Masked Expressions: A Visual Analysis of Students Photography in the Era of Face Masks in a Digital Photography Course

Mohamed Ardash

Associate Professor at Advertising Department, Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University
msardash@gmail.com

Abstract:

This research explores the transformative impact of digital technology on photography education, with a particular focus on how digital tools and techniques have reshaped traditional practices and artistic expressions. The study, titled "Masked Expressions: A Visual Analysis of Students' Photography in the Era of Face Masks in the Digital Photography Course," investigates the dual influence of digital advancements and the global pandemic on student photographers. Through a series of case studies, the research examines how face masks, as a necessary yet expressive accessory during the pandemic, have altered the portrayal of emotions and expressions in photography and how students have adapted to these challenges creatively and technically. The objectives of the research are to analyze the impact of face masks on emotional expression, examine the technical adaptations in photography due to digital tools, and identify emerging themes and narratives in student photography during the pandemic. The methodology includes in-depth case studies and thematic analysis of student-created photographs, providing insights into the evolving dynamics of visual arts education under unprecedented conditions. The findings reveal that digital technology not only facilitates a broader exploration of surreal and abstract themes but also necessitates continuous adaptation to new tools and ethical considerations in artistic practices. The research concludes with recommendations for enhancing photography education to include a balanced approach to digital and traditional techniques, ensuring that students are well-equipped to navigate and excel in a digitally dominated art world. This study contributes to the discourse on the intersection of art, technology, and societal changes, offering valuable perspectives on adapting visual arts education.

Keywords:

Introduction:

Photography as an art form captures moments that are ephemeral and transient, allowing us to see the world from new perspectives. The proposed research will explore the impact of digital technology on the creative process in photography. This study aims to understand how digital tools and techniques have transformed traditional photography practices and the implications of these changes for photographers and their work.

In the wake of the global pandemic, face masks have become a ubiquitous part of our daily attire, fundamentally altering interpersonal communication and self-expression. This shift presents a unique challenge and opportunity for the field of photography, particularly in educational settings where students are learning the art and technique of capturing human expressions.

"Masked Expressions" is a research project that delves into how digital photography students have adapted to these changes. The study focuses on the visual analysis of student-created photographs during the era of face masks, exploring how the partial concealment of the face impacts the portrayal of emotions and the overall narrative of the photographs.

This research aims to uncover the creative and technical adjustments students have made to address the challenges posed by face masks. It investigates how masks influence the emotional depth and communicative power of photographic portraits and how these constraints spur innovation and adaptation in photographic techniques and expression.

Through this analysis, "Masked Expressions" seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on art education and visual communication in times of significant social change, providing insights that could guide future educational practices and artistic explorations in the field of photography.

Research Objectives:

1- Analyze the Impact of Face Masks on Emotional Expression: To explore how the use of face masks affects the portrayal of emotions in photography, particularly focusing on the challenges and creative solutions developed by students in capturing expressive detail when the lower half of the face is obscured.

2- Examine Technical Adaptations in Photography: To investigate the technical

adjustments and innovations that photography students have implemented in response to the introduction of face masks, including changes in camera settings, composition, and lighting techniques.

3- Identify Emerging Themes and Narratives: To identify and analyze the themes, narratives, and motifs that have emerged in student photography during the era of face masks, understanding how these elements reflect broader societal changes and personal experiences during the pandemic.

Research Problems:

1- How has the integration of digital technology transformed traditional practices in photography education?

2- In what ways do digital tools and techniques influence the creative process of students photographers?

3- How do face masks alter the portrayal of emotions and expressions in students photography?

Significance:

This research is significant for several reasons: Educational Insight: It provides valuable insights into how digital technology and societal changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have influenced visual arts education. The study's findings can guide the development of photography curricula that better prepare students for the evolving demands of the art world. Artistic Innovation: By analyzing how students have creatively adapted to the use of face masks in photography, the research highlights the potential for innovation in the face of adversity. It demonstrates how constraints can spur creativity, leading to new artistic expressions and techniques. Societal Reflection: The research also contributes to the broader discourse on how art reflects and responds to societal changes. The use of face masks in photography serves as a powerful symbol of the pandemic, and the study offers insights into how this symbol has been incorporated into artistic practices. Technological Integration: The study underscores the importance of integrating digital tools into photography education, ensuring that students are equipped to navigate a digitally dominated art world while maintaining ethical artistic practices.

