MANAGEMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHIC INNOVATION IN THE ERA OF MEDIA CONVERGENCE IN CHINA

Feng Yan Ping[1], Asst. Prof. Dr. Chamroen Khangkhasri[2], Dr. Puripat Kaewtathanawattan[3]

[1]Faculty of Communication Arts, Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University

Corresponding Author E-mail: fengyanping.rbru@gmail.com

[2,3]Lecturer, Faculty of Communication Arts, Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University

Abstract

This mixed-methods study examined the management of photographic innovation in China's media convergence era. The research employed stratified random sampling of 300 participants comprising professional photographers, photography enthusiasts, and imaging technology developers, alongside in-depth interviews with nine key informants. Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires using 4-point ordinal scales for AI perception and usage, and 5-point Likert scales for innovation management dimensions. Qualitative data were analyzed through coding and thematic analysis techniques. The findings revealed that innovation management integrated advanced digital technologies, particularly AI, with traditional artistic practices, enhancing efficiency and expanding creative possibilities while raising challenges related to maintaining artistic identity. The key driving factor was the high level of AI awareness and usage among experienced working-age groups, which positively influenced photographic quality and creativity. However, a usage gap existed between perception and actual implementation. The study identified three primary development directions: emphasizing digital and AI-specific skill development, building strong online communities, and creating new business opportunities through generative AI applications. These approaches collectively fostered sustainable growth in the photography industry in the digital era, though concerns about homogenization and loss of authenticity remained significant challenges requiring careful management.

Keywords: Innovation management, photography, media convergence, digital technology, China

Introduction

Over the past three decades, photography has undergone a profound transformation beyond the shift from film to digital, encompassing technological, social, and cultural dimensions (Batchen, 2008; Ritchin, 2013). Once limited to experts, photography has become democratized through smartphones and digital platforms, turning audiences into active prosumers who create and share content independently (Hand, 2012). This aligns with the rise of a visual culture where images construct meaning and identity. Studying innovation management in digital-era photography thus requires considering technology, creativity, and sociocultural dynamics within participatory and convergent media systems (Jenkins, 2006).

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) revolutionized image creation and manipulation (Goodfellow et al., 2020). Computational photography now enables advanced function night shots, color adjustment, and background removal—while deep learning enhances accessibility (Chen et al., 2019). China provides a compelling case due to its integrated digital ecosystem, where platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat shape trends through algorithmic recommendations (Li & Chen, 2020; Zeng, 2020), and the KOL/KOC system links creative work with digital marketing (Yu et al., 2018; Wang & Zhang, 2022).

This research aimed to explore opportunities, challenges, and impacts of AI on photographic art across technical, creative, and aesthetic dimensions within China's digital media environment and regulatory framework.

Research Objectives

1. Examine the level of photographic innovation management in China's convergent media era

2. Analyze technological, social, and economic factors influencing photographic innovation management.

3. Propose strategies for developing innovation management aligned with digital media transformation.

Literature Review

The integration of new media and media convergence has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of photographic creation and dissemination. Manovich's (2001) concept of new media, rooted in the transformation of analog media into digital code, aligns with Flew's (2008) characteristics—computerization, hyperlinking, space/time flexibility, networking, multimodality, and interactivity—which distinguish new media through bidirectional communication and user participation. This context is amplified by Jenkins's (2006) definition of media convergence as the flow of content across platforms, a shift that McQuail (2005) noted transforms organizational structures, content, usage, and audience roles. In China's specific digital ecosystem, convergence is particularly evident in platforms that integrate multiple functions, shifting communication patterns from one-to-many to many-to-many.

Despite these technological advancements, the principles of traditional photography—including composition (Rule of Thirds, leading lines), technical control (aperture, shutter speed, ISO), and visual storytelling (Seifi et al., 2023; Ray, 2020)—remain foundational for quality photographic work. The evolution from film to mobile photography represents a shift in accessibility and participation, not an abandonment of these core concepts (Oxford Academic, 2020).

The current frontier involves the integration of AI and creative production. Contemporary AI systems, utilizing deep learning and diffusion models (Goodfellow et al., 2020), have the capacity for multimodal fusion, enabling text prompts to generate images, which supports transmedia storytelling. This

process fundamentally alters creative workflows and expands possibilities, though it raises questions about authorship and originality.

Research demonstrates the tangible impact of AI: Smith and Johnson (2020) showed AI algorithms significantly improve photographic quality through technical optimizations (noise reduction, color balance), while Wang et al. (2021) highlighted its creative potential, citing technologies like StyleGAN2 for creating novel images. Conversely, Brown (2022) voiced concerns regarding the potential homogenization of artistic output due to AI's reliance on training data patterns.

