks, each based on a theme set by the researcher: something they were grateful for (week 1), a selfie or self-portrait highlighting positive traits (week 2) and a picture to share with someone else (week 3). Participants then engaged in online one-on-one interviews with the researcher. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four core themes: (1) appreciation of life's value, (2) shifts in mindset, (3) cultivation of purpose and (4) pursuit of positivity. The findings suggest that this intervention contributes to fostering a positive outlook and enhancing feelings of happiness, contributing to participants' emotional wellbeing. While the study demonstrates a promising link between photo-taking and wellbeing as an accessible and preventative tool, further research is needed to examine additional variables, particularly across diverse age groups and ethnicities. As technology becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, such methods hold the potential for promoting individual and community flourishing with minimal effort.

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Introduction

Wellbeing is a complex and multidimensional construct that plays an important part in people's lives (Ruggeri et al., 2020). Understanding emotional wellbeing and detecting a person's psychological state is important for providing appropriate support and assistance. Psychologists and researchers are seeking accessible and cost-effective ways to improve emotional wellbeing (Feller et al., 2018). According to a recent review by Toh et al. (2022) the use of digital technology and platforms presents unique opportunities for health promotions and digital interventions in enhancing wellbeing in everyday life.

The construct of wellbeing within the positive psychology framework

Due to the subjective nature and the multidimensional components that constitute wellbeing, there has been a growing debate about how difficult it is to define and measure wellbeing (Thomas, 2009). Diener (2009) discusses the hedonic perspective which focuses on a person's experience of happiness and positive emotional states. The eudaimonic perspective is an approach that focuses on the experience of personal growth and finding the meaning of life (Ryff and Singer, 2008). These approaches have been traditionally reported by surveys and questionnaires that have been widely considered accurate and valid. However, restricting wellbeing to be measured by surveys and questionnaires does not allow a deeper understanding of a person's psychological state. For example, the results could be influenced by a person's mood at the time of rating (Voukelatou et al., 2021). In the search for regular ways of reporting the quality of a person's wellbeing, Bogomolov et al. (2013) suggested that the amount of data that people share through digital technology offers new ways to explore the complexities of wellbeing (Lathia et al., 2017).

Dodge et al. (2012) highlight that wellbeing depends on a balance between resources and challenges. The resources refer to assets such as social, personal, material, cultural and psychological that an individual can use to cope with and navigate life challenges. This is aligned with research that shows that to have good wellbeing, an individual is required to be challenged in life, otherwise, a lack of purpose can cause a person to feel stagnated (Hendry and Kloep, 2002; Kloep et al., 2009). As individuals are in charge of their decision-making and flourishing (Gable and Haidt, 2005), the ability to maintain a sense of balance between resources and challenges can enhance a person's wellbeing.

Given the rise in mental health challenges, researchers seek methods to improve emotional wellbeing. Studies suggest that changes in thought patterns can help alleviate symptoms of mental distress (Le Nguyen and Fredrickson, 2017). Positive psychology focuses on exploring three main conditions: a positive subjective experience, positive individual traits and positive institutions (Linley and Harrington, 2006; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which aims to facilitate a change in behaviour and build

positive qualities, such as optimism, happiness, self-determination and wellbeing (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). For example, Aknin et al. (2012) found that students who spent money on others reported greater happiness. Similarly, Seligman et al. (2005) found that writing down three positive things each evening increased happiness. Caprara et al. (2006) found that self-efficacy beliefs, such as positive thinking or the ability to manage negative and positive emotions, have a significant effect on a person's wellbeing and happiness. Furthermore, Kraft and Pressman (2012) demonstrated maintaining positive facial expressions during stress, such as manipulating a smile, increases positive mood. Stochl et al. (2019) found that the key items that signal improvement in wellbeing are connected with positive self-perception and positive mood.

These studies highlight simple strategies for enhancing wellbeing. This research aims to incorporate tools and techniques used in positive psychology as a core to explore the use of photography and its link to emotional wellbeing.

Therapeutic photography, phototherapy and photovoice for wellbeing

Using photography as therapy dates back to the 19th century when photographs were used to treat female patients in psychiatric hospitals. The technique involved taking pictures of the patient and presenting them with images of themselves, aiming to elicit a shock response as a means of healing their psychological condition (Drinkwater, 2008; Wetzler, 2021). In the 20th century, the benefits of therapeutic photography were recognised among World War II servicemen. They were so focused on engaging with the photography that they unconsciously used muscles and nerves that were described as unusable which supported their healing (Perchick, 1992). Since then, phototherapy approaches have been explored more deeply and used in counselling and therapy by pioneers such as Krauss (1980), Walker (1982) and Weiser (1984).