Literature Review:

The literature review will cover real outcome photographs of this class, that discuss different photography technology and techniques, focusing on artistic traits and aesthetic.

Purpose:

The primary purpose of this research is to evaluate and showcase the diverse outcomes of a photography class that integrates various art school philosophies. By examining the different techniques, styles, and creative expressions fostered through these distinct educational approaches.

Also, to understand and document how the mandatory use of face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced and transformed the practices and outputs of students enrolled in a digital photography course. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which face masks have affected visual representation, emotional conveyance, and artistic expression in photography.

By examining the adaptations and creative strategies employed by photography students, this research seeks to offer insights into the evolving dynamics of visual arts education under unprecedented conditions. Additionally, it aims to contribute to the pedagogical approaches in arts education, ensuring that teaching methods remain effective and relevant in times of significant social and cultural shifts.

Ultimately, this study intends to enrich the discourse on the intersection of art, culture, and crisis, providing valuable perspectives on how visual arts can adapt to and reflect changes in human experiences and societal norms.

Methodology:

Data Collection

- Case Studies: Select a diverse group of photographers for in-depth case studies to explore individual workflows and creative processes of the photography class.

Data Analysis

- Thematic Analysis: Using thematic analysis on each photograph to identify common themes and insights related to the creative and technical aspects of digital photography.

Case Studies Analyses:
Case Study No. 1 by Student Aya Alaaeldien:

Figure 1: Girl with a Flower Mask

Contrast and Color:

The most immediate visual element is the contrast between the dark, muted black face mask and the vibrant, colorful flowers. The flowers, in shades of yellow and orange, pop against the darker elements of the image, drawing the viewer's eye. The warm colors of the flowers are echoed in the maroon and white sweater, creating a harmonious color palette that balances vibrancy with subtlety.

Artistically, this image is a striking blend of contrast, texture, and symbolism, evoking a sense of both resilience and creativity.

Symbolism:

The juxtaposition of the face mask—a symbol of the current global pandemic and its associated challenges—with the delicate flowers suggests themes of hope, resilience, and the beauty that persists even in difficult times. The flowers emerging from the mask and hair can be seen as a metaphor for growth and renewal, even in the face of adversity.

Texture and Composition:

The textures in the image—the soft, curly hair, the roughness of the brick wall, and the smoothness of the mask—add depth to the composition. The way the flowers are placed, not just in the mask but also in the hair, creates a sense of movement and organic growth. The asymmetrical placement of the flowers adds a touch of spontaneity and naturalness, making the image feel more authentic and less staged.

Expression and Mood:

The person's partially visible face, with their eyes peeking out above the mask, adds an element of mystery and introspection. The mask covers much of the face, a common sight in recent times, yet the flowers transform this familiar symbol into something beautiful and artistic. The overall mood of the image is one of quiet strength, with a touch of whimsy and creativity.

Contextual Layering:

The brick wall in the background, a common and perhaps mundane element, serves as a neutral backdrop that doesn't compete with the subject but rather frames it. The image, in its entirety, feels like a commentary on the intersection of the everyday and the extraordinary, using common objects (a mask, a wall) and transforming them into something visually and symbolically rich.

In summary, this image can be seen as a visual narrative that combines the reality of the pandemic with a hopeful, artistic response. It speaks to the ability to find beauty and expression even in challenging times, using contrast, color, and symbolism to communicate a layered and thoughtful message.

Case Study No. 2 by Student Rania Kamal

Figure 2: Two Masks

Contrast and Composition:

The composition of the image is immediately striking, with two faces closely juxtaposed, each occupying half of the frame. This symmetrical balance draws attention to the eyes of both individuals, which are the focal points of the image. The use of black and white eliminates any distraction from color, allowing the viewer to focus on the contrasts of light and shadow, as well as the textures in the image. The grayscale palette emphasizes the subtle details, such as the softness of the skin and the folds of the masks.

