

# **Engaging older people through visual participatory research: Insights and reflections**

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## **Abstract**

Although there is an ageing population in Europe which acts as an increasingly influential social and economic force there remains limited scholarship concerning the involvement of older people in research. This paper responds to the question of how visual participatory research engages older people through three illustrative case studies, set in England and Italy, all of which incorporated different visual elements within their participatory design. These cases highlight; the value of the visual as a trigger for memories as an entry point for research discussions, that the sharing of experiences is facilitated by both the participatory and visual elements of the approach, and that greater engagement is forthcoming once trust is established through the socialisation of older research participants. Reflections and good practice suggestions are offered to other qualitative researchers on the practicalities of adopting this approach.

## **Key words**

Participatory research, older people, visual methods, digital tools, engagement.

## **Introduction**

Until recently, published studies involving older people predominantly focused on biomedical issues or dementia (see Williams and Webb, 2020; Tanner, 2019) or the process of ageing itself (see Stenner et al., 2011; Sixsmith et al., 2014). However,

studies are now broadening research beyond health related issues into older people's lives to include subjects such as; older population and gambling habits (Del Pino-Gutiérrez et al., 2021), work life extension for older people (Wainwright, et al., 2019) and use of mobile technology for shopping and entertainment (Kuoppamäki, Taipale, and Wilska, 2017). The aforementioned studies comprise both research 'on' and research 'with' older people but there remain continued calls for greater involvement of older people in research generally (Bindels et al., 2014) and specifically their perceptions about involvement in research (Doyle and Timonen, 2010). Although both the number of older people and the breadth of topics that they are involved in in research is increasing, there has been scant attention paid to the methods and approaches best suited to engage older people in research (Schilling and Gerhardus, 2017). In addition, specific aspects of the research process such as the analysis and presentation of the findings are often not inclusive of older people, even within methods such as participatory research (Ray and Bernard, 2007).

Whilst this paper acknowledges that older people involved in research are frequently termed or indeed are 'vulnerable', this paper encompasses older people who did not view themselves as vulnerable. Vulnerable can be defined as the state of being particularly susceptible to psychological or physical injury or by being of greater frailty or incompetency than others which results in a lack of control in involvement in decision making. Well-intentioned but misconceived perceived vulnerability is a negative assumption often made by others in relation to older people in society (Schröder-Butterfill, and Marianti, 2006; Centre for Ageing Better, 2020). There are many older people, like our participants, who live independently, are relatively physically able and who use some sort of digital devices in their daily lives. This paper assists in challenging any assumptions made about older people's engagement in research, their potential contributions and their use of digital visual technologies.

This need to involve older people in research, both those who identify as vulnerable and those who do not, is logical and desirable as the global older population continues to grow (United Nations, 2020), largely due to people living longer. This group though highly diverse in experiences, health, attitudes and consumption is becoming both an

economic and socially influential force (Hill, 2020; AARP, 2016). Thus it is timely to focus attention on investigating the involvement of this emergent group within research, including how to better engage them. Interestingly, the term older people has no agreed definition as the age from which a person is classified as 'old'. Many, but not all, organisations use 60 years old (for example, The World Health Organisation and the charity AgeUK) and therefore this paper adopts 60 years plus as the classification for 'older people'.

Authors such as Bindels et al. (2014) have outlined the potential value created by collaborative research involving older people and the benefits of empowering participants to be seen as sources of knowledge for all the stakeholders and for the benefit of the research outcomes. The broad potential offered by older people in research including the revisiting of the value of life experiences as research data, and the elderly's desire to shape research agendas rather than respond to a previously established agendas (Clough et al., 2006) is belatedly being recognised.

Participatory research is one established vehicle for incorporating older people in research and hinges on the level of engagement of the research participants (van der Riet, 2008) in order that richer data may be forthcoming. Other forms of research with less emphasis on the participation and interaction between participants and researchers and between participants themselves, for example interviews, do not fulfill the socialisation need held by many older people. Participatory research can be a social exercise in which a synergistic effect is created through the engagement with the project and with others (Mey and van Hoven, 2019), augmenting individual contributions from participants in a research study into an extended, coherent set of rich information. Participatory research can be particularly relevant for older people who may live alone, who may be more isolated and for whom the socialisation aspects of participatory research are a benefit in and of itself (Turcotte et al., 2020).