Weiser (2014) categorised three techniques in which photography can be used by individuals and therapists: (1) photovoice, (2) phototherapy and (3) therapeutic photography. In photovoice, the photographs are used to start a conversation about problems that people think need to be addressed in their community. Han and Oliffe (2016) conducted a scoping review on the use of photovoice in mental health research. The method was found to be effective in exploring stigma, recovery and support needs while also revealing gaps in public and policy engagement. Phototherapy involves licenced counsellors using photographs to initiate meaningful conversations with clients and enhance their personal growth. The conversation starts around what is seen by the client in the photographs and that can create a safe space for the client to open up to the counsellor (Weiser, 2004). Therapeutic photography, by contrast, is self-directed or done in groups without the support of a trained professional (Weiser and Krauss, 2009). By capturing the moments and experiences of everyday life, a person can start to view their life from a new perspective, which can help to increase self-knowledge and awareness and enhance their wellbeing and relationships (Weiser, 2004). Further, the photos are the representation of life storytelling, and sharing them with others begins a dialogue that can positively impact a person's self-esteem and self-efficacy from a cultural and social perspective (Gibson, 2017). Similarly, encouraging participants to take photographs in a mindful, reflective and task-oriented way can be described as therapeutic itself (Kopytin,

2004). The practise allows individuals to enjoy taking photos in their own time and surroundings (Dennis et al., 2009).

These techniques do not require understanding or following the rules of professional photography, and any type of camera can be used. The minimal skillset needed to participate in this activity offers an opportunity to be part of a process that is now recognised by online communities all over the world. This process creates a powerful form of non-verbal communication among people (Loopmans et al., 2012).

Loewenthal (2013) highlighted the value of photo-based interventions, demonstrating their potential to facilitate emotional exploration and enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy. By engaging with images, individuals can deepen emotional awareness and reflect on personal strengths, positive experiences, or progress over time. Similarly, Radley and Taylor (2003) found that photographs taken by patients during their hospital stay provided meaningful insights into their recovery, emphasising the significant impact of hospital environments on healing. Photography enabled patients to reflect on their experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of their journey. Building on this, Saita and Tramontano (2018) noted the growing use of photography as a therapeutic tool, though research in this area remains limited. Gibson (2018) emphasised the need for a structured and empirically validated approach. Bell (2002) further demonstrated the therapeutic potential of photography by analysing Jo Spence's self-portrait series documenting her battle with breast cancer, showing how images can serve as a powerful medium for personal expression and challenge societal perceptions of illness.

Exploring practise of taking a photo a day with a smartphone camera

Taking photographs with a smartphone camera has become a statement of being in places, witnessing events, connecting with people and experiencing any other important moments in life (Creighton et al., 2019). With such a vast adoption of smartphone cameras, photos became a non-verbal way of communication and a powerful form of visual expression available to almost everyone. Suler (2008) suggested that evolution in digital photography and the internet enable people to share photos with others in ways that encourage mutual support, self-insight and personal growth.

Together with the evolution of smartphone technology and high-quality cameras, the topic of therapeutic photography and its effect on wellbeing is an emerging area. More and more photo-sharing websites or dedicated groups on social media, like Facebook or Instagram, are available to users so they can share their emotions and feelings through photography. For example, Flickr is one of the largest online photo-sharing websites where members can join various groups focused on hobbies, food, travel, and mental health issues such as depression, self-harm or eating disorders, allowing members to exchange self-reflections and support (Barton, 2012). Suler (2009) studied Flickr users on how individuals create, share and react to images. Findings suggested that participating in photo-sharing within a group can create an opportunity for an individual to express their underlying emotional problems, which can work as a self-help or support group. Cox and Brewster (2018) instructed participants to take and share one photo daily online for a year. They reported that taking pleasant photos, sharing positive events and

receiving positive feedback from others had a positive impact on their wellbeing. Chen et al. (2017) found similar results among college students who photographed moments of happiness for 3 weeks, enhancing their wellbeing in relation to social connections, entertainment, personal achievement and nature. However, in all these studies the participants were taking photos spontaneously without any structure or theme in mind.