This black-and-white image is a powerful study in duality, intimacy, and the shared human experience, using minimal elements to convey depth and emotion.

Texture and Detail:

The texture of the fabric—both of the headscarf on the left and the surgical masks worn by both individuals—adds a tactile quality to the image. The masks, now a ubiquitous symbol of the pandemic, are rendered in stark contrast to the smoothness of the skin and the softness of the hair, adding a layer of visual interest.

The fine details, like the stray hairs, the slight furrowing of brows, and the natural imperfections of the skin, contribute to the authenticity and realism of the photograph. These details make the image feel deeply personal and raw.

Symbolism and Mood:

The image is rich in symbolism. The two faces, partially obscured by masks, convey a sense of shared experience and solidarity. The masks, while hiding part of their identities, also unify them in a common experience—perhaps hinting at themes of connection, even in isolation.

The decision to capture only half of each face can be interpreted as a commentary on how the pandemic has fragmented our lives, leaving us with only parts of our usual selves visible to the world. Yet, the eyes—clear, focused, and direct—remain uncovered, symbolizing resilience and the undiminished human spirit.

The image's close cropping adds to the sense of intimacy and immediacy, making the viewer feel almost as if they are intruding on a private moment. The lack of visible space around the faces creates a feeling of closeness and perhaps even confinement, reflecting the restrictive nature of the times.

Emotional Resonance:

The image resonates emotionally, evoking feelings of both unity and separation. The closeness of the faces suggests a bond, possibly familial or friendship, while the masks indicate the barriers that have become a part of daily life. This duality—connection and distance—gives the image its emotional depth.

The choice to render the image in black and white further enhances its emotional impact, stripping the scene down to its essential elements and focusing the viewer's attention on the expressions and textures rather than on color.

Contextual Layering:

Without a visible background, the focus remains entirely on the subjects. This lack of context forces the viewer to engage more deeply with the faces and what they might represent, making the image more universally relatable. It becomes less about who these individuals are and more about what they represent: a shared human condition in extraordinary times.

In summary, this image uses composition, contrast, and symbolism to explore themes of connection, resilience, and the dualities of the human experience during a time of global crisis. Its artistic strength lies in its simplicity and the depth of emotion it conveys through minimal means.

Case Study No. 3 by Student Youssef Gerges:

Figure 3: The Bandage Mask

Composition and Perspective:

The composition is striking in its simplicity, with the subject positioned off-center, gazing upward into an undefined space. This perspective creates a sense of contemplation or anticipation, as if the subject is looking toward something beyond the frame. The low-angle shot enhances the subject's presence and creates a sense of grandeur or importance.

The choice to wrap the subject's head and face in layers of white fabric transforms the figure into something almost sculptural. The layers obscure much of the subject's identity, turning the person into an abstract form that could represent anyone—or anything. This anonymity invites viewers to project their own interpretations onto the figure.

This black-and-white image is a captivating exploration of identity, transformation, and abstraction, rendered through a minimalist and almost surreal composition.

Light and Shadow:

The lighting in the image is soft and diffused, casting gentle shadows that emphasize the textures of the fabric and the contours of the subject's form.

The bright, almost overexposed background creates a stark contrast with the subject, further drawing attention to the wrapped figure.

The interplay of light and shadow also adds a sense of depth and dimension to the image, making the fabric appear almost translucent in places. This translucency gives the image an ethereal quality, as if the subject is emerging from—or dissolving into—the light.

Texture and Material:

The texture of the fabric is one of the most visually compelling aspects of the image. The layers of gauze or similar material are wrapped tightly, yet still allow for some visibility of the features beneath. This layering creates a tension between concealment and revelation, as the viewer can discern the shape of the head and the suggestion of facial features, but not their details.

The contrast between the smooth, flowing fabric and the solid, dark clothing creates a visual dichotomy, highlighting the dual nature of the subject—both grounded and otherworldly.

