

In what ways does AI-generated imagery reframe the role of photography in constructing personal memories?

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Abstract

Over the past ten years, AI-generated images have changed the way we visualize personal memories, shaking up the traditional idea of photography. Unlike photos, which have always been trusted to capture real moments and help to maintain emotion, family and memories, AI works differently. They're created by computer algorithms instead of being snapped in the moment, so they can look like photos but don't have a direct connection to reality. This opens up new possibilities, being that people can visualize memories that were never photographed, piece together lost recollections or even imagine versions of their past.

This thesis looks at how AI-generated images are changing, not replacing, the role of photography in personal memory. Photography has long been a selective and emotionally powerful way to organize memories — through albums, social media, or family collections. Its authority has always come from being seen as a “true” record of reality, even though it's shaped by human choices about what to capture, keep, and highlight. AI images take this even further, offering visuals that are imaginative, collaborative, focusing on emotional truth just as much as factual accuracy.

Through this thesis, I will look into how AI is changing the way we think about memory in four areas: the historical and cultural role of photography, the technical and creative differences between photos and AI images, how synthetic images are used to shape personal and emotional memories, and the cultural issues that come up when real and AI-generated visuals are combined. AI images open up new ways to remember and reimagine the past, but they also raise the questions about authenticity and how we preserve memories. On the whole, this study sees photography and AI working together, as photos keep us grounded in reality, while AI lets us reconstruct and tell new personal stories.

Introduction

The past decade has brought a big change into how visual culture is made and understood. With fast-advancing AI image generation, people now have easy access to tools that can produce lifelike images from short text prompts. These systems have widened creative opportunities for artists and media makers, but they have also entered far more personal areas of visual experience: memory, identity and the stories people tell about their own lives (Hoskins, 2024). As more people use AI to picture childhood moments that were never photographed, rebuild missing memories, or create idealised scenes from their past, the line between what is recorded and what is imagined has become less secure. (Pataranutaporn et al., 2025) This thesis explores this new situation, asking how AI-generated images reshape, rather than replace, the traditional role of photography in making personal memories.

For most of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, photography was understood as a technology that captured and preserved events as they happened. Roland barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, presents photographs as a projection of their subjects, declaring the reality of “that-has-been,” linking photography directly to a moment of reality (Barthes, 1981). Its defining feature was the belief that a photograph was physically connected to a real moment through light and time, emphasizing the indexical character of photography, where the subject’s presence is captured as light transfers its shape onto the image. Susan Sontag (*On Photography*, 1977) highlights this aspect well, noting that photographs are culturally treated as proof of events, shaping them in reality in a way that separates them from other kinds of representation. Within this context, personal memory has long been supported by photographs, which serve as evidence of lived experiences and act as material points around which identity and family stories form. AI-generated images differ sharply from this model. Instead of arising from real events, they are produced through computational patterns drawn from huge sets of existing pictures. AI images can look photographic, yet they may have no direct link to a person’s life. When placed in memoirs, family stories or digital archives, they raise new questions about what counts as true, what counts as real and what role images play in emotional memory.

Throughout history, photographic memory has filled three big roles which goes as recording the past, shaping personal and family identity, and offering a visual basis for telling one’s life story. Photographs fill albums, social media feeds and domestic spaces. They act as proof, keepsakes and emotional objects. People use them to remember loved ones, mark important events and feel connected across generations. In doing so, photography has supported the belief that personal memory is built from what actually happened. Yet this belief was never simple. Even before AI, photographs were chosen, cropped, staged,

and arranged — not only recording life, but shaping how it was remembered. The arrival of AI-generated imagery magnifies this tension by separating the visual record from real lived events.

AI imagery challenges the link between photography and truth. If photographs once grounded memory in reality, synthetic images open space for memory that is imagined, reconstructed, or idealised. A person might generate an image of themselves as a child in a place they never visited, or a “missing” picture of an ancestor who lived before cameras were common. These acts blend memory with invention, yet they also highlight a deeper point, this being that memory is not only factual, but emotional, descriptive and narrative. AI-generated images may not serve as evidence, but they can hold emotional truth and personal meaning.