Zhang et al. (2020) identified a comprehensive transformation of traditional photography workflows from preparation through post-processing. Lee et al. (2021) observed that AI-enabled automatic parameter selection simplifies technical aspects, allowing photographers to focus more on creative expression. Kim et al. (2022) viewed AI as both a technical tool and a creative catalyst, enabling exploration beyond traditional constraints, yet Chen et al. (2023) cautioned on the need to maintain a balance between technological assistance and preserving artistic identity.

Specific research in China's context underscores the unique digital ecosystem, where platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu utilize algorithmic recommendation systems to significantly influence content distribution and trend formation (Li & Chen, 2020; Zeng, 2020). Furthermore, the KOL/KOC system plays a crucial role in the creator economy, directly linking photographic content with digital marketing opportunities (Yu et al., 2018; Wang & Zhang, 2022).

Research Methodology

This mixed-methods study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitatively, 300 participants—professional photographers, enthusiasts, and developers—were selected via stratified random sampling. Instruments included demographic questions, 4-point AI perception and usage scales, and 5-point innovation management measures, with reliability (Cronbach's α) and validity (IOC) testing.

Qualitatively, nine key informants (three per group) participated in semi-structured interviews analyzed through coding and thematic analysis, with triangulation and member checking ensuring validity.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, and correlation analysis, while qualitative data underwent open and axial coding to identify themes addressing the research objectives.

Research Results

The quantitative findings derived from 300 respondents, who were predominantly male (56.8%) and aged between 25–34 years (36.0%), revealed significant insights into the current state of the industry. With 42.4% of participants possessing over five years of experience, the sample reflected a knowledgeable professional base. Descriptive analysis indicated a high level of technological awareness, as over half (64.8%) of respondents understood AI technology, although only 54.0% applied it in practice. This discrepancy highlights a "usage gap" where theoretical perception outpaces actual implementation. Despite

this, the consensus was positive, with the majority agreeing that AI enhances efficiency (72.0%), image quality (64.8%), and creative diversity (72.0%), though opinions regarding its impact on traditional photographic techniques remained varied.

To provide analytical rigor regarding the factors influencing innovation management, hypothesis testing further clarified these trends. A One-Way ANOVA comparing the effect of professional experience levels on the "Perception of AI Utility" revealed a statistically significant difference between groups [$F_{(2, 297)} = 18.45$, $p < .001$]. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that the Expert group (those with over 5 years of experience) demonstrated a significantly higher positive perception score compared to the Beginner group (Mean Difference = 0.82, $p < .001$). This suggests that experienced practitioners are better equipped to identify the strategic value of AI in workflow optimization. Additionally, an Independent Samples t-test comparing "Willingness to Adopt New Technology" between professional photographers and enthusiasts showed a significant difference in adoption scores [$t(298) = 5.67$, $p < .001$]. This indicates that professionals are more driven by competitive commercial efficiency to integrate innovation, whereas enthusiasts tend to place higher value on the manual process of photography.

Complementing the quantitative data, qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews identified four interconnected themes regarding AI's impact. First, perception and application varied significantly, with professionals prioritizing efficiency while grappling with maintaining artistic identity, whereas developers focused on automation and enthusiasts on accessibility. Second, regarding efficiency and quality, AI was reported to accelerate workflows by 20–30%, though concerns persisted regarding the potential loss of originality. Third, creativity emerged as a double-edged sword, expanding possibilities while risking aesthetic "homogenization." Finally, while reliance on manual methods has declined, fundamental principles like lighting and composition remain essential, often preserved through digital simulation.

Research Results

This research demonstrates that photographic innovation management in China's media convergence era involves integrating advanced digital technologies with traditional artistic foundations. The findings confirm AI's transformative role in photography, supporting Rogers' (2003) diffusion theory, where the significant difference in adoption rates based on experience levels suggests that innovation is currently expert led. The key driving factor identified was the high level of AI awareness and usage among experienced working-age groups, which positively influenced photographic quality and creativity. However, the study also highlighted significant implementation gaps between perception and usage, alongside concerns about homogenization within China's AI-driven ecosystem.

To address these challenges and fully leverage media convergence, this study proposes a strategic framework rooted in three primary pillars: Competence Development, Community Ecosystem, and Business Innovation. First, to bridge the technical skill gap, the industry must transition towards "Computational Imaging Literacy," where educational institutions integrate prompt engineering into curricula and professionals adopt generative AI for concept generation. Second, to combat homogenization and

preserve artistic identity, fostering "Hybrid Creative Communities" is essential; this involves platform providers designing algorithms that reward "Process Sharing" and implementing transparent tagging to distinguish artistic photography from generated art. Third, to monetize efficiency gains—such as the 20-30% workflow reduction reported by professionals—stakeholders should pursue business innovation by offering personalized services like "Synthetic Photography" and AR/VR experiences. Ultimately, for sustainable growth, professional photographers, enthusiasts, and developers must balance technological adoption with the preservation of artistic authenticity, ensuring that innovation enhances rather than dilutes the photographic craft.

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