Symbolism and Interpretation:

The image can be interpreted in various ways, depending on the viewer's perspective. The wrapped figure could symbolize protection, isolation, or transformation. The fabric, traditionally associated with bandages or shrouds, might evoke thoughts of healing, mummification, or metamorphosis. The lack of visible identity could represent a loss of self or a deliberate attempt to obscure or reinvent one's identity.

The upward gaze of the subject suggests aspiration or hope, as if the figure is looking toward something greater. The image's ambiguity allows it to be seen as both a symbol of resilience in the face of adversity and as a commentary on the vulnerability of the human condition.

Emotional Tone:

The emotional tone of the image is both serene and haunting. The soft lighting and gentle textures create a calm atmosphere, but the obscured identity and stark composition also introduce an element of unease or mystery. The image feels introspective, as if capturing a moment of inner reflection or transformation.

Contextual Layering:

Without a clear context, the image becomes a universal symbol, open to multiple interpretations. The lack of identifiable background or setting makes the subject the sole focus, emphasizing the themes of identity and transformation. The image can be seen as a meditation on the self, the masks we wear, and the ways in which we navigate the world, particularly in times of change or uncertainty.

In summary, this image is a compelling piece of visual art that uses minimalism, contrast, and symbolism to explore complex themes of identity, transformation, and the human experience. The combination of abstract form and emotional depth makes it a thought-provoking and evocative work.

Case Study No. 4 by Student Youssef Gerges:

Figure 4: The Torn Mask

Subject:

The central figure is a person wearing a blue face mask, with dark hair, and a serious or introspective expression. The mask, a symbol heavily associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, immediately grounds the image in a context of health, safety, and perhaps isolation.

This image is a compelling piece of visual art that uses various elements to convey a sense of fragmentation, disruption, or duality.

Visual Disruption:

The image is deliberately torn along a diagonal line, which bisects the person's face. This tear creates two distinct parts of the image, representing a kind of split or division. The tear is rough, with frayed edges, symbolizing an abrupt or violent separation.

Frame and Tape:

The white frame around the image, with a piece of tape in one corner and an "X" in another, adds a sense of a boundary or a box. The tape might suggest an attempt to hold something together or fix it, while the "X" can be interpreted as a mark of correction, rejection, or an indication of something being wrong or incomplete.

Color and Lighting:

The color palette is subdued, with muted tones, focusing attention on the blue of the mask and the contrast between the light background and the darker features of the subject. The lighting appears soft, emphasizing the seriousness or somber mood of the subject.

Symbolism and Interpretation:

Fragmentation: The torn effect could symbolize a sense of identity being split or fragmented. This might represent the psychological or emotional impact of the pandemic, where many people experienced a rupture in their normal lives, creating a 'before' and 'after' reality.

Duality: The mask covers half of the subject's face, which along with the tear, could suggest a duality between the hidden and the revealed, the public and the private self. It could also represent the contrast between how we present ourselves to the world versus what we feel internally.

Isolation and Disconnection: The image could be commenting on feelings of isolation and disconnection, both physical (due to social distancing) and emotional (due to the mental toll of the pandemic).

Overall, the image uses a mix of direct visual cues (like the mask) and more abstract techniques (like the tear and framing) to create a layered, emotionally resonant piece that invites viewers to reflect on themes of division, disruption, and the complex emotional landscape of recent times.

Case Study No. 5 by Student Asmaa Taher:

Figure 5: Kid with a Mask

Concept:

This photograph captures a poignant and timely moment. Artistically, the image resonates with the themes of innocence, vulnerability, and adaptation. The subject, a young child, is depicted adjusting a blue face mask, an act that has become symbolic of the global pandemic. The contrast between the child's delicate hands and the oversized mask underscores the disparity between childhood innocence and the gravity of the current world situation.

Colors:

The soft focus and muted colors, particularly in the background, draw attention to the child's action, emphasizing the mask as a focal point. The floral-patterned garment adds a touch of warmth and nostalgia, perhaps evoking a sense of the normalcy and comfort that existed before the pandemic.