This dissertation aims to argue that AI-generated imagery does not make photography irrelevant. Instead, it changed the function photography plays in personal memory. Photography becomes one part of a larger system of visual remembrance — still valuable for its ties to reality, but now placed alongside synthetic images that allow wonder, repair, and imaginative reconstruction. AI expands what can be pictured from memory, while also complicating ideas of authenticity, ethics and archival care.

The chapters that follow the development for this argument will follow in four parts. Chapter 1 will look into photography’s historical role in memory-making, and how ideas of truth, material form and identity developed around it. Chapter 2 explains what makes AI-generated imagery different, focusing on non-indexicality and its effects on trust and authenticity. Chapter 3 examines how people use synthetic images in personal and emotional contexts, including processes of memory reconstruction and self-narration. Chapter 4 considers the ethical, archival, and cultural consequences of combining real photographs with generated ones in personal histories. Altogether, the chapters show how AI image generation challenges and complicates the function of photography in personal memories.

Chapter 1 – Photography and the Making of Personal Memory

Photography has long shaped how people remember life. Since the 19th century, it has been more than pictures — a tool to understand and hold onto the past, gaining trust as a reliable medium.

“No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it” (Benjamin, 1931/1999, p. 6).

Because of this trust, photography has been used in many areas that require trust, such as science, journalism, law and personal memories. For most people, a photograph became more than just a picture but felt like physical proof that a moment actually happened, something which can be saved as a document.

This becomes noticed as the photos themselves feel real and show the truth. Batchen says, “these otherwise humble portraits declare ‘don’t not forget me’ with as much intensity of purpose as any pharaoh’s tomb.” (Batchen, 2004, p.17) In that sense, photographs become more than images: they become a moment existed and must be remembered. It’s important we understand where this comes from, as even today we treat photos as true records. The history that lies within it as well allows us to compare photography to newer image-making technologies, which aren’t seen as trustworthy or real.

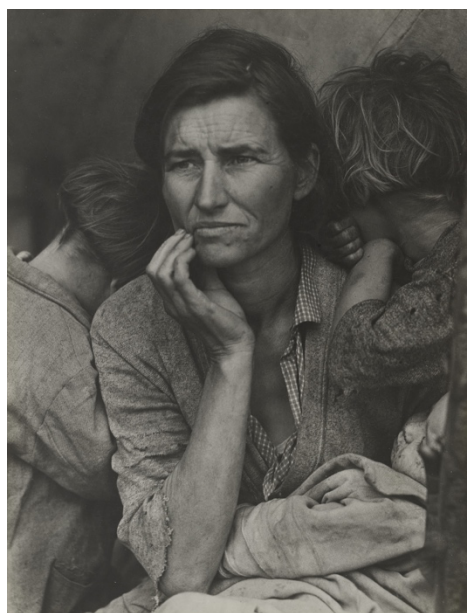


Figure 1 – Migrant Mother

The emotional tone of photographs can be shown by Lange's Migrant Mother. While the image documents a real event happening, its power lies with how it shapes memory and empathy, showing that photographs do more than record but construct meaning and emotional truth.

Over time, cameras became easier for everyone to use, and it stopped being just a form of records but started becoming part of everyday home life. Families and friends start saving images to remember special occasions, people and average daily moments. (Batchen, 2004) A family photo album became the main place where these images can be stored helping to create a story, family connection and who people were. From the simplest things like birthdays, holidays, school pictures, they all work together in forming a visual history that families can look back on when talking about the past. The albums were never just a place to dump the pictures—they formatted and organised stories about a family's life, focusing on the family values and what stayed. Even in today's digital world, this idea of a family album remains through phones, cloud folders and social media posts. "We appear to be in the the beginning of a true revolution in media creation: the rise of generative media." (Manovich, 2023, p. 2) Photography became a way to organise personal memory, letting people hold onto the past and keep those quick moments. This sense of truth, however, is complicated by Marsh's argument that although photographs are often seen as accurate representations, they "never really re-present reality because all realities are relative" (Marsh, 2003, p.14)

Photos have long been seen as proof that moments happened, shaping how we trust and remember events. While photos come from reality, they are shaped by choices, what to capture and preserve, yet their link to truth remains strong (Sontag, 1977).

