

The Social Uses of Purikura: Photographing, Modding, Archiving, and Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from ethnographic research in Tokyo, this paper describes the social practices of photographing, modding, archiving and sharing Print Club sticker pictures. The case of purikura is presented in order to illustrate a pervasive image capture and sharing modality that is optimized to capture and display peer network relationships.

Keywords

Photo sharing, camera phones, communication, purikura

INTRODUCTION

Camera phones are enabling new opportunities for the capture and sharing of visual information, but there are also many limitations in comparison to already established forms of visual communication. This position paper explores some photography, archiving, and sharing modalities that have not yet been fully integrated in the camera phone and digital exchange space by describing practices surrounding Print Club (purikura) sticker photos in Tokyo. Purikura have been well established among Japanese teenage girls since the late nineties, and are an example of an image capture and sharing medium that is optimized for sharing within peer networks. By examining a well-established set of social practices for pervasive image capture and sharing, we can understand some of the social and cultural drivers in this space.

In purikura booths, individuals or small groups can take their photos with a variety of frames or backdrops, and they are printed out on the spot onto sticker paper. The first booths were deployed in 1995, and by 1997 there were 45,000 booths around the country [8]. Starting in 1998, booth makers built in the ability to alter and write graffiti on the photos, leading to another spike in popularity. Currently, almost all Japanese teenage girls take and share purikura photos [3]. In a survey last year of girls aged 10-

15, 43.6% of respondents noted purikura as the activity they are most “into” right now, making it the most popular choice (japan.internet.com). Although purikura are no longer as popular as they were in their heyday a few years ago, they are a well-established feature of teenagers’ popular culture and central to their visual communication practices.

After outlining our research framework, this paper describes purikura photography, modding, archiving and sharing practices. We conclude with a discussion of what purikura can teach us about what young people look for in visual communication technologies.

OUR RESEARCH

For this paper we draw on an ethnographic study, currently in progress, documenting how young people engage with purikura. In July and August of 2006, we conducted fieldwork in urban areas popular among young people: Shibuya and Kichijoji districts of Tokyo and in Yokohama, observing people in game centers with purikura and in purikura-only centers. We conducted observations for two days in Shibuya, which is considered the center of purikura culture, and observed for one day each in Kichijoji and Yokohama. So far, we have conducted 18 spot interviews of people exiting the booths and 9 in-depth interviews with young women who we recruited through our students’ social networks. In addition, we conducted three interviews with staff at these centers, and one representative of a purikura booth manufacturer.

In our ongoing research we are seeking to understand how visual communication is changing with the advent of new portable and visual technologies, as well as how new technologies could be better designed to support visual communication modalities. Like other social researchers examining camera phones [2,4,9], we have conducted studies of new technology use in order to identify emergent

genres and modalities for camera phone image capture and sharing [1,6,7]. In this study, we approach these questions from a more oblique angle. Instead of studying camera phone use, we are studying an existing practice of pervasive image capture and sharing in order to identify visual communication modalities that are not yet addressed by camera phones and online photo sharing sites.

Camera phone were initially piloted in Japan in large part because of manufacturers' observations of teenage girls' involvements with mobile phones and purikura. However, as Laura Miller writes in her analysis of purikura, camera phone photography does not allow users to easily modify or write graffiti on the photos, a practice that was well established by the time that camera phones were introduced [5]. The ability to modify photos is one of a variety of functions embedded in purikura that have made it a compelling and nearly universal medium among Japanese teenage girls. Central to the appeal is that fact that purikura booths have been optimized for commemorative photos that make friendships and social networks visible to others. We turn now to a description of the social practices surrounding purikura before concluding with a discussion of implications for understanding the evolution of pervasive image capture and sharing.

THE SOCIAL USES OF PURIKURA

Purikura are particularly rich objects for examining pervasive image capture and sharing because of the ways in which they are embedded in the everyday practices and locational infrastructures of young women in Japan. Although young men will take purikura if they are with a girlfriend or with a mixed-gender group, it is rare to see men on their own in purikura areas. Purikura are geared towards the tastes and social practices of women and girls. We describe these practices in terms of the cycle of photographing, modding, archiving, and sharing purikura.

Photograping

In our interviews, most teenagers said that they will generally take some purikura every time they go out to town with a friend or a group of friends. The frequency for the high school students we interviewed averaged about 2-3 times a month. Upon entering college, this frequency tends to drop. It is a ritualized commemoration of their time together as well as a fun activity in and of itself. They will go to a game center or a purikura center, and find an empty booth (Figure 1). Behind the large curtain is a studio area that comfortably accommodates 4-8 people. After depositing ¥400, they use a touch screen display to choose backdrops, lighting, and other custom features that vary depending on the booth. A timer will count down before each shot.

In the few seconds between each of the 4-6 shots, different backdrops will drop from the ceiling, the touch screen will display different options, and participants will scramble to decide on and strike different poses. For example, the touch screen might display the upcoming backdrop as clouds and

blue sky, and someone might shout "airplane pose!" In the privacy of the booth, couples might kiss one another, or girlfriends might shed clothes, take sexy poses or make funny faces.



Figure 1 Purikura booth

Modding

After the photography session, participants will exit the studio area and go to the "graffiti corner" to mod their photos. There, they will find two pens dangling on the side of two touch screens. When they push the start button a timer will start to count down the time they have for modding, which varies depending on whether there are other customers in the studio area or the other graffiti corner.