One recognised approach to encourage engagement in research is the use of visual material (Gubrium and Harper, 2016; Mannay, 2016) within the research process. Dicks et al. (2006, 2011) observe the under appreciation of the 'visual' in social science

research with its predominant employment as an archiving device rather than considering images as having an interpretive quality in their own right. Traue et al. (2019) also call for further research to develop scholarship of how the visual informs meaning making in social science research. Pursuant to this, Schilling and Gerhardus (2017) suggest that the use of visualisation is a strategy to enhance the engagement of older people in research.

By combining certain visual tools with participatory research this exploratory paper speaks to the call made by Edwards and Brannelly's (2017) editorial commentary, volume 17, issue 3 of this journal calling for research involving more democratic methods to account for the need for collaborative knowledge making. Encouraging more democratic research can enable participants to shape the research focus to the benefit of a specific community (Durose et al., 2011) and enhance any impact of the research. Furthermore, participative and collaborative research is viewed as particularly relevant to giving a voice to underrepresented and often vulnerable groups in society, such as the elderly (Aldridge, 2014; Bergold and Thomas 2012; Clarke, 2010). Our paper is timely in that it focuses on a growing group in society, one that has much wisdom to share with researchers but which, at present, remains peripheral to discussions about research methods and approaches.

Our paper does not intend to argue that visual participatory methods shed new insight into understanding older age and ageing, but rather that should researchers wish to engage with older participants across a wide range of topics which may include but also go beyond ageing, then visual participatory research may be a valuable approach. Older people as members of the community are likely to have views and experiences of a diverse range of topics of interest to social science researchers. Thus this paper aims to explore how visual participatory methods engage older people in research. Having elaborated the aim and rationale for the paper, an outline of the key concepts follows before the description of three case studies. The subsequent discussion reveals insights and reflections on using visual participatory research methods before offering suggestions for good practice.

## **Participatory research**

At the core of participatory research lies a shift in ‘the location of power’ (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) from a top-down, understanding of knowledge creation as belonging exclusively to professional researchers in conventional research, to a bottom-up (Chambers, 1994; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995) approach that actively involves communities in research. Participatory research has been conceptualised in terms of a wider methodological approach, rather than an alternative research method (Lilja and Bellon, 2008).

Within different disciplinary contexts, participatory dimensions can range from research design, co-directing research processes, analysing data, to the dissemination of findings. Different types of participant involvement have been identified by Biggs (1989) in terms of ‘modes’ of participation – contractual, consultative, collaborative and collegial – that describe the various roles played by researchers and participants and their relationship within research projects. Indeed participatory research in its various forms has become increasingly employed not only to include others in co-production of knowledge but also to solve problems of a broader societal nature (Henward, Dicks and Housley, 2019). Participatory research settings involve a range of techniques for engagement with participants, including visual representations of artefacts and or participant created visual material (van der Riet, 2008).

The application of participatory research with older people, beyond the realms of health associated topics is belatedly developing. For example, community based participative research with elderly residents has been used to identify transportation options for a small US city (see Dalbelko- Shoeny et al., 2020) and Claessens’ 2013 study involving participant led and generated images by elderly people of their nursing homes. In addition, participatory research focusing on design has been employed to elicit insight from older communities in the design of future robots within smart systems in private homes (Iacono and Marti, 2014).

Beyond participatory research, data collection tools adopted for research involving older people have included data taken from national surveys in China and Europe (see

Huang and Wang, 2020; Dingemans and Henkens, 2020); in depth individual interviews (see Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko, 2016; Robins Browne et al., 2019); and mixed methods incorporating focus groups and case studies (see Stirzaker et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2016). Furthermore, observation based ethnographic study has been undertaken in residential homes (see Reed-Danahay, 2001).