Photographs don't just record events, they carry emotions, from an old house to a lost loved one. Over time, they can come to represent relationships, life stages, and memories, shaping not only what we remember but how we remember it.

A key part photography working in memory comes from the fact that printed photos are physical objects. You can hold them, frame them, place into albums. As they exist in the real world, they become part of everyday family habits — flipping through albums, hanging up pictures and showing old photos to the younger generation. "Photographs have inextricably linked meanings as images and meanings as objects; an indissoluble, yet ambiguous, melding of image and form, both of which are direct products of intention (Edwards, 2002)." The physical side of photography helps to keep the memories tied to a time and a place. Even the marks on photos like the fading, scratches, bent edges, all adds up to its meaning. This shows that it's been handled, moved and valued. This documentation doesn't just record the moment within, but of its own history as an object itself. Although digital photographs are more

common now, many people still feel attached to printed ones, especially when connected to precious events or heritage. The physical form makes photographs feel real in completely different way digital or AI imagery could not copy.

Photography also plays a key part in passing memories through generations (Setiadi, 2017). Pictures of old relatives, family homes, or early gatherings invite people to see a past they never lived through. These photos help to carry family identity, stories and their values. It allows people to see the connection of the people that came before them. For children, photos are the main way they can learn about their older family and to imagine the relatives they never met or might not have much recollection of. For adults, looking at old photos can remind them of the changes that have happening linking the past and present together. In many families, these images can hold deep meaning and a strong aspect for storytelling. They act as visual reference points that memories gather around, shaping and reshaping its family history. This deeply shows that photography matters not just for personal memory, but for shared identify as well.



Figure 2 - Family-of-five birthday party photo

Family snapshots illustrate the choices of photographing memory. Everyday challenges and ordinary occurrences are missing, highlighting the idea that personal albums are deliberately chosen snapshots rather than everything that goes on. These choices show how photography has historically shaped both individual and family identity.

Although photography is linked to truth and recording reality, it has been naturally selective. Only specific moments end up being photographed and fewer are saved in photo albums or kept for the future. Taking an image immediately means choosing what's relevant and what isn't. "These choices determine the content and the aesthetic qualities..." (Hertzmann, 2024). (Family albums usually showcase birthdays, holidays and achievements. But what they will never show is arguments, stress, and the everyday struggles. Due to this, personal photo collections often show a polished and incomplete version of everyday life. This selective nature reveals that photographic memory is built and not neutral. Photographs influence how people remember but also influence what gets ignored and erased. Even though photographs are treated as objective facts, they still reflect on cultural beliefs, personal feelings and social expectations. Recognising this selectively is key when thinking about how new visual tool, like AI-generated images, might change or challenge how photographic memory is formed. Photography has always required a balance between recording real events and telling a story, even way before AI existed.

Realising that photographic memory has always been shaped and selective helps us to understand why AI-generated imagery is important. Photography for a long time has been linked to real life through its documentary roots but has worked as a storytelling tool that creates meaning as well as recorded facts. Barthes explains that the studium of a photograph communicates the factual or cultural content, the information recognizable by a general audience, stating that it is "the interest which we take in a photograph in a general way" (Barthes, 1981, p. 27), which highlights the documentary function of photography. This combination of truth and imagination provides a foundation for considering how synthetic images now enter personal memory. AI-generated pictures break photography's usual tie to lived experience, offering images that can still feel emotional even when they never happened. This change doesn't only challenge photography's authority, but it shows how flexible memory-making really is. AI images force us to question what we define as a memory object, where authenticity resides in visual accounts, and how individuals juggle both genuine and imagined memories of their past. Now that the traditional role of photography in shaping memory has been outlined, the next chapter will explore what truly separates AI-generated images from photographs and how these differences change the way personal memory forms through pictures.