Lighting:

The lighting appears natural and subdued, casting a gentle glow on the child's face, which is partially obscured by the mask. This subtle play of light and shadow enhances the mood of the photograph, creating a sense of quiet introspection.

Overall, the image is both a document of our times and a tender exploration of how even the youngest among us are navigating these unprecedented circumstances. The simplicity of the composition belies the depth of emotion and meaning conveyed through the child's simple, yet profound, action.

Case Study No. 6 by Student Nadeen Ahmed:

Figure 6: The Hidden Mask

Concept:

This black-and-white photograph exudes a strong sense of expression and introspection. The image focuses on a young woman, her hands partially covering her mouth, which creates a powerful visual statement about silence, self-censorship, or perhaps the desire to speak out.

Colors:

The monochromatic palette emphasizes contrasts and textures, highlighting the smoothness of her skin, the fabric of her scarf, and the light catching on her jewelry.

The shadows and light play a crucial role in the composition, especially in the way they draw attention to the subject's eyes, which are full of emotion and intensity.

Emotions & Mood:

Her direct gaze, combined with the gesture of covering her mouth, suggests a complex mix of emotions—possibly hinting at themes of restraint, contemplation, or the suppression of one's voice. The headscarf and the bracelets add cultural and personal layers to the narrative, offering viewers a glimpse into the subject's identity and background.

Background & Composition:

The background, though slightly blurred, contains elements that contribute to the overall context of the photograph. The poster on the left, with partial text visible, and the abstract forms in the background, hint at an environment that might be public or communal, yet the focus remains intimate and personal.

Overall, this photograph is a striking exploration of identity, expression, and the unspoken. The simplicity of the composition, coupled with the depth of emotion conveyed through the subject's eyes and gesture, makes it a compelling piece that invites the viewer to ponder the story behind the image.

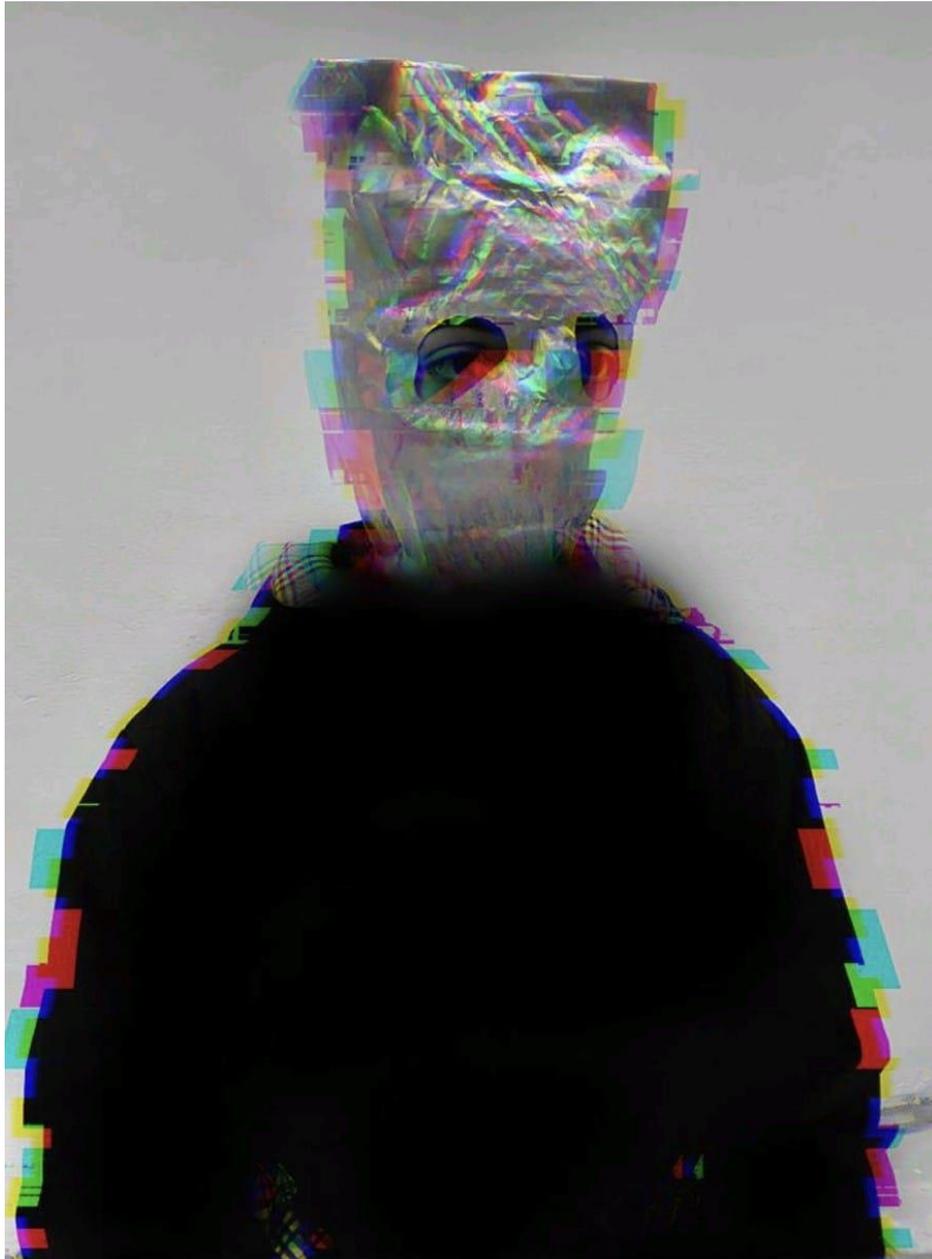**Case Study No. 7 by Student Nermin Sherif:**