Kurtz (2015) found taking photographs mindfully and creatively showed a significantly higher appreciation of everyday life than those who were asked to take random snapshots. Similarly, Peterson (2015) used a mindfulness-based art therapy intervention by combining photo-taking with walking outside and found positive effects. Together with the dynamic growth of smartphone photography and its relationship to wellbeing, Lee et al. (2021) created the app SnapAppy that allowed users to take pictures of positive events during the day and upload them with descriptions or short comments. Findings showed a positive correlation between participants' mood and positive and negative affect after regular photo-taking, sharing and reviewing the photos.

Study rationale, aims and research questions

This study integrates hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing through a structured, thematic photography intervention. By using smartphone cameras, which are widely accessible, individuals engage in a simple daily practice that promotes intentionality, self-expression and reflection. The intervention aligns with theories of wellbeing that emphasise balancing resources and challenges, using photography as a tool for self-awareness and emotional regulation. Wellbeing is often conceptualised through dominant discourses that emphasise individual responsibility, emotional positivity and productivity—norms that reflect and reproduce broader social and cultural power structures. Such framings risk excluding the diverse, contextual, and relational ways in which wellbeing is actually experienced, particularly by those whose lives do not align with mainstream ideals. From a critical perspective, wellbeing is not a fixed or universally measurable state, but a dynamic, situated process shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and political forces. In this context, the practice of taking a photograph a day offers a gentle, creative way to support wellbeing—not by prescribing what it should look like, but by opening up space for individuals to define and document it on their own terms. This daily act can challenge normative expectations about what counts as a “good day” or a “worthy” moment, and instead foreground the individual's perspective, offering opportunities for reflection, resistance and meaning-making. By situating this visual practice within a critique of norms and power relationships, it becomes not only a tool for self-expression but also a means of reclaiming narrative agency and expanding how wellbeing is understood and valued.

Limited research has explored the link between regular, intentional photo-taking and emotional wellbeing. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how individuals understand their wellbeing and how themed photography may contribute to its enhancement. To understand this phenomenon, therapeutic photography and positive psychology theory are used as a framework to examine how people can benefit from photo-taking and to enhance their wellbeing. The research is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do individuals understand wellbeing in their daily lives?
2. What is required to have good wellbeing?
3. How does taking different photos every day influence a person's wellbeing?

Method

Participants

Individuals who are based in the United Kingdom, aged 18–60 and who own a smartphone camera and know how to use it were recruited through an open invitation that was posted on related Facebook photography groups. The invitation explained the aims, inclusion criteria and procedure of the study. People who were interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher via email. Twenty-four people were interested in the study. However, four of them were not recruited as they did not match the inclusion criteria of age and location. Additionally, one participant pulled out of the study during the third-week assignment as she found it too tricky to decide what image to send to other people. This sample size was considered suitable, guided by research done by Malterud et al. (2016).

Data from a final sample of nineteen participants (17 female and 2 male) with ages ranging from 25 to 60 were analysed. The final sample comprised 13 British participants, four European, one Canadian and one Mexican, all residing across both urban and rural regions of the United Kingdom. Participants were employed either full-time or part-time in professional or creative occupations such as education, finance, therapy, styling and self-employment. All participants were regular smartphone users.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee. Before the main study took place, two female participants aged between 25 and 35 were recruited for a pilot study. This enabled the researcher to test the photography assignments and review the interview questions. Both participants reported that the recruitment process was straightforward and that they felt safe and informed about the purpose of the study. Participants stated that the assessments were clear and easy to complete, preferring the online interviews due to their locations and busy schedules. Furthermore, they reported that the interview questions were insightful and provided them room to reflect on their lives. They both observed a small but positive effect on their wellbeing. Following participant feedback, no changes were made to the structure and content of the intervention, which was subsequently applied to the main study.

Participants in the main study received an email with a new assignment they had to follow the night before each week started. In week one, the participants took one picture of something that they were grateful for each day. In week two they took a self-portrait or selfie that captured something positive about them each day. In week three, participants took a picture of something that they thought would make someone else happy and they sent it to that person daily. During each of these weeks, one short email was sent by the researcher on Wednesday to check in on the progress, and another email was sent on

Saturday night with a reminder to send all seven photos to the researcher by the end of Sunday. The participants took all the photos with their smartphone cameras and did not use editing software. All participants were informed that in this practise, taking photographs was not about the technical aspect of photography but about the mindset in which they took a picture. The researcher saved all the images and kept them in secured digital folders.

