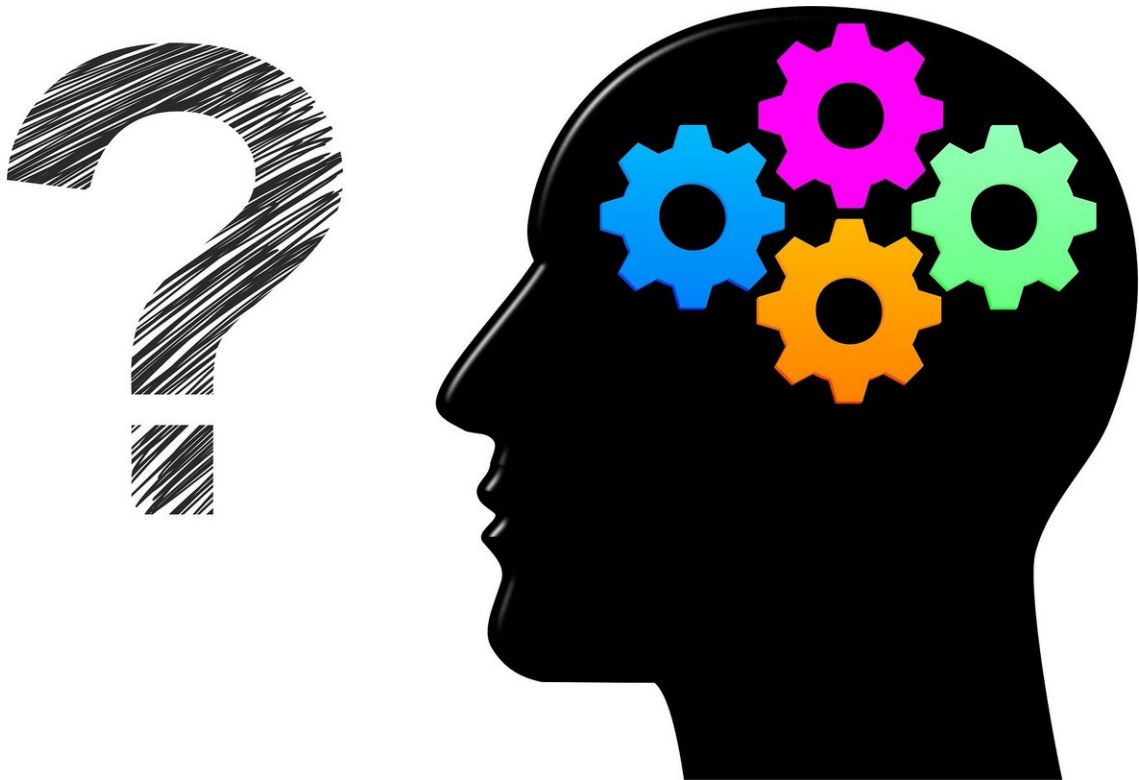


# Documenting your life may come at the cost of memory formation

June 29 2018, by Carolyn Mcmillan

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How much do you value your memories? Enough to forego that next amazing Instagram pic?

Research by UC Santa Cruz doctoral student Julia Soares has found

compelling evidence that the act of taking a photograph impairs people's memories of the event.

"People think that taking a photo will help them remember something better, but it's actually quite the contrary," said Soares.

In a [set of experiments](#), she invited people to her lab for a virtual museum tour where they looked at paintings on computer screens, knowing they would be tested on what they saw.

She compared how well participants remembered the paintings following three scenarios: when they just looked at the images; when they looked and took pictures using a [camera](#) phone; and when they took pictures using Snapchat.

The picture-takers consistently scored worse—by as much as 20 percent—on multiple choice tests about what they had seen.

Soares thought that the result could be chalked up to the phenomenon known as "cognitive off-loading": that is, not remembering as well because you know the camera is there to remember for you.

Even people who took pictures using Snapchat—in which images last only 10 seconds—remembered less. People who were asked to take a picture and then delete the image, also did worse.

"Whenever they used a camera, they were less likely to remember as well as when they just observed," Soares said.

So what's behind it? Soares has a few ideas: That by stepping out of the moment to take a picture, people become less focused on what's in front of them, a phenomenon she termed "attentional disengagement." Taking photos might also create a false sense that we know the subject better

than we actually do—what she calls a "metacognitive illusion"—making us less likely to use the mental strategies that help us remember.

Ironically, most of the photo-takers were sure that taking pictures improved their recall, she said.

Her results have made her think twice about when, and how often, she takes pictures.

"I'm not saying people shouldn't ever take photographs, but they might want to be mindful about deciding when they do it."

**More information:** Julia S. Soares et al. Forget in a Flash: A Further Investigation of the Photo-Taking-Impairment Effect, *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.10.004)

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