### **Visual methods and the role of images in research with older people**

The use of visual imagery within ethnographic research has increased over the years (Pink, 2001; Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015). Visual materials include still images, moving images in the form of film and video, and Internet-based images, and have been analysed in their context as cultural manifestations of a particular social group (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015). Visual imagery has been used to engage participants with both the research process and its findings, and to create a bridge between '*two distinct cultural worlds – that of the researcher and that of the participant*' (Johnson 2014: 317). Furthermore, Woermann (2018) suggests that dimensions of culture and socialisation of life that may be difficult to capture in words may be accessed through visual methods as a more encompassing and fruitful approach.

Visual material has been used to trigger discussions or elicit narratives from participants in interview settings (Pauwels, 2015), or produced by participants to help articulate their views (Liebenberg, 2009). Photo elicitation, photo narrative analysis, and participant-led visual methodology have produced rich findings, allowing new perspectives to emerge (Rose, 2016; Berger, 1972). The visual enables the development of a space where discussion between participant and researcher can take place, and allows participants to express their perceptions in a non-verbal manner (Pain, 2012). The use of the visual as a facilitator in research can also encourage interaction between participants (Baecker, 2014). Photography and videography can also capture temporary behaviour within its situational context (Belk et al., 2018). Participant generated photographs and other types of images can act as the focal point of a research discussion with the emphasis and direction managed by the participants

themselves as co-creators of the research (Burles and Thomas, 2014; Balomenou and Garrod, 2016).

The power of images to evoke memories and emotion is well established (see Rose, 2013; Harper, 2002) and as older people have a greater repository of memories accumulated through their longer lives, and thus a set of unique expertise, images both generated by themselves and also taken by others can be highly evocative and unlock personal stories. (Mysyuk and Huisman, 2020; Crete-Nihihata et al., 2012). These images, including photographs and film, can act as symbolic keys which reveal insight into the past, can act as metaphors for experience (Tishelman et al., 2016; Brescó de Luna and Rosa, 2012), and facilitate self-reflection (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001). Indeed photographs in their materiality can act as a physical prop (Hanganu, et al., 2004) appreciated by older people, linking the past to the present (Wilson, 2018). Yet despite the advantages of participant generated images, there remains an underappreciation of amateur participant generated images in social science research (Balomenou and Garrod, 2016).

Participant generated photographs and video have also been used to document the 'self' as part of inquiry into identity (Ziller and Lewis, 1981), life experiences (Burles and Thomas, 2014) and interactions between an individual and wider social surroundings (Dodman, 2003). Positive aspects of participant generated images in research include giving control and autonomy to participants (Dodman, 2003) which enables groups who might remain unheard in research to find their voice or 'photovoice' (Wang and Burris, 1997). More recently Pauwels (2015) outlined a typology of visual participatory research methods in which photovoice is delineated as empowering for participants but with a community and action focus to elicit social change. However Liebenberg (2018) critiques photovoice as being limited in its impact to facilitate social change. Photovoice differs from photo elicitation in that the latter employs photographs as prompts to start discussions about a topic, usually driven by the researcher and is not intended per se to mobilise people through their collective voice (Harper, 2002; Strack et al., 2004).

Progressively, visual studies are incorporating digital media to account for contemporary user experiences (Pink et al., 2016). Digital images provide not only a digital memory (van Dijck, 2007), but, as re-mediated images, they also convey the qualities relating to the context in which the captured image occurred (van Doorn, 2013). Photography, whether digital or not, remains an influential sociotechnical system that is important to human activity (Van House, 2011). Digital technologies are extending and creating new opportunities for creative, participatory research including the ability to reach more diverse audiences (Gubrium and Harper, 2016) and the further enabling of older participants as co-creators (Coelho and Duarte, 2016). Digital and visual methods are apt for participatory approaches in that they break down the 'fourth wall' of research by questioning the traditional role of the researcher as the expert (Gubrium, Harper and Otañez, 2016), and can document the life as lived (Vivienne and Burgess, 2013), which may have particular relevance for older people.