Chapter 2 – AI-generated Imagery and the Transformation of Visual Memory

AI-generated imagery works quite differently from the way photography works when creating visual content. As opposed to the way photography works, AI creates images by studying big collections of pictures and then produce new visuals based on patterns within that data. “We describe a simple approach for this task based on a transformer that autoregressively models the text and image tokens as a single stream of data” (Ramesh et al., 2021). These results can look like photos but are not linked to a real moment or location. Instead, they come from computation and not from a camera capturing a scene. Due to this, AI imagery forms a new type of picture that doesn’t really fit into photography or illustration. It combines the elements of looking photographic yet also created from imagination. This is highly relevant because the images no longer need real events to exist, meaning memories can be pictured even when no camera was present. This shift creates a challenge with old beliefs about what images represent and how they connect to a lived experience. Without recording reality, images are now able to be produced to fill in memory gaps, remake past events, or show moments the camera never captured. This shift creates the starting point for new methods of building personal memory.

One key difference between AI images and photographs is the idea of indexicality. “If the constraints of successful signification require that the sign utilize some existential or physical connection between it and its object, then the sign is an index.” (Atkin, 2010) Regular photos are indexical because they come from a direct link. For example, the light from the real world enters the camera and becomes an image. AI-generated pictures do not work in this way. They are formed from algorithms and patterns in data, not from real things in front of the camera. Scholars, Rubinstein and Sluis argue the materiality of the digital image “is deeply intertwined with its inherent undecidability and underpinned by computational processes that are largely unknowable or inaccessible” (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2013, p. 27). Therefore, AI imagery has no need to show anything that actually existed. They can become extremely similar to how a photograph looks in style and detail whilst becoming completely invented. For personal memory, this break from reality is a big change. it creates a possibility to picture events that were never photographed or even remembered. Photography ties memory to real life experiences, yet AI imagery can tie memory to imagination instead. this creates a combination of openness and risk, as fabricated images can release memory from what was documented, but they make the visual record less stable and harder to confirm as true.



Figure 3 - Van Gogh's Bedroom to AI Whisperers with Love

AI-generated images can look like photos but aren't actually linked to real-world events. Unlike traditional photographs, they are constructed from patterns rather than light from the actual scene. The shows AI images are imaginative rather than tied to reality and can visualize a memory without relying on the experience.

AI image generators act more like tools for visual storytelling than devices that record real life. Studies on human-AI co-creation suggests that AI image generators function as creative collaborators rather than factual reporters. For example, Turchi et al. (2023) found that large-scale text to image generative models support creators in creativity and storytelling, letting users to repeatedly refine and shape outputs. It takes in descriptions, prompts, or scraps of memory and turn written ideas into pictures. In doing so, the user becomes almost a co-creator, directing the output through experimentation, adjustment and imagination. Photography's story comes from what the camera captured, whereas with AI, story comes first, and the image is built from it. This alternates the link between memory and pictures. Instead of photographs influencing how we remember, people can now create images that match or even change their memories. The generating act now becomes its own memory work, letting users try out visual versions of childhood places, old relationships, or forgotten times of life. The results aren't ever neutral — every image reflects choices about looks, feelings, and tiny details, making the nature of memory more obvious. AI doesn't just work as a way of recording what happens, but it helps to shape what happens, turning memory into something we make not just something we store.

AI-generated images are more useful when no real photographs exist when records are incomplete (Turchi et al., 2023). Most people hold strong memories that were never captured on camera — moments from early childhood, brief experiences, or personal events that mattered but went undocumented. Prior to AI, these memories stayed pictureless, living in only our minds or in spoken stories. Now they are visualized and imagined into images. This ability creates a new type of

representation, being that that memories don't need proof to become visible. AI pictures can stand in for experiences that can't be photographed because they are gone, forgotten or partly imagined. They might show what someone wishes had been captured, instead of what actually happened. Even though, this raises questions about accuracy, it highlights a deeper point about memory, this being that people often remember through emotion rather than precise detail. Therefore, AI imagery connects feelings with visuals and widens what can class as a memory object.

