

Photovoice: Methodological Insights from a Multi-site Online Design

Field Methods

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Abstract

Photovoice involves respondents taking photographs of their environment to promote critical discussions and reflect on their experiences. Photovoice empowers marginalized communities and serves to reach policymakers. The Arizona Youth Identity Project (AZYIP) used photovoice with an innovative approach in a multisite research design with a large sample size and completely online research implementation using video conferencing, mobile phones, and video messages. We outline our process for other researchers interested in utilizing this dynamic method. We also reflect on the challenges and opportunities of engaging in this research design for future projects.

Introduction

Photovoice helps engage and empower participants from historically marginalized backgrounds because it allows them to control narratives of their

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experiences, providing insights into cultural issues, community norms, and behaviors (Greene et al. 2018; Gubrium and Harper 2016). This visual methodology was created in the 1990s by health promotion researchers with three purposes: (1) agency for participants to record their own experiences; (2) promote critical dialog through focus group discussion; and (3) reach policymakers and stakeholders through dissemination (Wang and Burris 1997). For those with limited power in society, this method provides access to respondents' worlds and enhances their understanding of complex concepts (Strack et al. 2004). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of online photovoice increased in the literature (see CohenMiller 2022; Ferlatte et al. 2022). Given the nascent nature of online photovoice, we provide insights to facilitate online photovoice in three main areas: (1) implementation in a multisite design; (2) large sample size; and (3) integration of different visual methodologies and techniques to facilitate online rapport and capture participants' lived experiences.

We draw from our experiences from the Arizona Youth Identity Project¹ (AZYIP), a mixed methods study that examines identity and belonging among young adults from various socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. We focused on Latine, Native American, and white youths aged 18–29 from five regions in Arizona. Here we focus on the photovoice component of the study, which includes three interconnected parts: in-depth interviews, photovoice, and postphotovoice photo-elicitation interviews. All components were conducted via video conferencing or text messaging with mobile devices.

Step 1: Participant Recruitment and Team Training: Scaling up

Different ways exist to implement a fully online photovoice project (see CohenMiller 2022; Ferlatte et al. 2022). In AZYIP, we wanted to scale up recruitment and interview a large sample of young adults (18–29 years) across different regions of Arizona. To gather a large sample ($n = 144$), we utilized both online and in-person strategies. We mainly recruited through an online survey and sent flyers through social media and established community partners. However, for rural areas, it was more difficult to recruit because of a lack of existing ties and networks. Thus, a research team member traveled to that site to leave flyers at local businesses.

To conduct photovoice at a large scale, our team (including one principal investigator, one postdoctoral scholar, two graduate research assistants, and five paid undergraduate research assistants) trained 26 undergraduate and 14 graduate research assistants to conduct in-depth interviews, photovoice, and postphotovoice photo-elicitation interviews. This process took approximately six–eight weeks. We used electronic forms to obtain virtual respondent consent via text or email.

Step 2: Designing Photovoice Entirely Online and Data Collection

In designing the online photovoice project, AZYIP engaged in three overarching steps: (1) conducted in-depth interviews via video conference; (2) invited these participants to engage in 14 days of photovoice; and (3) postphotovoice photo-elicitation interview via video conference. These three interaction points were essential to the project to build rapport with participants and elicit complex concepts such as belonging and identity. Of the 340 youths interviewed in the initial in-depth interviews, 144 (42%) participated in photovoice.

The initial in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing platform and allowed the research team to meet participants and establish rapport. At the end of the in-depth interview, we invited participants to join the photovoice study with information about the project. Participants were eligible to participate in the photovoice project if they completed an initial in-depth interview, signed a consent form that included photo release approval, and answered the Day 1 photo prompt via text.

This photovoice project centered on [Wang and Burris's \(1997\)](#) design, and we further adapted it to an online modality and drew from social media, daily diary, and photo-elicitation approaches to support on-going engagement and depth in participants' experiences with our research questions ([Foster et al. 2023](#); [Goldberg et al. 2020](#); [Shaw 2021](#)). We designed a protocol to engage with youth in photovoice using daily prompts and video recorded messages delivered via text (see [Appendix](#)) to participants for 14 consecutive days. Video messages explained the prompt for each day and helped establish rapport and mimicked social media interactions common among youth. As part of the photovoice instructions, youth could submit personal or Internet photos. We allowed the use of Internet photos because images that reflect complex concepts could be best elicited through Internet images. We then asked them to briefly describe why they chose that picture. Similar to prior work, we encouraged participants to send pictures that resonated with them ([Catalani and Minkler 2010](#)). During the 14 days, we regularly uploaded pictures to a password-protected folder in a cloud-based storage system and organized them by participant ID number, date, image, and description. Images were uploaded to coding software for analysis.