The interviews were scheduled after week three when the photo-taking intervention was completed. The interviews occurred over 3 weeks and were conducted online via Zoom on a one-to-one basis with each participant and were recorded. The interview time range was between 27 and 56 minutes with an average time of 39 minutes. All photos that were taken by each participant and sent to the researcher were used during the interview as a reminder of what was done each week. Looking at photos helped initiate the discussions on participants' reflections around the photo taking. This approach helped to understand the connection between taking different photographs and their effect on a person's wellbeing. A semi-structured interview schedule was used with an outline of 12 questions (e.g. What would your photographs say if they could speak? What is the message for you in these photos? How does this photo make you feel?), allowing flexibility in the discussion. The recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2021) was applied to explore participants' experiences of how and why taking different pictures daily influenced their wellbeing. This method allowed the identification of patterns and meanings in the data while aligning with positive psychological theory and a social constructionist epistemology. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework guided the analysis, providing both flexibility and clarity. In this research, a social constructionist paradigm was employed to understand and analyse realities based on the premise that knowledge is not discovered as an objective truth but is constructed through meanings, perceptions, and social processes (Tuckett, 2005). This approach also enabled to explore how reality is constructed from the standpoint of positive psychology.

Results and discussion

In this study, participants took one photo daily on weekly themes: gratitude (week 1), self-portraits of positive characteristics (week 2) and sharing photos with someone (week 3). All participants described the activity as positive and therapeutic. During follow-up interviews, participants reflected on their experiences, noting the gratitude (week 1) and sharing photos (week 3) were straightforward and enjoyable. However, some found self-portraits (week 2) challenging, as focusing on their positive traits felt uncomfortable. Despite initial difficulty, some participants reported a shift in perspective by the end of the week, feeling satisfied with their efforts. Participants reported it was easier to focus on others than themselves. Photo-taking was widely described as a way to preserve happy memories and reflect on the positivity in everyday life. Reviewing the 21 photos

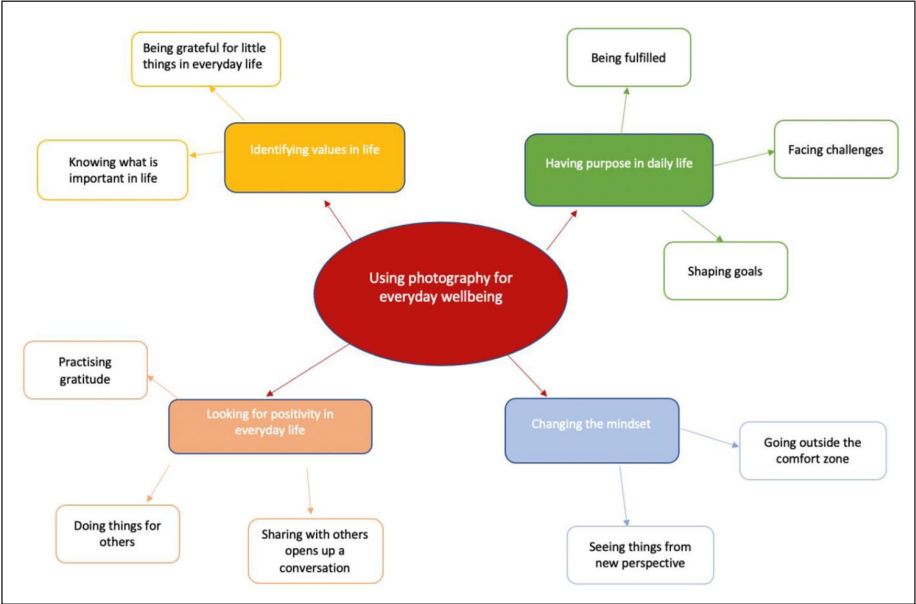


Figure 1. Final thematic map.

taken over the 3 weeks, participants identified emerging positive patterns and many expressed a desire to continue the practice. Gratitude and sharing photos were the most favoured.

The overarching theme of “using photography for everyday wellbeing” encapsulated the findings, with sub-themes providing depth and illustrating broader concepts within the data (Figure 1).

Theme 1: Identifying values in life with sub-themes: being grateful for little things in everyday life and knowing what is important

Participants recognised their photographs as reflections of what they value most in life. Revisiting these photos at the end of each week allowed them to reflect on their belief systems and understand how these connect to their life values. Photos became a “foot-print” of what mattered most, such as connections with family and friends: “[. . .] I realised that the people in my life are very important to me and I remember noticing that, many of the pictures are connected either to friends or my family [. . .]” (Kate). The choice of what to photograph was deliberate, focusing on meaningful moments rather than taking numerous rushed photos. This process highlighted gratitude for small, everyday joys, as one participant noted:

[. . .] how nice it was to realise just how many things in your life you can be grateful for. And they don’t have to be huge things, it doesn’t mean that you have to have a huge house or anything like that, just the little things [. . .]. (Lily)

Participants broadly understood wellbeing as a balance across mental, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions. They acknowledged that life challenges, such as job loss or illness, could disrupt this balance. However, participants expressed that having people in their lives, being active, living in a nice location, spending time in nature, having good nutrition, being challenged, having a good job, having opportunities to grow, having interesting hobbies or meditating are important parts of their overall wellbeing. Taking a daily photo with a theme helped participants visually represent what they needed for wellbeing. For example, one participant stated:

[. . .] it shows a lot of what I value that I think makes like I said mental state happy. Like, I think it shows the outdoors as a happy place. It shows the family as a happy place and like an adventure. [. . .]. (Diana)

Participants found that this practise of taking one photo a day with a theme in mind enhanced their gratitude and awareness of life's positive aspects:

Taking pictures helped me realise, you know, that I am lucky, that I have people whom I love in my life, that I live in a beautiful place, I do cool things, you know, like, having to take a picture of something that I'm grateful made me feel more grateful. (Emma)

These findings align with Schwartz and Sortheix's (2018) emphasis on values as central to shaping motivations, decisions and behaviours. Living in alignment with personal values fosters fulfilment and enhances wellbeing (Schwartz, 2016). Daily digital photography promotes self-care and mindfulness by encouraging reflection and intentionality (Brewster and Cox, 2018; Cox and Brewster, 2018).

Participants reported that the practice of capturing daily photographs encouraged them to notice and appreciate small, often overlooked details in their surroundings. This mindful engagement promoted a sense of gratitude, as individuals reflected on simple yet meaningful aspects of their daily lives, such as natural beauty, personal connections or moments of joy. The act of selecting themes or subjects for photographs prompted participants to prioritise what held personal significance. Through this process, they developed greater clarity about their values and what contributed to their sense of purpose and fulfilment. This intentional focus helped participants distinguish what mattered most in their lives, reinforcing a deeper understanding of their priorities and aspirations.

Theme 2: Having a purpose in life with subthemes: shaping goals, facing challenges and being fulfilled

This theme reinforces the findings by Hulme et al. (2012), which highlight the direct link between maintaining a positive self-view and the belief in achieving set goals, alongside the ability to control one's motivation. All participants recognised the importance of having a defined purpose of taking one photo daily with a specific weekly theme. They described this structured goal as both rewarding and motivational, helping them maintain focus and consistency. Aligned with McKnight and Kashdan's (2009) research, participants found that engaging in purposeful, meaningful challenges enhanced their

motivation and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that interaction and enjoyment of taking photographs would happen when the challenge and skills were in balance and participants were able to cope with the task. This balance allowed them to develop the motivation and resources needed to overcome the difficulties of the task:

I think a bit more about a purpose. So, the assignment of taking pictures of myself was particularly hard because I tend to steer clear of any photographs of myself. But the assignment of taking pictures for other people was easy because that was second nature for me. (Sam)

This balanced rationale between having skills and achieving a goal led to reflection on the essence of having a purpose in life and how that influences a person's wellbeing. Each participant stayed motivated because they had particular challenges and were able to confront their limitations and cope with them: "It was the topics that we had to cover for the photographs that were motivating and positive" (Noemie). Participants reflected on how accomplishing daily challenges positively influenced their wellbeing, even during difficult times. This engagement promoted a sense of achievement:

I didn't feel very well and I was trying to entertain her when I didn't feel very well. But I felt quite pleased with myself that I managed to find something a bit of fun to do, even though I didn't feel well [. . .]. (Kate)

The importance of having a purpose and goals is supported by research, including Steger (2012), which highlights that purpose is essential for wellbeing and helps individuals avoid feelings of confusion and worthlessness. Furthermore, people who feel that their life has meaning, in effect, feel more satisfied with their lives and enjoy life more (Kashdan and Steger, 2006; Steger and Frazier, 2005). Participants in this study echoed these findings, noting that purposeful activities fostered satisfaction and enjoyment: "I liked the concept of how you try and do something every day. It's kind of that rhythmic, habitual sort of accomplishment that you can say, okay, today, I didn't forget [. . .]" (Alie).

These results align with Steger et al. (2008), demonstrating that overcoming challenges and achieving meaningful goals promotes positive emotions, improved self-perceptions and greater life satisfaction contributing to the eudaimonic dimension of wellbeing that emphasises self-actualisation and vitality. Participants noted that engaging in value-driven actions not only fosters creativity and personal growth but also mitigates stagnation and negative emotions. This connection illustrates how purposeful, values-driven actions can enrich daily life, fostering a sense of fulfilment that supports long-term psychological wellbeing.