Participants will almost invariably make substantial modifications to their photos. These will usually include decoration with cute stamps, such as hearts, stars, or flowers, and annotation of the photo with handwritten text. For example, they might annotate a photo with the names of the participants, the occasion, date, or commentary. Depending on the booth, they can add makeup, different hairstyles, frames, and other special features (Figure 2).

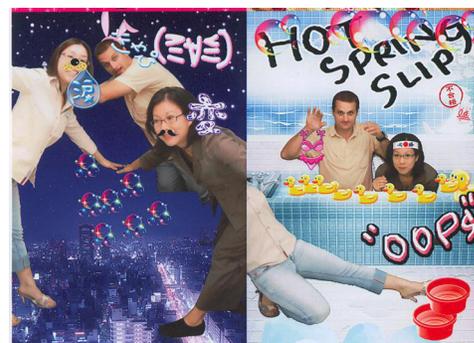


Figure 2 The modded purikura

Often they will mod the photos by introducing distortions or graffiti onto each other's faces. Miller describes graffiti photos as a new kind of creative expression keyed to contemporary girls culture in Japan [5]. The modding of photos is the most enjoyable part of the experience, and generally takes more time than the photography. If they are not rushed by a waiting party, girls will often mod for 10-20 minutes.

Archiving

Once they are done modding, the girls will exit the booth and wait in front of a screen on the outside of the booth while their photos print out. There they might have the option of selecting extra copies, an extra large printout, or sending photos to their mobile phones. Almost all the girls we interviewed said that they liked to have their purikura sent to their phones, and they would often forward from there to other friends. Before printing out, they also select how they want the pictures divided, into 16 photos, 8 photos, etc (Figure 3). After their photos print out, they will go to a small table that is set up at every purikura area, where there are scissors that they can use to cut the sheet of stickers to divide among the participants.



Figure 3 An example of purikura sheet

After going home, each of the girls will cut the sheet into individual pictures, and will stick one of each onto their purikura album. Some girls will fill their pages with just stickers butting up against one another. Others will design complex diary-scrapbooks that describe the friendships and occasions for the photos (Figure 4.1, 4.2).



Figure 4.1 A designed purikura notebook



Figure 4.2 A designed purikura notebook

The extra photos will be stored in a small container that they call a “puri-can.” The small “extra” stickers that come attached to the very end of each purikura sheet are often stuck on mirrors, mobile phones, or other portable objects.

Sharing

With the exception of one informant, all of the girls we interviewed said that they carry their purikura albums with them almost all the time. They tend to carry their puri-can with them only when a friend asks if they can do a purikura exchange. At school, during lunchtime or even during class, girls will look at each other’s purikura albums. It is not unusual for even classmates who they are not very close to ask to see each other’s purikura albums. Generally, they will only exchange purikura with close friends.

Purikura albums function as displays of girls’ peer relationships and their activities, as well as their creative talents in modding photos. Although they may show their purikura albums to close male friends, almost all of the display and sharing happens within female peer groups. On very rare occasions, we might see a family member photographed, and some girls share their albums with their family. But it is clear that purikura sharing is primarily among girl friends.

This sharing culture performs the social function of displaying taste, fashion, and peer status in a format that is creative and fun and creates an opportunity for gossip. Boys might be featured in purikura albums, but they will never have their own. The purikura they get are displayed more casually on mobile phone or pencil boxes. Intimate photos of couples are generally not displayed on purikura albums, but are kept in more private locations, like in a personal planner, on the inside of the battery case of a mobile phone, or squirreled away in a desk drawer at home. Most girls don’t want to deal with the complication of having old romantic relationships displayed in a semi-public archive. Interestingly, some girls also say that they might show a male friend but they wouldn’t want to show a boyfriend their purikura albums because they often feature photos of them making funny faces, or with their faces distorted with graffiti.

DISCUSSION

We can extract a number of lessons from what we have learned about the social uses of purikura.

1. The affordances of photography in a purikura booth support ongoing, ritualized photo taking of peer and couple gatherings. Unlike handheld photography, purikura photos enable people to easily take photos of every member assembled, without fussing with camera timers or trying to photograph oneself at arms length. The booths allow privacy within a dense urban infrastructure, as well as high quality photos that can be viewed and printed on the spot, for immediate sharing among those photographed. Further, the endless variations of photo backdrops and modifications encourages repeat visits.

2. Purikura are a rare example of how digital photo taking and sharing can be embedded in an infrastructure of location based entertainment. Current design innovation tends to focus on how we can transmit photos between handheld devices or from a handheld to a server or laptop. Purikura suggest the opposite flow, that there are occasions where photos captured in stationary infrastructures are transmitted to handheld devices.

3. Photo modding is an enjoyable social activity that also functions as an outlet for new forms of visual literacy. Currently, purikura booths are the only widely available infrastructure for photo modding in a user friendly and social context. Purikura collectors also enjoy sending these annotated photos to their mobile phones or computers so that they can enter the stream of visual exchange. The modding introduces stylistic features that distinguish purikura from other types of photographs.

4. The capture and display of moments when friends gather is a compelling archiving and sharing modality that is uniquely served by purikura. All of the girls we spoke to also had camera phones, and some even had photo blogs, but all continued to take purikura. They saw camera phones and digital cameras as devices to take photos of places or objects in the environment, but they turned to purikura to take photos of themselves with their friends. All of the girls we spoke to who photo blogged were careful not to post pictures to their blogs that featured themselves or friends, but saw it more as a form of photo journalism, documenting scenery, food, and other objects they have run across. This is consistent with earlier work on camera phone use [2, 4, 6, 7, 9]. By contrast, the materiality of the purikura album enables display to select others, in a format that is portable, flexible, and easily managed by the individual.

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