Step 3: Integrating Photovoice in Qualitative Interviews

Traditionally, after participants share their photos, the research team conducts a focus group to engage in a critical conversation about their concerns and images ([Catalani and Minkler 2010](#)). However, in AZYIP, research team members conducted individual postphotovoice photo elicitation interviews to get more in-depth with each participant ([Richardson and Nuru-Jeter 2012](#)).

Given the complexities of COVID-19, the research team determined coordinating one-on-one interviews was more feasible for participants. To engage in the photo-elicitation interview, participants' photos and responses from the photovoice project were organized and labeled into individual PowerPoint presentations to share during the Zoom interview. This PowerPoint presentation and the interview protocol allowed the interviewee to elicit more context on the meaning behind the photos shared. If participants did not address a photo from the slide, the interviewer would follow up with prompts such as "What does picture 2B mean to you?" By integrating diverse visual methodologies (i.e., photovoice and photo elicitation), researchers can expand their understanding of participants' perceptions of their photovoice submissions (Shaw 2021).

Step 4: Photovoice Dissemination

In photovoice, disseminating research findings beyond academic spaces is essential to community engagement. This aligns with the literature where they have engaged in both online and in-person dissemination forums (Teti and Myroniuk 2022) such as photo exhibits, blogs, and receptions as a source of social change and empowerment (DiEnno et al. 2021; Greene et al. 2018). In AZYIP, we have disseminated photovoice findings through short policy reports accessible to the public (see Romanello et al. 2022). For dissemination purposes such as photo exhibits, Internet screenshots cannot be included because of copyright infringement. This is important to consider as such photos cannot be reprinted in publications or photo exhibits. This hurdle limited the number of photos we could utilize from our project.

Recommendations: Opportunities and Challenges to Consider in Online Photovoice Implementation

As part of the opportunities of an online approach, researchers can be flexible with availability to meet and reach participants from distant regions (Lichty et al. 2019). Because our target population is young people, engaging in an online modality and tapping into social media culture made photo collection more organic for youth.

We offer recommendations based on our challenges with online photovoice. First, we had challenges with recruitment in rural areas, so we recommend establishing community partners in rural communities as these are harder to recruit. Second, we recommend using a Google Voice Business account (Appendix for details) to send participants text messages without revealing the researcher's personal contact information. A business account will reduce the cost of phone and data services with fewer messages flagged

for spam. Prepaid phones are also helpful to prevent the research team from using their personal phones (Woolford et al. 2012).

Our next challenge was participant compliance such that 18% ($n = 26$) completed all 14 days of the photovoice project. Therefore, our third recommendation is limiting daily messages to 10 days or less. In AZYIP, about 56% ($n = 80$) responded to at least 10 of the daily messages. This will help with participant fatigue and encourage participants to complete the entire project. Furthermore, we recommend keeping daily prompts short and simple to trust and enable participants as recorders (Catalani and Minkler 2010).

With a large sample size, we had data management and analysis challenges. We recommend combining all prompts, images, and captions in one file for organization and coding purposes. Data management is key to avoiding missing data. In AZYIP, we conducted individual postphotovoice interviews. A limitation of our approach is that participants did not get the opportunity to discuss with other participants and it was less efficient to conduct all interviews individually. Hence, we recommend conducting group discussions or focus groups to engage multiple participants (Ferlatte et al. 2022).

Conclusion

This short take outlines an online and multisited photovoice project, an addition to the kit of visual methods. The online modality brought several benefits, from security and safety for participants and the research team, opportunities for a multisite design, and flexibility for participants to engage in the research project from places and times that suited them. Photovoice is an avenue to highlight the experiences and reflections of participants from the community.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. For more details about Arizona Youth Identity Project, see <https://thesanfordschool.asu.edu/research/centers-initiatives/az-youth-identity-project>.

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