

Career Identity Development of Photography Majors: The Mediating Role of Photographic Imagination and Creative Self-Efficacy

Yuanxin Wang

Polus International College, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

Abstract: This study explores how university photography students envision their future careers. We're interested in understanding their thoughts and feelings as they plan their professional paths. "Professional identity" describes how someone sees themselves in their work role. For photography students, this often involves balancing two important aspects: their passion for creating meaningful art, and the practical need to make a living. Our research suggests two key elements play a vital role in this process. First is "photographic imagination"—the ability to envision and create photos that are not just technically good, but also carry meaning and emotion. Second is "creative self-efficacy"—the fundamental belief in one's ability to create valuable work. These two elements—imagination and confidence—work together like a bridge. They help students transform classroom learning into a clear, personal vision for their professional future. By sharing these insights, we hope to help educators better support photography students in developing both their artistic voice and their career path.

Keywords: Career Identity, Photography Major, Photographic Imagination, Creative Self-Efficacy, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

Individuals are challenged by increasingly more career transitions in the 21st century. Each of these transitions entails making a career decision, typically by locating promising alternatives, collecting information about them, comparing the alternatives on the short list and choosing one. Finding the areas where individuals are experiencing difficulties in this process is important for helping them and facilitating their career decision making. Deciding on a career path is challenging, especially for artists. Photography students often walk this path, trying to balance their love for art with the practical needs of life. Luckily, the field of photography is full of diverse opportunities. They could become fine art photographers, work in commercial photography, pursue photojournalism, or even start their own business [1].

When there are many possibilities, to really know "who I am" and "what I want" is very important. Self-awareness is the foundation for build a career. This career should be both successful and fulfilling. Professional identity answers a question. The question is "who are you in the professional world" [2]. It is about a person understand their own strengths, passions, values and directions for development. When this understanding become more clearer, then decisions becomes more firm. And goals becomes more clear too. So this can makes people to walk more confident on their career path.

For students who study photography, they have a key question. The question is "Who am I as a photographer?" To learn about camera skills is important. Editing is also important. But these things are just the beginning [3]. They also need to found their own style. It means what kind of photos they like to take. They need to understand where they fits in the photography world. The photography world is very big.

There is two inner qualities that is very valuable. First one is a photographer's eye. This means you can see special moments. It also means you can form ideas. And you can use pictures to

tell stories. Second one is to have strong believes in your own creativity. It's like a voice inside you. The voice say, "I can make something meaningful."

2. Literature Review

2.1 Finding Your Path as a Photographer

You might be wondering where to even begin. Do you need a photography degree? Can you actually make a living from it? The truth is, there's no single right way to start. In fact, we'll look at six different paths you could take [4]. Some might fit your personality and dreams better than others—and that's perfectly fine. The important thing to remember is that there's more than one way to build a career you'll love.

Once you've decided that this is the career you want to follow, it's important to give yourself an opportunity to both practice your skills and develop new ones for the long-term. Figuring out what you want to do takes time—it's your own personal journey. College can be a great place to explore. It lets you try different types of work, find what you really enjoy, and make those first big decisions about your future.

In a creative field like photography, things work a bit differently. You'll often find yourself balancing between the art you love and the work that pays the bills [5]. That's why many photographers end up doing several different jobs at once. Imagine a photographer you might know: one day they're teaching a class, the next they're shooting for a client, and they still find time for their own personal projects.

To make a career like this work, you need to know who you are but also be ready to adapt. If you're learning photography, it helps to ask yourself a few simple questions: What's my style? What do I really love to photograph? Who am I making my work for? What matters most to me in a job?

When you find answers to these questions, your path becomes

clearer and your work starts to feel like it's truly yours. Without thinking about them, it's easy to finish school feeling unsure about what to do next.

2.2 Developing a Photographer's Eye

One of the most important skills for any photographer—whether you're just starting out or already working as a pro—is learning to see like a photographer. This is what people often call your “photographer's eye.” It's that ability to notice interesting scenes, moments, and details that others might miss. It means looking at an ordinary place and already picturing a great photo in your mind before you even take out your camera [6].

This skill isn't something mysterious—it really comes down to a few simple things. It starts with being able to imagine the final photo before you shoot it—thinking about the best angle, how to frame the shot, and how the light will look. It's also about telling a story with your image, not just recording a place—you want to share a feeling or capture a real moment. Another part is giving meaning to simple things, letting ordinary objects express bigger ideas or emotions. And it's about staying curious, always watching for those little details—a splash of light, a quick smile, or a quiet pattern in everyday life [7].