Although AI-images can look like real photographs, there are smaller visual clues that show they are generated. As Kamali et al. (2025) notes, "diffusion model-generated images... often contain artifacts and implausibility that reveal their AI- generated provenance." Artificial pictures tend to have very smooth textures, unrealistic perfect lighting, or dramatic details that feel more dreamlike. Faces might appear too symmetrical or polished, and environments can look cleaner and more atmospheric than real life. These traits can make AI memories feel emotionally boosted, like looking at a memory through nostalgia rather than an original capture. This style can be deliberate or just a result of how the model was trained, but either way it adds a new tone to personal memory-making. The memory is shown not as it truly was, but as it remembered. This differs from traditional photography, which can often contain, uncertainty, flaws and physical signs of time. AI imagery tends to be sharper, smoother, and easier to reshape, reflecting interpretation rather than a lived experience. Visually, the different aspects affect how people understand and emotionally react to artificial memory images.



Figure 4 – AI Images



Figure 5 – Clearing Winter Storms

Comparing Adams, Clearing Winter Storm with AI-generated landscape, highlights material differences. While photography captures temporal and physical reality, AI images often appear “perfected” and free from physical restrictions. This contrast emphasizes how AI shifts memory representation from documenting facts to creating imagination.

AI systems also complicate the idea of authorship. Within photography, the photographer's job is to frame and record what is already present. Their creativity revolves around choices of angles, timing, focus and method. With AI imagery, creation becomes an exchange between human direction and machine output. Users don't just capture a scene; they adjust with the model through prompts and repeated generation. Authorship becomes shared rather than singular. (Manovich, 2023, p. 2) This raises a key question: who authors the visual memory? The person remembering the moment, the system generating the image, or the interplay between them both? Creative control becomes more flexible, and the final images carry human vision and algorithmic interpretation. This shared authorship unsettles traditional ideas of personal visual history, where pictures are assumed to come from lived reality and individual effort. AI-generated memories, however, arise through co-production, blurring boundaries between remembering, recreating and inventing.

As a whole, these qualities of AI-generated images and their lack of indexical ties, their story-driven nature, their flexible style, and their shared authorship shows a clear move from traditional photography. AI does not replace the camera's job of documenting real life, but it changes the visual space where memory is made. It widens what can be pictured and remembered by allowing people to create images of things that have never been photographed or are never real. This freedom brings in new questions: how do we tell the difference between memory as evidence and memory as imagination? How will AI images enter family archives and how will they shape emotional and generational history? Having outlined technical and conceptual differences between AI imagery and photographs, I will delve into how people are already working AI-generated images into personal memory projects, whether it be emotionally, creatively, and sometimes healing, opening a new phase in the history of photographic culture.

Chapter 3 – AI in Personal and Emotional Memory-Making

An interesting use of AI images in personal memoirs appears when people attempt to rebuild memories from early childhood, especially those with no photos to support them. Childhood memories are usually incomplete: made of textures, colours, emotions, and small pieces instead of a full and wider clear picture. Traditional photography rarely shows these moments because they happened before people were old enough to document themselves, or at times when no camera was present. AI image generation gives a way to turn the early memories into visuals by changing words, feelings, or small details into

images. Someone may only remember the warmth of their kitchen, the pattern on the walls, or sunlight through a window, but AI can take a picture that matches the feeling of that memory. Studies have shown that “AI-edited images having the strongest effect (2.05x compared to control)” (MIT Media Lab, 2025), demonstrating that AI can influence how memories are experienced and remembered. Instead of recreating history exactly, AI produces an image that reflects how the memory is felt. The result works less like proof and more like an emotional version — a visual reflection that shapes memory’s subtle, personal quality. In this sense, AI lets people view memories that once lived just in the mind, transforming simple documentation into a process of creative reconstruction.

AI images are now used not just for childhood memories but also to reconstruct memory, addressing gaps from lost or damaged photographs. Families often face times when no visual records exist, such as ancestors who lived before photography became common or significant and personal moments that were never captured. As one genealogist notes, “most of my ancestors left no written records, but the outlines of their lives could be reconstructed through official records such as birth, marriage and burial certificated, census returns, and in some case wills and probate records,” highlighting how much of family history exists only in fragments (Robb, n.d.). AI-generated pictures let people visualize these moments, not to rewrite history, but to symbolically restore the missing gaps. Creating an imagined image of a great-grandparent or a childhood home that no longer exists can give emotional closure, giving form to memory where the past has faded. These images don’t claim the truth in a traditional photographic sense, yet they hold meaning for memory. Their significance lies in making what is both visible and narratively accessible. Instead of leaving empty spaces in albums or digital collections, AI provides visual anchors that support storytelling across generations. This widens memoir further than what was recorded into what is remembered, imagined or wished for. This shows visual history as something that can be carefully and creatively rebuilt.



