

No Pictures, Please: Taking Photos May Impede Memory of Museum Tour

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Visit a museum these days and you'll see people using their smartphones and cameras to take pictures of works of art, archeological finds, historical artifacts, and any other object that strikes their fancy. While taking a picture might seem like a good way to preserve the moment, new research suggests that museum-goers may want to put their cameras down.

In a new study, psychological scientist Linda Henkel of Fairfield University presents data showing that participants had worse memory for objects, and for specific object details, when they took photos of them. The findings are published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Henkel was inspired to conduct the research in part because of her own experiences.

"People so often whip out their cameras almost mindlessly to capture a moment, to the point that they are missing what is happening right in front of them," says Henkel.

This led her to wonder about the extent to which capturing life events with a camera shapes what we later remember.

To find out, she set up an experiment in the Bellarmine Museum of Art at Fairfield University. Undergraduates were led on a tour around the museum and were asked to take note of certain objects, either by photographing them or by simply observing them. The next day, their memory for the objects was tested.

The data showed that participants were less accurate in recognizing the objects they had photographed compared to those they had only observed. Furthermore, they weren't able to answer as many questions about the objects' visual details for those objects they had photographed.

Henkel calls this the "photo-taking impairment effect":

"When people rely on technology to remember for them — counting on the camera to record the event and thus not needing to attend to it fully themselves — it can have a negative impact on how well they remember their experiences," she explains.

A second study replicated these findings, but it also presented an interesting twist: Taking a photograph of a specific detail on the object by zooming in on it with the camera seemed to preserve memory for the object, not just for the part that was zoomed in on but also for the part that was out of frame.

"These results show how the 'mind's eye' and the camera's eye are not the same," says Henkel.

Henkel's lab is currently investigating whether the content of a photo, such as whether you are in it, affects later memory. She also wonders whether actively choosing what to photograph might influence what we remember.

"This study was carefully controlled, so participants were directed to take pictures of particular objects and not others," says Henkel, "but in everyday life people take photos of things that are important to them, that are meaningful, that they want to remember."

Most museum-goers would probably argue that they take pictures so that they're able to look at them later. Doesn't reviewing the photos we've taken help us to remember?

Memory research suggests that it would, but only if we actually took the time to do it:

"Research has suggested that the sheer volume and lack of organization of digital photos for personal memories discourages many people from accessing and reminiscing about them," says Henkel. "In order to remember, we have to access and interact with the photos, rather than just amass them."