The good news is, you don't have to be born with this skill—anyone can learn it. By taking lots of photos, learning from feedback, and studying the work of photographers you admire, you can slowly develop your own way of seeing. That's what turns a person who just uses a camera into someone who truly tells stories with light.

2.3 Building Your Creative Confidence

There's a psychologist named Albert Bandura who talks about “self-efficacy.” Really, it just means believing in yourself—knowing you can do something well. When we talk about being creative, we call this “creative self-efficacy.” It's that simple feeling of “I can make something that matters.”

If you're studying photography, this confidence shows up in small ways every day. You pick up your camera and think, “I know how to get the shot I want.” You start trusting your own taste, feeling like you can create photos that actually say something [8]. When problems come up—maybe the light isn't right or something goes wrong—you believe you can find a way through it. Most importantly, you have the drive to take a project from that first spark of an idea all the way to a finished photo.

This self-belief changes everything. Students who have it will try harder projects, learn from feedback, and push through tough moments. Those who don't often shy away from challenges, feel more anxious, and might give up too soon.

2.4 How It All Comes Together

We all know that school helps shape the photographer you'll become. Sure, getting your assignments done and listening to your teachers matters. But that alone won't show you your path. The real change happens inside your mind.

Here's how it grows: First, as you learn and practice, you start seeing the world differently. You develop what photographers call an “eye”—you can picture a good photo in your mind before you even lift your camera.

This growing imagination builds your confidence. When you can imagine a great shot and then actually create it, you prove to yourself: “I can do this.” You begin to trust your skills.

With that new confidence, you feel brave enough to ask the big questions. You start wondering, “What's really my style?” and you can actually picture yourself building a future in photography.

So imagination and confidence work hand in hand. Think of them as two bridges that help you cross over from being a student in a classroom to becoming a photographer who knows exactly who they are.

3. Research Model and Hypotheses

We have a simple way to think about how photography students find their path. Imagine it as a journey: First, you learn. You take classes, practice skills, work on projects, and listen to advice from teachers and friends. This is your base. But learning does more than just teach you facts—it changes how you see the world. You start to notice beauty everywhere and see how light can change the feeling of a picture. You get inspired by great photographers and their work. This is how you build your imagination: the ability to see a picture in your mind before you even take it. This imagination then builds your confidence, and that confidence helps you form your own professional identity as a photographer [9].

That imagination then builds your confidence. When you imagine a photo and then actually create it, something powerful happens. You think, “I can do this.” Each success makes you believe in yourself more.

With that new confidence, you start asking the big questions: “What kind of photographer do I want to be? Do I want to tell stories with my pictures, open my own studio, or create art?” This is how you find your professional identity—your own unique path in the world of photography. Without confidence, it's easy to avoid these questions. You might tell yourself, “I'm not ready for that yet.” But with confidence, you feel able to build a future that you are truly excited about.

So, what have we learned from this journey?

First, your imagination builds your confidence. When you can clearly picture a great photo in your head, you feel more sure of yourself when you pick up the camera.

Second, your confidence shows you the way forward. The more confident you feel, the clearer you can see your future path.

And finally, imagination alone isn't enough. You need both—the ability to imagine the photo, and the confidence to go out and make it real.

Education works in steps. School doesn't just hand you an

identity. Instead, it first helps build your imagination. That imagination then makes you more confident, and it's that confidence that finally helps you discover who you are as a photographer.

So, in short, becoming a photographer is about more than just learning skills. It's a personal journey. Students learn to see the world in a creative way, they build up their confidence, and through that process, they find their future.

When teachers understand this step-by-step journey, they can support their students in a better way. We can help them become more than just skilled photographers—we can help them grow into confident artists who know their own path.

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of the Findings

This model reminds us that becoming a photographer is a personal journey, not just a skill checklist. A good photography class does more than teach you how to use a camera—it teaches you how to see the world differently and gives you the confidence to create.

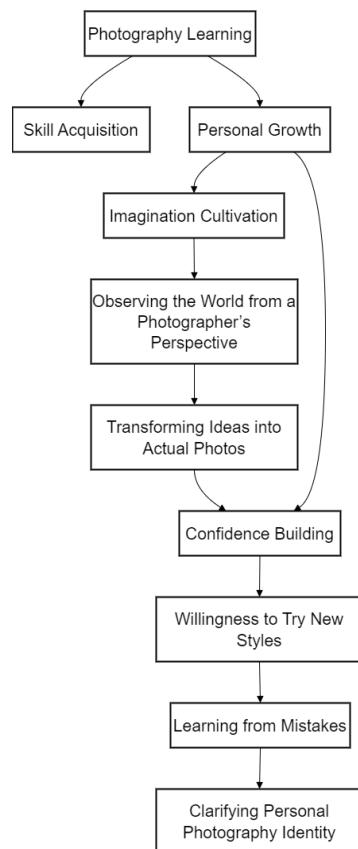


Figure 1: Core Logic Model of Photography Learning

Here's the first key idea: imagination builds confidence. It's simple but true. When students start seeing the world through a photographer's eyes, they feel more in control. They stop just observing life and start shaping it through their lens. Every time they turn a mental picture into a real photo, their self-belief grows a little stronger. [10].