Figure 6 – Self Portraits

Historical self-portraits, such as Cahun's work, reveal photography's role in visualizing identity and memory. Chaun's staged and imaginative self-representation signals AI's capability to create images of imagined selves, demonstrating continuity in the exploration of personal memory and identity through images.

A strong feature of AI-generated memoir images is that they often focus on emotional truth more than visual truth. People rarely remember events exactly as they looked; they usually recall the feelings, the meaning of the moment, or how it shaped who they are. As Roland Barthes writes, "The second element will break (or punctuate) the stadium. ... it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (Barthes, 1980, p. 26), highlighting how certain details in an image can have deep emotional responses that go beyond its literal content. AI images can highlight and show this emotional side by creating scenes that are clearer, idealised, or symbolic than any photo could be. For example, a memory of a childhood park might look sunnier and brighter than it really was, reflecting the feeling of the memory rather than historical accuracy. In memoirs, emotional truth can be important than factual truth. The image shows how the past feels, not how it actually appeared. This is very different from photography's usual claim to objectivity. Where photos verify, AI visualises. Where photos record, AI interprets. This change shows that emotional truth can exist alongside, or even replace, factual precision in personal memory-making. This suggests that images in memoirs are shifting toward representing feeling and experience, rather than just proof.

Another growing use of AI images is in grief and remembrance. For people who have lost loved ones, especially when few or no photos exist, AI-generated pictures can help reconnect visually. Someone might create portraits of relatives they never met or imagine scenes they wished had happened. For example, a child held by a grandparent who died early, a family together in a house long gone, a conversation that never took place. As Kidd and Nieto McAvoy note, "As the promotion of deepfake and voice- synthesizing technologies intensifies within genealogical contexts – aggrandised as mechanisms for 'bringing people back to life' – it is crucial that we critically examine these processes and the socio-technical infrastructures that underpin them, as well as their mnemonic impact" (McAvoy and Kidd, 2024). While these images are not real records of events, they can carry deep emotional meaning. They let people see relationships that existed in feeling or desire, rather than in history. This raises questions about authenticity, but it also shows new kind of memory-making, as AI can give shape to grief and unfinished memories into emotional narratives that traditional photographs cannot convey. These synthetic images don't rewrite history but engage with it, offering comfort, connection, or imagined closure. Understanding this emotional use is key to seeing how AI is changing the role of images in personal memory.



Figure 7 - A Vintage Kitchen

AI recreations help bring fragmented childhood memories to life. Even though it's not indexical, these images hold emotional truth and provide memory anchors that photography couldn't capture, showing AI's potential to extend personal memory beyond what was previously documented.

AI-generated images also let people experiment with how they see themselves across time, with identity, and possibility. They can create pictures of themselves as children they barely remember, in past decades they never lived through, or in culturally important places tied to their heritage but never photographed. Others use AI to imagine different lives by exploring who they could have been, where they might have lived, or how they might have looked under other circumstances. A study notes that AI-generated images “can create a twin of an individual... blurring the lines between reality and the digital world” (Wijesundara and Rathnayake, 2024). These images are not memories of real events, but reflections connected to memory and identity. AI offers a new self through which people can explore bloodline, nostalgia and the futures they imagine. In memoirs, this visual experimentation can show the tension between who someone was, who they are, and who they imagine themselves to be. AI imagery works as a site of reflection, reframing identity as a multi-layered narrative rather than a linear one. By letting individuals visualise versions of themselves across memory, imagination, and fiction, AI allows people to imagine parts of their life that never actually happened.

