

Taking Pictures Increases Enjoyment and Enhances Experiences

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Photography has always been a fun hobby of mine. Ever since stepping into the darkroom for my 9th grade photography class and feeling the weight of a well-built camera, I was hooked.

When I travel, I like to go out for an afternoon of taking pictures, trying to capture something interesting about wherever I am. I often wonder, though...*is this ruining the experience?* If I'm in an old cathedral, am I missing the point by burying my face behind the viewfinder? Should I instead put the camera away and just let the experience wash over me?

One of my favorite bands, [Matt & Kim](#)^[1], came out with a song a few years ago called "[Cameras](#)," which resonated with those thoughts I'd been having. A key lyric is: "***No time for cameras. We'll use our eyes instead.***"^[2] It

champions the idea that focusing on taking pictures can distract you from the moment.

Some [recent research](#) by Kristin Diehl and colleagues, however, challenges this take on taking pictures. In contrast to Matt and Kim, these studies suggest that **taking pictures can actually *enhance* an experience.**

Taking Pictures is Engaging

It all comes down to *engagement*. When you're taking pictures, you are paying close attention to the details that surround you. You become *more* focused on the experience than you would otherwise be. This is important because [studies](#) have shown that **when we're more engaged with what's going on, we enjoy the experience more.**



In one of their studies, researchers went to a farmer's market food court in Philadelphia and asked people if they'd do a quick study on eating experiences. Half of these people were told to *take at least three pictures of their lunchtime eating experience*. The other half were just told to eat as they normally would. Even though some people in the second group still took pictures of their lunch (hipsters will be hipsters), they did so way less than the group who was explicitly told to take pictures.

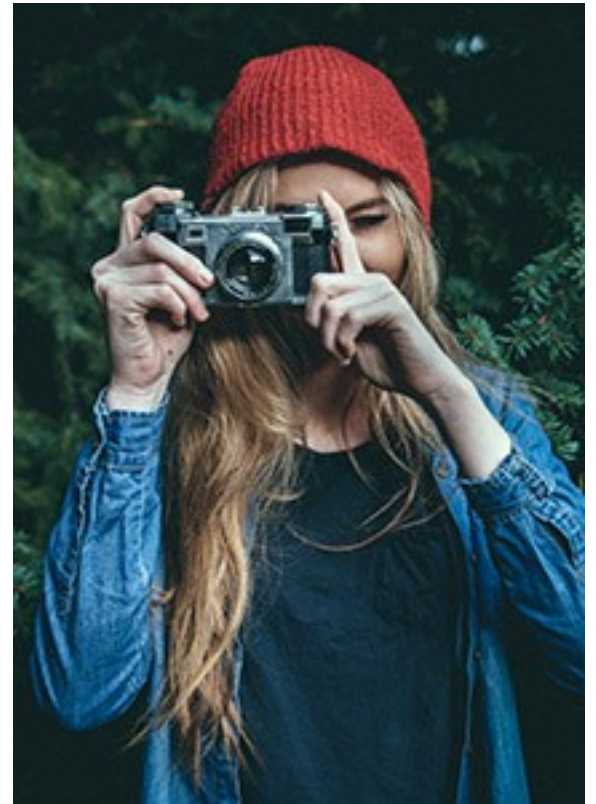
When they finished their meals, everyone filled out a quick survey about their eating experience. **People who photographed their experience said they were more *engaged* and more *immersed* in the experience,** compared to people who didn't take pictures.

In another study, researchers had some people take pictures while touring a museum exhibit and asked other people not to take pictures during their visit. Everyone wore special glasses that allowed the researchers to track their eye

movements. Not only were they more engaged in the museum experience, but **people who were told to take pictures also spent more time looking at the key artifacts in the exhibit**, compared to people who didn't take pictures.

Taking Pictures Increases Enjoyment

As I hinted at earlier, being more engaged often makes things more enjoyable. The same seems to be true when it comes to taking pictures. In the food court study, for example, not only did taking pictures lead to being more engaged, it also boosted enjoyment. **People who took pictures of their eating experience said they *enjoyed* the experience more than people who didn't take pictures.**



The same thing happened when people were told to take pictures (or not) on a bus tour of Philadelphia, on virtual bus tours of London and Hollywood, during a virtual concert experience, and in the real museum exhibit.

Overall, it seems that **taking pictures leads to heightened engagement, which in turn makes experiences *more* enjoyable.**

But Sometimes You Should Leave the Camera At Home

So far, these studies make a pretty compelling case for keeping a camera on you at all times.^[3] Although it seems like a surefire way to make your life more enjoyable, there are a couple important caveats.



First, it's possible that taking pictures can *interfere* with the experience. Most of the time, taking a photo is pretty simple, and it focuses our attention on what's around us, immersing us in the experience. Sometimes, though, your camera's on the fritz, you don't know how to use it, or you keep getting texts while trying to use your phone's camera. In these cases, the research showed that **cumbersome photo-**

taking methods *don't* make experiences more enjoyable.

Second, what about photographing negative experiences? Should you be taking pictures at funerals? It's important to understand *why* photography might make things more enjoyable—by *immersing* you in the experience.

When that experience is pretty positive, getting immersed *enhances* all that good stuff. **But when the experience is pretty negative, immersion enhances the *bad* stuff.**

In one study, the researchers had people hop on a virtual safari and either take virtual photos of the experience or simply watch what happens.

Sometimes the safari highlighted relatively positive sights, and sometimes it highlighted relatively negative ones—like a bunch of lions gruesomely attacking and clawing at a live water buffalo.

Like you'd expect by now, when the safari was more positive, taking pictures led to more enjoyment. But when the safari was more *negative*, taking pictures led to *less* enjoyment. The lesson is that **taking pictures of a negative experience can make it even *less* enjoyable.**

A Final Snapshot

Overall, this new research shows that taking pictures can enhance

your experiences. I shouldn't feel bad about lugging my camera on my next trip and snapping a picture of my dinner at a restaurant (#nofilter). Instead, I may have been having even better experiences all along.