## **Case studies**

The case studies illustrated below allow reflection on the different research designs that include visual participatory dimensions. They have been selected as they all exemplify specific research designs which facilitated a high level of engagement amongst older people as participants and co-producers of the projects..

Firstly, all three case studies utilise the 'visuality of memory' (Radstone 2010: 327) through the use of visual artefacts (both digital and non digital), including photographs (cases 1, 2, 3), videos and digital maps (case 3). Secondly, all projects reveal how the sharing of memories can act as a catalyst for socialisation which then adds to the depth and breadth of information shared. Coming together to discuss recollections of past experiences (case studies 1 and 2), and cultural consumption (case study 3) has highlighted how collective reminiscence can provide purpose and means to social interaction. Given the incidence of isolation in older generations, this aspect has



potential to benefit this specific demographic. Collectively these case studies of immersive, visual participative research methods illustrate the potential value of taking this approach with older people.

### ***Memories, photos and wellbeing***

Visual methods were at the heart of the project 'Memories and photos', which comprised three workshops conducted with older participants in collaboration with Age UK. The project's two objectives were, first to evaluate the effectiveness of visual participatory research in facilitating the elderly's role as co-producers of research data, while empowering them to share their individual and collective memories. Second, it explored the extent to which research participation can act as a vehicle for socialisation for older members of the community. The project comprised 3 workshops held over a 6 week period (each of 3 hour duration) conducted in the South East of England. 15-20 participants over 60 years were recruited through snowball sampling, via a local Community Centre, notification in newspapers, and local Age UK group email newsletters.

Data was collected in the workshops by sharing images both in hard copy and digital formats (via participants' smart mobile phones or tablets) and through their interactions with each other in the workshops, and also creating their own visual archive such as an album. The images were used to discuss and investigate memories by our co-producer participants, connectivity and the process of sharing (Gubrium and Turner, 2010; Rose 2016).

In the first workshop, images in both black and white and in colour, representing aspects of life in the 1950s and 1960s were shared around the group and discussed.. The participants articulated similarities between the images and their personal memories, and used some of the photos as a trigger to share with moments of their past lives. For example, one of the male participants, who had been reluctant to talk to the others, when shown an image of a girl with a parrot in a street, immediately began reminiscing about his father's pet shop. The role of the image in the 'production' as well as in the 'performance' of memory was striking in this particular case, as it

demonstrated the significance of the 'eye-opening' process taking place during the workshop setting *'because of the unfamiliar context for, and fresh approach to, something that is very familiar'*, in this case the image of the parrot (Kuhn 2007: 283).

In the second session participants brought their own photographs either as hard copy or on their own smart devices. They were predominantly related to family and friends, childhood activities, relatives who had moved away, as well as holiday locations, work and leisure activities. During this session, participants discussed their memories, explained their choices and the significance of the images with others in the workshop, as well as the role of photos in strengthening relationships and connecting with family, friends and neighbours.

In the third workshop, the creation of a hard copy or digital photo album offered participants an opportunity to preserve their chosen images. The albums were initially an incentive for participation but also were to develop skills such as creating a digital archive as personal skill development is recognised as an element of wellbeing (Ryff, 1989). The third workshop also gave participants the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the process of sharing personal photos and wellbeing. The *"multivocality of the photographic image"*, with *"its ability to communicate multiple narratives"* (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015:19) emerged. Images were described both as triggers for sudden reappearance of memories which had lain dormant, and as a starting point to re-evaluate their past. Thus helping participants reflect on the positive contribution photos have made in their life, as well as plan for the future in terms of sharing those images further with extended family and friends.