Here's the second idea: confidence helps you find your path. Without it, you might not try new styles. You might think,

"I'm not good at that," or, "My work isn't special." But with confidence, you experiment. You try, you learn, and you slowly see what you like. This is how you discover who you are as a photographer.

Here's the main point: these two ideas need to work together. Teaching skills alone is not enough. If we don't help students build their creativity and confidence, they might never feel like real photographers. For example, if we only care about technical grades and forget to encourage them, we can make students lose confidence. This actually slows down their growth, even if their technical skills are improving. Core Logic Model of Photography Learning in Figure 1.

4.2 Implications for Photography Education

Here are three practical ways teachers can support this process:

1) Help them use their imagination.

Learning should be more than just camera settings. Try these ideas:

Give creative projects: Instead of "take a portrait," ask them to take a photo that feels "peaceful" or tell a story without any people in it.

Practice seeing: Have them walk around and just look—notice the light, the shadows, and find beauty without even using a camera.

Learn from the best: Look at famous photographers' work. Talk about their unique vision. Ask, "What were they trying to show us? How did they see the world differently?"

2) Build their confidence.

Confidence grows with practice and support. You can:

Set "just-right" challenges: Give tasks that are not too easy or too hard. Small wins build big belief.

Share real stories: Talk about how even great photographers had doubts. This shows students that it's normal to face challenges.

Give kind feedback: Always start with what you like about their photo. Talk about the work, not the person.

Create a safe space: Let students experiment freely. Make sure they know that imperfect photos are not failures—they're steps in learning.

3) Connect their creativity to their future.

Help students see how their personal growth leads to a career. Weave this into everyday lessons. Ask questions like: "What do the photos you love to make tell you about the kind of job you'd enjoy?"

When students connect their growing imagination and confidence to real-life possibilities, they can build a future

that truly fits who they are. Implementation Path for Imagination Cultivation in Figure 2.

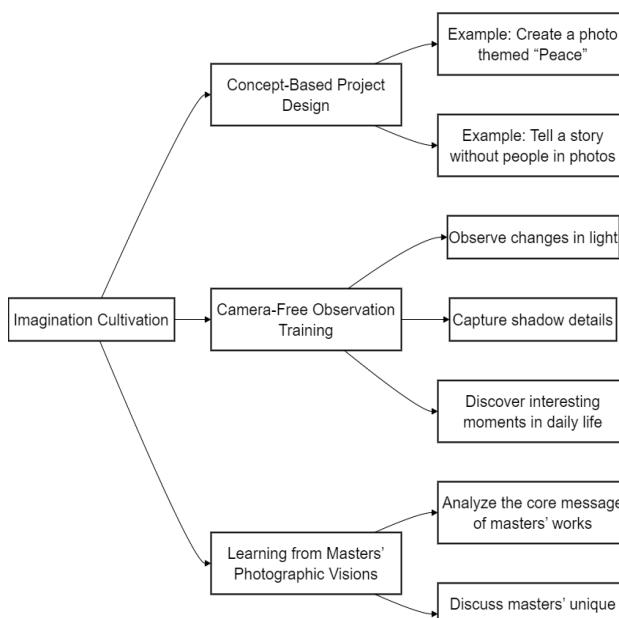


Figure 2: Implementation Path for Imagination Cultivation

4.3 Limitations and Future Research

This paper introduces a new model for how photography students grow, but it's only a starting point. The next step is to test it in the real world.

One simple way is to ask photography students for their opinions through surveys. It would also be helpful to follow a group of students for several years and observe how their confidence and creative identity develop over time.

We can also improve the model by adding other important factors, like a student's personality, support from friends and family, and the guidance of a good mentor. Including influences from the wider art world and real-world experiences like internships would make the model even stronger.

Finally, while we focused on photographers, it makes us wonder—could this model apply to other artists too? Would it work for painters, designers, dancers, or actors? Exploring this could help us understand if the journey to becoming an artist is something we all share. Research Limitations and Future Directions in Figure 3.