Theme 3: Looking for positivity in everyday life with subthemes: Practising gratitude, doing things for others and sharing with others opens up a conversation

This theme illustrates how the daily act of capturing positive moments through photography fosters a habit of recognising and appreciating the good aspects of life. This aligns

with Seligman et al. (2005) recommendation that repetitive, positive practices can enhance wellbeing. Participants reported that focusing on positive experiences through their photographs influenced their thoughts and behaviours, helping them view their lives through a more optimistic lens: “I think what I like about them is that it focuses on the positive things that happened to me, or whether I experienced and I think that also watching them makes me feel more positive about these three weeks” (Orka). Using smartphone cameras as a tool for mindfulness, participants intentionally paused, observed their surroundings and captured meaningful moments. This practice led to greater gratitude and reflection:

Um, I think it's about the things that you find valuable in life, I certainly appreciate so, you know, I'm grateful for my health, I'm grateful for my family, I'm grateful for where I live and for me, that's that was the sole consideration when looking at the pictures. (Sam)

Through this reflective process, participants shifted their attention from negativity towards positivity, recognising and appreciating the good in their lives: “[. . .] I think that there's a level of gratefulness that comes from those pictures and they would tell me that I am lucky because not everyone gets to do it” (Nora). This is consistent with prior research showing that practising gratitude reduces negative emotions and enhances emotional resilience (Carr et al., 2021; Rashid and Seligman, 2018). For instance, gratitude has been shown to assist individuals in recognising positive daily experiences, managing stressful situations more effectively, spending less time dwelling on negative emotions, and experiencing greater happiness through interactions with others.

In addition to personal reflection, participants found joy and fulfilment in sharing their photos with others. Sharing positive photographs with family or friends strengthened social bonds and increased feelings of connection: “Thinking about other people thinking about taking photographs that would make other people happy, that start conversation, yeah, that was a nice one” (Noemie). This aligns with Helliwell et al. (2017) findings on the impact of pro-social behaviours on wellbeing. Participants experienced positive emotions, such as happiness and fulfilment, when their photographs were shared with a specific purpose in mind. Furthermore, similar to the findings of Rudd et al. (2014), results from this study suggested that participants felt emotions of happiness when they performed acts of kindness, such as sending photos to loved ones, created meaningful exchanges:

Well, taking pictures of flowers, my mom has always been a very keen gardener until she became too old to do it so any flowers that I see that are beautiful colours or anything like that, I know that she is going to enjoy them. Which makes me think that I'm doing something to make her feel happy. (Sofie)

Participants also noted that sharing photos opened up opportunities for conversations: “I do share a lot of my photos on social media for my work but sending it to somebody was it was almost like a little opening up of a conversation” (Candy). Sometimes rekindling connections with individuals they hadn't spoken to in a long time: “[. . .] And you

know, also with that picture of munchies, the crisp I haven't spoken to that person for ages and actually it was a good opportunity to reach out and reconnect" (Emma).

These findings align with Kumar and Epley's (2021) observations that sharing positive experiences, such as photographs, provided participants with opportunities to engage with family and friends in more meaningful ways which strengthens social connections, enhancing happiness and fostering meaningful relationships.

This practise of taking and sharing photos brought participants closer to their loved ones and helped them appreciate their surroundings. For those less comfortable expressing gratitude verbally, photography provided an accessible and meaningful way to communicate and reflect on life's positives. By integrating gratitude, mindfulness and social sharing into daily routines, participants experienced a reinforcing cycle of positivity. This practice serves as a valuable tool for improving emotional wellbeing, particularly for individuals seeking non-verbal methods of self-expression and connection.