**Figure 1. Participants share memories triggered by personal photos. Case study 1.**

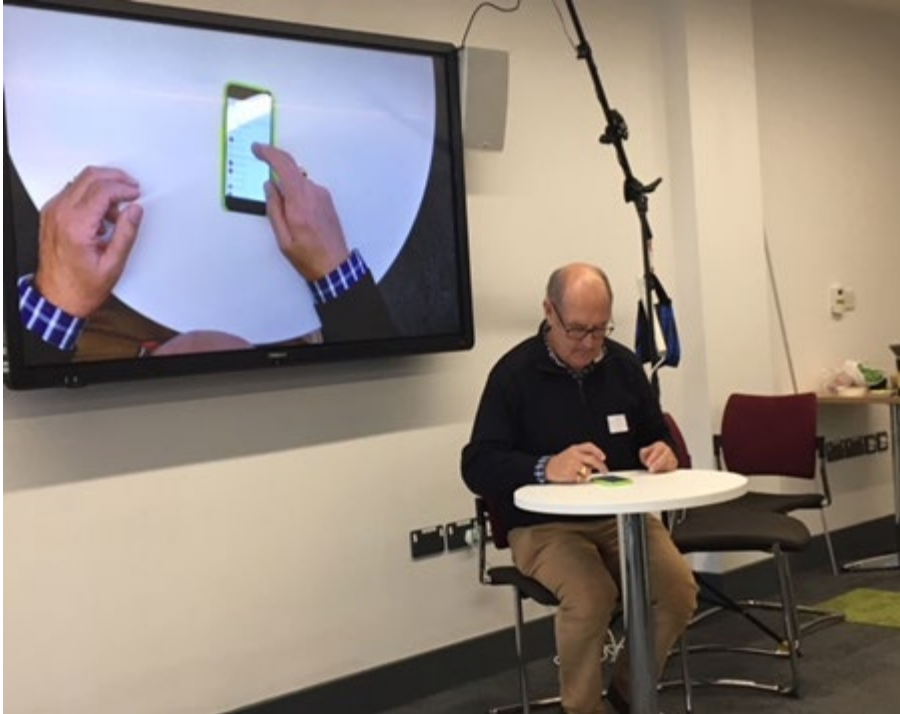
The participants co-curated a public exhibition of their material which was held at the exhibition space of a local university, providing a wider audience for their images. Participants selected the material to be included (images, captions and recordings of descriptions of the photos) and were invited to attend the opening of the exhibition as 'experts' with their families and friends. Several participants asked the researchers if the series of workshops could be replicated, expressing positive feelings towards the time they spent together and confirming the strong bonds with others created through the project.

## **2. *Sharing photos and connectivity through digital technology***

The purpose of this research project was to understand real-life behaviour of older people in their digital device use, specifically smart mobile devices as vehicles for remaining connected to others, especially through the sharing of digital photographs. As suggested by Woermann (2018), dimensions of culture and socialisation of life may be difficult to capture in words and visual methods including photography and videography may be a more fruitful approach for researchers who wish to capture such dimensions. As one part of a wider project investigating older people's use of digital

technology to alleviate loneliness, two participative workshops were held at two different English universities. The two workshops comprised people aged between 60-90 years old who were all living independently and who used digital technologies to some degree in their lives (ipad, e-commerce, smart mobile phone, etc). The participants were recruited via flyers and website information disseminated through local community organisations (such as regional over 50s, regional Age Uk, university staff alumni), and physical community notice boards near places of worship and community centres. Once recruited, the participants became co-producers of the workshops as they unfolded, encompassing the essence of participatory research (Mannay, 2016).

The venues had been set up to allow permission based, video and audio recording, including the option of real time filming and streaming onto a large screen in the same room. General discussions, facilitated by one of the research team, regarding connecting with others as one grew older were followed by discussions over the use of digital technology to help maintain contact and to remain connected to others. Volunteers were requested to demonstrate how they actually shared photos using their own mobile devices, and provide a commentary whilst doing so, thus providing evidence of actual rather than reported behaviour and capturing fleeting, temporary behaviour within a situational context (Basil, 2011; Pink et al., 2016). The volunteers came to a table over which a video camera had been placed which captured the detailed actions of their hands on their device screen as well as the images on the screen and participants' own narration of what they were doing and why. This 'film' was broadcast to the rest of the room for real time comments, questions and further discussion.