Figure 7: The Pixelated Mask

Philosophy & Concept:

This image stands out as an abstract and surreal representation, playing heavily on themes of anonymity, distortion, and the digital age. The subject, whose face is obscured by a makeshift mask, possibly a plastic bag, combined with the intense glitch effect, evokes a sense of disorientation and identity loss.

Symbolism:

The glitch effect, characterized by the colorful pixelation and digital noise, is reminiscent of a corrupted digital file or malfunctioning technology. This visual distortion serves as a metaphor for the fragmented nature of identity in the modern world, where digital personas often take precedence over reality. The bright, almost neon colors of the glitch effect contrast sharply with the dark, featureless silhouette of the figure, emphasizing the tension between the human and the digital.

Layout & Concepting:

The bag covering the face introduces an additional layer of anonymity and dehumanization, suggesting themes of suffocation, concealment, or perhaps forced conformity. The eyes, barely visible through the mask, are the only hint of humanity left in the figure, adding to the unsettling nature of the image.

Composition:

The composition is minimalistic, with the stark white background allowing the distorted figure to dominate the viewer's attention. The lack of other visual elements creates a sense of isolation, making the figure appear as though it exists in a void or a liminal space, further enhancing the eerie, otherworldly feel.

Overall, this image is a powerful commentary on the effects of technology on identity, the loss of individuality, and the alienation experienced in the digital era. The use of glitch art, combined with the disturbing figure, creates a haunting visual that lingers in the viewer's mind, provoking thoughts about the increasingly blurred lines between the human and the technological.

Results:

The research findings reveal several key outcomes: Creative and Technical Adaptations: Students have made significant creative and technical adjustments to their photography practices in response to the use of face masks. These adaptations include changes in camera settings, composition, and lighting techniques to better capture the emotions and narratives of their subjects despite the partial concealment of the face. Emergence of New Themes: The analysis of student photography during the pandemic has identified emerging themes and narratives that reflect the broader societal changes of the time. These include themes of isolation, resilience, and the duality of human experience during the pandemic.

Expanded Artistic Horizons: The integration of digital tools has facilitated a broader exploration of surreal and abstract themes in photography. Students have been able to manipulate and enhance their images in ways that were not possible with traditional methods, leading to more complex and nuanced artistic expressions. Ethical Considerations: The research also highlights the ethical considerations that arise with digital manipulation in photography. Students must continuously adapt to new tools while maintaining ethical integrity in their artistic practices. Recommendations for Education: The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing photography education, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to digital and traditional techniques. This ensures that students are well-prepared to excel in a rapidly changing art world. These results contribute to the understanding of how photography education can evolve to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by both technological advancements and societal shifts, offering a roadmap for future educational strategies and curriculum development.