All of these examples together show that AI-made images are not just a visual trend, but a new tool for personal and emotional memory. AI can make unseen memories visible, fill missing history, picture grief, and show emotional truth. Its value is not in pushing photography to aside, but to work with it. Where a photo proves something happened, AI can imagine what was never captured. Both forms can

exist together in personal memoirs, creating mixed collections where real events and emotional impressions blend. AI-made images may someday sit beside family photos, not as lies but as story additions — pictures of things no one photographed, moments remembered more by feeling than detail, or memories lost with time. This shift brings new ethical and cultural questions. How will future families understand synthetic memories? How can people tell emotional images from factual history? These issues follow into the impact of blended memory archives, the problem of authenticity and the future of the personal memory when the images can be both taken and inverted.

Chapter 4 – Ethical, Archival, and Cultural Implications

Bringing AI-made images into personal memoirs creates big questions about what counts as real. Photography has always been trusted because it seems to show the truth of a moment and proves something was actually there. AI changes the idea by making images of things that never existed, or things remembered only through feeling or imagination. Some scholars have pointed out, “one cannot develop any comprehensive understanding of AI without taking into account the imaginaries about AI,” and these imaginaries carry visual representations that we create and share (Romele, 2022). The issue here is not just that AI can come up with realistic scenes, but that in the future these images may sit mixed with real photos in family albums or archives. When fake and real visuals appear side by side, it can become harder to tell documenting from inventing. This makes memory harder to judge and even trust. If someone in the future finds an AI-made childhood picture among real ones, how will they know what’s history and what is imagined? Visual truth becomes a question instead of an assumption. However, this confusion shows a change in culture and memory is becoming a place where emotional truth and factual truth live together. Instead of seeing AI as destroying authenticity, it may be better to see it as changing what authenticity means — moving it away from proof and towards expression.



Figure 8 – Imagined Images

A completely made-up archive challenges the combination of AI-generated images with traditional photographs. Labelling properly is essential to maintain trust, preventing future viewers from confusing imagination with facts.

Beyond personal storytelling, using AI imagery in family archives creates long-term problems for how history is understood. Archives, whether in houses or museums, are built upon the idea that images show things that really happened. If AI-generated pictures are added without clear explanation, future viewers might believe they are real photos. The risk grows as digital files replace printed albums. Information can be lost, labels can change, and context can fade over time. Archival scholars note, “The contextual information of the original physical objects... is essential for researchers to know that the records they are using are trustworthy” (Force and Smith, 2021). For example, a grandchild or historian looking at an AI-made image years from now may assume the event truly occurred, which could confuse family history or shared memory. Digital images make this even more uncertain. Unlike physical photos that age, crease, or fade, AI pictures can stay intact forever, making them harder to tell apart from real ones. This means people must take new steps to protect clarity such as, marking, tagging, or pointing out which images are photographs and which are synthetic. Without care, family history could slowly turn into a mix of truth and imagination that future viewers may not be able to separate.

The ability to make images of events that never happened creates ethical problems. On one hand, AI-generated pictures can help emotional healing, fill missing history, and let people connect with ancestry in meaningful ways. On the other hand, they can give you visual power to inventions, myths, or selective versions of the past. A made-up image might support a warmer family story while hiding harder truths. Image generation may be used to smooth over painful events, rewrite family conflict, or produce idealised versions of the past that were never real. Huyssen notes, “The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3), which highlights that memory is shaped by the ways we choose to represent it. When synthetic visuals start shaping what is remembered and what is forgotten, the past becomes flexible in ways photography never allowed. This leads to a key question: is it ethical to invent images that will change how future generations understand heritage? The power to visually build history must be used with awareness of its effects. AI memoir imagery can be an act of care, but it can also remove reality. The ethics of invented memory therefore depend not just on technology, but on intention, whether the created image aims for truth, healing or convenience.