Theme 4: Changing the mindset with subthemes: Seeing things from a new perception and going outside the comfort zone

The intervention facilitated a noticeable shift in how participants viewed their daily routines, encouraging them to explore new perspectives and step outside their comfort zones. This shift had a meaningful impact on their emotional wellbeing, fostering personal growth and enhancing their appreciation of life. Much of this revolved around being challenged, thinking about the meaning of the photo and having a purpose. Participants reported that the challenge of thinking about the meaning behind each photo encouraged them to approach their surroundings with greater intentionality and curiosity:

I think that it made me look at things around me not in a different way because it's not like I'm sort of blind to these things normally, but it just made me look at things in a much more proactive way. (Lucy)

This proactive engagement prompted many participants to recognise the value in everyday moments and motivated them to adopt behaviours aligned with personal growth. Some individuals challenged long-held beliefs and habits, discovering a sense of pride and accomplishment:

I'd made a promise to myself that I wasn't going to show my face that it was going to be arty and it would be feet and hands and different things. And then I challenged myself to think differently [. . .] I felt prouder of myself, not of the photos but proud of myself for being more visible and transparent and not judging myself. (Candy)

The intervention also helped participants reframe their beliefs and shift away from negativity. Symbolic and visual representations in the photographs facilitated this cognitive shift, allowing participants to perceive challenges and ordinary moments in new, positive ways:

[. . .] sometimes when we have negative things, we think that oh, all the life sucks and the world is all negative so these can change the perspective of what we see. We can change our perspective when something happened negatively. (Ola)

This reframing process was linked to enhanced self-efficacy, with participants reporting greater confidence in their ability to navigate challenges and find meaning in their daily lives. Even mundane routines were reinterpreted as sources of joy and fulfilment: “So yeah, it taught me that even though maybe I don’t have so many exciting things to do I still enjoy it the way it is. Yeah, even when sometimes it’s just an ordinary walk.” (Marta).

These findings align with prior research on photography as a tool for improving mental health. DeCoster and Dickerson (2014) highlighted the potential of photography-based interventions, although gaps in methodologies and measurement approaches have limited their implementation. Over and above, simply using questionnaires and scales to measure mood would not necessarily lead to a clear knowledge of how emotional well-being is influenced by taking one photo a day with a theme in mind. Lee et al. (2021) emphasised that the level of engagement with specific photography themes plays a significant role in a process that is correlated with an improvement in the participant’s mood and positive and negative effects. Weiser (2004) highlighted that self-perception should be considered as a starting point for any therapeutic intervention as a factor in exploring self-narrative. Self-portrait assignments can be used to learn more about beliefs, attitudes and feelings one has about oneself. As Donaldson (2005) suggests, self-esteem is a critical factor in self-efficacy and therapeutic interventions, and this study underscores the importance of developing self-esteem through meaningful engagement with photography themes.

The analysed data shows that this method enables participants to consider the multi-layered meaning of their photos and that photographs have become a representation of what is important in people’s lives. Consequently, this creates an opportunity for people to take time to think about photos, reflect on them and easily communicate their perception of life, feelings and emotions. With such an explicit method, participant gradually but firmly established a more focused and engaged attitude towards taking more meaningful photographs, which in effect positively influenced their emotional wellbeing.

Further exploration and more robust evidence for the role played by themes in photo taking contributed to understanding how different themes affect different dimensions of wellbeing. The analysed data has revealed that the majority of photos that were reported to make participants happy were associated with both: subjective and objective approaches to wellbeing. In addition to the themes that were recognised in the interviews, the analysed data has shown a mix of eudaimonic approach to happiness which focuses on personal growth and finding meaning in life and the hedonic approach which focuses on feeling happy and being satisfied with life (Deci and Ryan, 2008). The findings can be compared with the work of Brewster and Cox, who examined participants already engaged in a spontaneous, vernacular “photo-a-day” social media practice (Brewster and Cox, 2018; Cox and Brewster, 2018). While their studies emphasised community connection and online feedback loops, the present research focused on a structured, theme-based intervention encouraging reflection rather than performance. This distinction highlights how intentional framing can shift photography from social

documentation towards mindful self-exploration, offering potential for therapeutic and wellbeing applications.

Strengths and limitations. Using a qualitative study supported by thematic analysis allowed both an understanding of the daily practice of photo-taking and an exploration of participants' experiences. This study demonstrated that taking one photo a day with a theme in mind had a positive effect on participants' wellbeing. The consistent pattern of positive reflections from participants provided clear evidence that therapeutic photography techniques can have a significant impact on those who practice them regularly. Despite the short timescale of the research, participants shared sufficient information about the positive aspects of the experience.

The accessibility and flexibility of this photo-a-day practice make it a promising candidate for integration into social prescribing frameworks. As a low-cost, culturally adaptable, and non-verbal tool, it could be recommended alongside other creative or wellbeing activities such as art, journaling, or gardening. By encouraging individuals to document and share everyday positives, the practice supports both personal reflection and community connection, aligning with holistic approaches to health promotion and preventative mental wellbeing.