Conclusion:

The research conducted on the impact of digital technology on photography education, with a particular focus on how digital tools and techniques have reshaped traditional practices and artistic expressions has provided significant insights into how digital tools have transformed traditional practices in the field. The adoption of digital cameras and software has not only altered the technical aspects of photography but has also expanded the creative horizons for photographers, enabling more complex and nuanced artistic expressions.

Through the analysis of various case studies, it became evident that digital technology facilitates a broader exploration of surreal and abstract themes, allowing photographers to manipulate and enhance images in ways that were not possible with traditional methods. The integration of these tools into educational curriculums has proven essential in equipping students with the necessary skills to navigate and excel in a digitally dominated art world.

However, the research also highlighted challenges such as the need for continuous learning and adaptation to rapidly evolving technologies, and the ethical considerations that arise with digital manipulation. To address these challenges, it is recommended that photography education programs emphasize both technical proficiency and ethical artistic practices.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of embracing digital technology in photography education while maintaining a balance with traditional techniques to foster a well-rounded and ethically aware generation of photographers. The findings from this research are poised to guide future educational strategies and curriculum developments, ensuring that they align with the ongoing advancements in digital technology and the evolving needs of the art and photography industries.

Recommendations and Suggestions

1- Enhance Educational Curriculum:

- Incorporate Digital Tools: Integrate more comprehensive training on digital tools and software that are pivotal in modern photography, ensuring students are adept at both traditional and digital techniques.
- Focus on Artistic Philosophy: Emphasize the philosophical and conceptual aspects of surrealism and abstract art within the curriculum to deepen students' understanding and appreciation of these styles.

2- Foster Creative Experimentation:

- Encourage Mixed Media: Promote the use of mixed media and interdisciplinary approaches combining digital and traditional methods to push the boundaries of surrealism and abstract photography.
- Create Collaborative Projects: Develop collaborative projects that allow students to work together, merging different artistic visions and techniques to produce innovative works.

3- Expand Exhibition Opportunities:

- Showcase Student Work: Organize exhibitions that specifically highlight surreal and abstract photography, providing students with the platform to display their work and receive public and peer feedback.
- Engage with Art Communities: Partner with local art galleries and online platforms to regularly feature student projects, increasing visibility and engagement with the broader art community.

4- Leverage Technology:

- Utilize Advanced Software: Encourage the exploration of advanced editing software to manipulate images in ways that align with surreal and abstract aesthetics, allowing for greater creativity and expression.
- Adopt New Technologies: Stay abreast of emerging technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality that can be used to create immersive and interactive photographic experiences.

5- Conduct Workshops and Seminars:

- Invite Experts: Regularly host workshops and seminars with renowned photographers and artists who specialize in surrealism and abstract art to provide students with insights and inspiration.
- Technical Skill Development: Organize sessions focusing on specific techniques such as lighting, color manipulation, and digital editing that are crucial for surrealism and abstract photography.

6- Research and Development:

- Ongoing Research: Support ongoing academic research on the impact of digital technology on surrealism and abstract photography to continually update teaching methods and curriculum.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Implement robust feedback mechanisms to gather student and faculty insights on the effectiveness of the teaching methods and the relevance of the curriculum content.

7- Promote Ethical Practices:

- Ethical Use of Digital Tools: Educate students on the ethical considerations in digital manipulation, ensuring they understand the implications of altering images and the importance of maintaining artistic integrity.
- Transparency in Art Creation: Encourage transparency in the creative process, where students disclose the extent of digital manipulation in their works, fostering an environment of honesty and ethical artistic expression.

By implementing these recommendations, the educational program can enhance its approach to teaching digital photography, better preparing students to innovate and excel in the evolving landscape of visual arts.

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