A sensitive issue arises when AI is used to make images of people who have died. Creating pictures of dead relatives can bring comfort, but it also raises questions about consent. The people shown cannot say whether they agree with how they look, or how their image might be shared or understood. Ruiter says, “the key factor that renders deepfakes morally wrong is the use of digital data representing the image and/or voice of persons to portray them in ways in which they would be unwilling to be portrayed” (Ruiter, 2021). When does remembering become pretending? if someone generates a picture of their great-grandmother as a young woman, is that a type of tribute or a fantasy placed on her? the ethics become even more uncertain when AI rebuilds faces from one unclear photo or blends

several relatives into one ideal form. These images might make family bonds feel stronger, but they also risk turning real people into soft memories instead of full lives. Consent becomes harder still when such images are shown widely. Synthetic family images could move into social media, archives, or museums, shaping how someone is remembered long after death. The comfort AI offers must be balanced with care for personal dignity and for the people being represented.

Even with these risks, AI images can add value to personal memory if used thoughtfully. Instead of replacing photography, they can create mixed practices that combine real records and imagination. A memoir might include actual childhood photos alongside AI-made reconstructions, clearly marked but meaningful in their own ways. The photos serve as proof, while AI images act as interpretation — one shows the moment, the other shows its feeling or meaning. This mix calls for new ways of reading images. Just as people learn to understand paintings, books, or movies, future viewers may learn to tell the difference between documentary and imaginative pictures in archives. Memory culture may move toward accepting different kinds of truth: historical, emotional, and narrative. Within this setting, photography is not weakened but redefined. It becomes one part of memory, supported by AI images that show what camera could not. While photos ground us in real experiences, AI allows space for imaginative exploration. As one study notes, “in the era of virtual experiences, museum visitors are thus also engaged in more interactively observing and understanding the gifts of the past” (reference), highlighting how AI-enhanced or digitally reconstructed images can deepen engagement with memory and heritage.



Figure 9 – Behind The Gare

Cartier-Bresson's *Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare* shows the fleeting, reality-linked nature of photography. Unlike AI-generated images, photographs age and carry physical traces. This comparison shows the considerations when AI imagery is introduced into personal memory collections.

The rise of AI-made images doesn't mean the end of photography, but a change in how pictures work in personal memory. The strength of AI images is in showing what is missing, restoring what was lost,

visualising feelings, and widening what can be remembered. At the same time, they challenge long-held ideas about visual truth, bring up ethical questions about authenticity and consent and create archival risks that future generations will need to manage. From this mix comes a new visual world where real and imagined memories interact. Photography continues to document personal history in actual events, while AI creates a space where memory can be imagined, repaired, and emotionally expressed. The combination of both suggests that personal memory will be built not just from lived experience, but also from what is remembered or emotionally important. This all leads into an overall look into the main points and exploring how this new type of photographic memory could shape identity, legacy and the ways people tell the stories of their lives in the future.

Conclusion

This thesis has look at how AI-generated images are changing the role of photography in shaping personal memory. Photography has for a long time, acted as a way to record life, giving visible proof of experiences while also shaping emotional and family stories. Its trusted appearance, physical form, and place in personal and family collections have grounded memory in both facts and feelings. Yet at the same time, photography has always been selective and descriptive, a way to shape and tell memory as a story.

AI-generated imagery brings a big change to this picture. By creating visuals without relying on real world scenes, AI allows people to rebuild, imagine, and reinterpret their own histories. It makes it possible to picture childhood moments that were never photographed, lost relatives, or emotionally meaningful experiences that exist only in memory. While these images are not factually tied to real events, they carry out emotional meaning and narrative value, acting as extensions of memory rather than replacement. AI questions the idea that images must show real events to matter, showing that memory is as much about feeling and storytelling as it is about facts.

Using AI images raises ethical, archival and cultural questions, including how to manage authenticity, consent, and mixed archives. At the same time, it opens new ways for self-expression, imagination and remembering. Photography and AI images are not in conflict, they work together to create a more flexible, layered approach to memory. While photos preserve our connection to reality, AI opens up new emotional and imaginative ways of remembering.

In the end, AI doesn't replace photography in personal memoirs —it reshapes how we engage with it. The traditional function of photographs as evidence and memory tools is now joined by synthetic images that show what was never recorded, adding depth to the story's memory can tell us. The rise of this visual environment reflects a shift in cultural understanding, suggesting that memory involves both actual events and the ways they recalled, imagined, and felt.

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