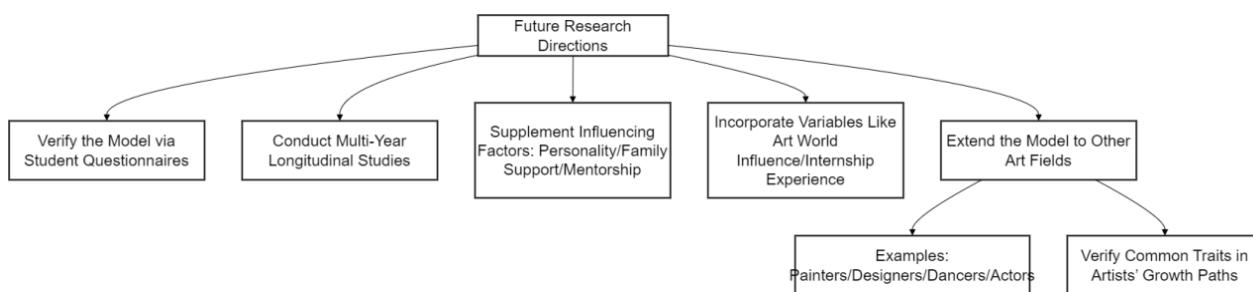


Figure 3: Research Limitations and Future Directions

5. Conclusion

The journey for photography students is more than just learning technical skills. It is also a process to discover yourself. It is about pursuing an artistic life.

A main goal for college should be to help students. They need to form a strong professional identity. This means they have a clear sense about what it means to be a photographer. This kind of identity cannot be taught directly in a class. Instead, it grows by developing two important inner qualities. These qualities are photographic imagination and creative self-efficacy.

Photographic imagination lets students see the world like a canvas for creation. And creative self-efficacy gives them the confidence. This confidence helps them turn their ideas into visual expression. When these two capacities work together, they connect school learning with professional growth. This allows students to change their skills into a stable professional identity. A professional identity that can last for a long time.

This view gives clear guidance for teachers. Their teaching should not only be about using cameras. It should not only be about editing techniques too. Instead, teaching must help students' unique way of seeing the world. It must also make them believe that their visual voices are important. If we build a learning environment that sparks imagination and makes

creative confidence stronger, we can help photography students. They can become not just skilled at making images. They can also become self-aware and confident artists. Then they are ready to find their own path in the big world of photography.

References

- [1] Koprowicz A. Peasants, Photography and Citizenship: An Exercise in Re-Framing Social Imagination in the Polish Lands in the Nineteenth Century [J]. Nationalities Affairs / Sprawy Narodowosciowe, 2023(55). DOI:10.11649/sn.3020.
- [2] Wrigley R. The idea of Italy. Photography and the British imagination 1840–1900 [J]. Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 2023, 28:380 – 382. DOI:10.1080/1354571X.2023.2171635.
- [3] Schwartz J M. Conjuring place: The photo-geographical imagination of Thomas Joshua Cooper [J]. Journal of historical geography, 2024(Dec.): 86. DOI:10.1016/j.jhg.2024.06.005.
- [4] Al Hakim A A, Arnanda A. R B S, Andini R D, et al. A STUDY OF KURNIA NGAYUGA WIBOWO'S EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHY "MEMORY LANE" [J]. Journal of Social Science (2963-1866), 2024, 3(9). DOI:10.57185/joss.v3i9.357.
- [5] Field-Donovan F. Modernity's Children: Form as Authority in the Films and Photobooks of Helen Levitt

[J]. Oxford Art Journal, 2024, 47(3). DOI:10.1093/oxartj/kcae026.

[6] Shtang S R. Situated imagination of Zionist borders: the feminist gender nonconforming photography of Yael Meiry [J]. 2023.

[7] Lee D K, Choi Y J, Lee S J, et al. Development of a deep learning model to distinguish the cause of optic disc atrophy using retinal fundus photography [J]. Scientific Reports, 2024, 14(1). DOI:10.1038/s41598-024-55054-0.

[8] Choi J Y, Ryu I H, Kim, Jin KukLee, In SikYoo, Tae Keun. Development of a generative deep learning model to improve epiretinal membrane detection in fundus photography [J]. BMC Medical Informatics and Decision Making, 2024, 24(1). DOI:10.1186/s12911-024-02431-4.

[9] Wang X. Research on the future development direction and countermeasures of photography in the new media era [J]. Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2023. DOI:10.54097/ehss.v14i.8909.

[10] Lamberg E. Professionalism, privilege and publicity: representations of development cooperation in amateur photography and Finnish newspapers, 1968–1972 [J]. Visual Studies, 2023. DOI:10.1080/1472586x.2023.2168212.