Compared with other wellbeing interventions such as running or gardening, daily themed photography offers distinct advantages in terms of accessibility and inclusivity. The activity requires neither specialised equipment nor substantial physical capacity or dedicated space, making it particularly suitable for individuals with limited mobility, energy or time resources. Consistent with other creative modalities employed within social prescribing frameworks, such as visual arts or reflective journaling, it promotes processes of self-reflection, emotional expression and the development of social connectedness (Fancourt and Finn, 2019; Thomas et al., 2021). Uniquely, however, daily themed photography leverages the ubiquity of smartphone technology as a platform for visual mindfulness, embedding psychological self-awareness and aesthetic engagement within the routines of everyday life (Brown and Ryan, 2003; Suler, 2016).

This study has several limitations. The small, self-selecting sample limits generalisability. Participants were predominantly female, digitally literate, and already comfortable using smartphones, which may have biased the results towards positive engagement. Individuals who are less confident or enthusiastic about digital technology may respond differently, highlighting the need for future studies to explore how varying levels of digital confidence, access and attitudes towards technology shape participation and wellbeing outcomes. The intervention lasted only 3 weeks, a relatively short duration to establish lasting behavioural or emotional change (Kurtz, 2015). While participants reported immediate benefits, future longitudinal research should examine whether such effects persist over time. The withdrawal of one participant during week three suggests that decisions about self-disclosure and sharing may evoke emotional ambivalence and merit further investigation. Additionally, the study relied on verbal reflections; integrating visual or diary methods could capture evolving emotional changes more dynamically. This study was limited to exploring three photo themes related to positive psychology (Seligman et al., 2005). Future research should investigate a broader range of themes beyond those examined in this study and explore the long-term effects and maintenance

of the observed changes. Furthermore, it may be valuable to explore interventions that incorporate additional conditions, such as sending a self-portrait or selfie to another person, and to investigate the optimal duration of the intervention to maximise its positive effects. This practice could also be applied to other areas, such as health behaviour change interventions, where individuals take and share daily photos related to physical exercise, mind-body activities or nutrition within a community group to encourage positive health routines. While the majority of participants characterised the practice as both enjoyable and beneficial, a few participants found the self-portrait week, in particular, challenging. They expressed discomfort, self-consciousness and resistance in the task. This initial unease underscores the depth of the reflective process and indicates that photo-based interventions may bring to the surface underlying concerns related to self-image, confidence and individual differences in engagement and readiness.

While one-to-one interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, incorporating brief interviews at the end of each week immediately after participants completed their daily themed photos could provide further insights into how wellbeing fluctuates depending on personal circumstances. While online interviews allow for flexibility and fit them around participants' busy schedules, the interpretation of data was limited to participants' verbal language. Future studies could conduct face-to-face interviews to capture non-verbal cues and behavioural characteristics, enhancing data interpretation (Szolnoki and Hoffmann, 2013). Finally, while this study explored the experiences of participants from the United Kingdom, future research could include individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds to explore how cultural perspectives influence the wellbeing effects of a photo-a-day practice. Expanding this research internationally could help develop photo-based interventions that are culturally inclusive and globally accessible. Despite these constraints, the findings provide valuable insight into how intentional photo-taking can promote reflective awareness and positive affect in daily life.

Conclusion

These findings highlighted that structured, goal-oriented photography, rather than random photo-taking, can meaningfully support wellbeing. While the dataset is sufficient for an in-depth qualitative analysis and does not aim for statistical generalisation as with large-scale quantitative studies, it offers valuable insights into designing accessible, photo-based interventions that promote mental and emotional wellbeing, while also challenging normative assumptions about what wellbeing looks like and how it should be achieved. Given the widespread availability of smartphone cameras, this practice can serve not only as a self-care tool but also be integrated into social prescribing cultural activities as a prosocial activity that encourages connection and shared meaning.

The research demonstrates that emotional wellbeing can be fostered through purposeful, manageable, and individually meaningful activities. The practice of taking a daily-themed photo introduced a routine that was achievable even during periods of low energy, and encouraged participants to pause and reflect on what was important in their lives. Importantly, by inviting individuals to define and represent their own experiences, the intervention resists dominant, one-size-fits-all narratives of wellbeing and returns agency to participants. The intention to share something positive with others further

contributed to emotional wellbeing demonstrating that simple, everyday acts of expression and connection can become quietly powerful forms of resistance to social pressures that demand constant positivity, productivity or perfection.

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Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by The School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leicester.

Consent to participate

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all the individual participants who were included in the study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Dagmara Minkiewicz. The first draft of the manuscript was produced by both authors and all authors commented on versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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