**Figure 2. Live streaming of a participant demonstrating mobile photo-sharing activity. Case study 2.**

Following some initial reluctance, several volunteered once they had seen the innovative data capture system working. The audience participants became co-producers and even directors as they gave verbal directions, suggestions and prompts to those volunteer participants whose photo-sharing activities were being recorded. This level of interaction and use of participant generated images and captured behaviour gave control and autonomy to participants (Dodman, 2003) which enabled 'photovoice' for older people, who as a group who might otherwise remain voiceless in research (Wang and Burris, 1997). The workshops themselves became an act of sharing knowledge and experience not just for the benefit of the research but for the practical benefit of the participants. Peer to peer tutoring occurred, sharing advice on short cuts, photo editing, and 'how to' guidance across android, and Apple phones and tablets. Participants shared their skills but were also transparent in expressing their worries about; sharing photos digitally, privacy, their perceived lack of knowledge regarding open or closed groups on social media platforms and any lack of confidence they felt in interacting through digital technologies. The technology capacity of

participants in this type of research can be a barrier to successful implementation (Hodgetts et al., 2007) but this was not evident in the workshops. Being able to see what was actually being done, the process of making public a normally private act (that of sharing a photo) became an immersive and shared experience for those in the room. In addition, it was noted by the participants themselves that the very act of coming together for a research project provided a form of socialisation and connectivity in the real, non-digital world.

### **3. *Memories, visual tools and digital cultural heritage***

The third case outlines the increasingly important role played by visual participatory research in a multiphase research project on memories of cinema-going in 1950s Italy. Visual methodology became systematically integrated into the project as we realised its potential for further engagement with the participants and for the richness of data provided. The first phase, Italian Cinema Audiences (2013-2016) was carried out in collaboration with UNITRE (Italy's University of the Third Age). It aimed to investigate the importance of films in everyday life in post-war Italy, and the social experience of cinema-going. With oral history at the core of this project, older cinema-goers' memories constituted the main primary data.

In the first phase of data collection, over 1,000 Italians aged over 65 completed a questionnaire aimed at providing both quantitative and qualitative data on participants' recollections of experiences of cinema-going, along with customs, practices and tastes linked to film consumption. The sample of respondents was divided almost equally between men and women, and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as between the main cities and provincial areas, chosen from eight regions across the north, centre, south and inland areas of Italy. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling with support from community partner UNITRE. The analysis of the questionnaire led to the identification of themes and patterns that were further explored in half-hour in-depth video-interviews with 160 participants sampled from a similar cross section of the population. Using video as a data collection medium allowed us to capture the complexities and different types of communication in the act of remembering, including

body language and linguistic aspects, such as tone, volume, and register. Yet, visual material was not used as a means of elicitation in both stages of data collection, as researchers had not planned to “engage with this methodological approach – nor with the idea of images (both photos and videos) as conceptual devices” (author B 2019: 47). This decision was taken in an effort to avoid “planting memories” via images in participants’ recollections.

However, the significance of the audiovisual as a memory elicitation tool became apparent during the later public engagement events of the project. These included the screening of video-interviews clips, and the opportunity for audiences to share memories of their own cinema-going experiences thus revealing the powerful effect of the audiovisual in triggering memories (Rose, 2013). In fact, the ‘visual texture’ of memory was a recurrent element that emerged from participants’ feedback (Author B, 2018). In addition, the public engagement events highlighted the fact that this approach allowed for a lessening of the power imbalance between researcher and participant (van der Riet, 2008; Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995), as those who attended the events participated in a collaborative effort to reconstruct past cinema-going experiences.

In light of this iterative learning, the research team decided to embed visual elements more systematically in a community outreach intergenerational event in Rome, aimed at empowering the older generation to share ownership of their own cultural history. Schoolchildren video-interviewed older cinema-goers (65-80 years old) while using a digital map of 1950s cinemas that included photos and other materials. The digital map was created by the research team using Historypin – a platform that allows users to ‘pin’ their content to Google Maps using its location and date – and included a collection of materials and data based on research on old Roman cinemas. This visual approach incorporating geo-visualisation and maps enriched with images facilitated the triggering of memories.



**Figure 3. Intergenerational digital cultural heritage research discussion. Case study 3.**

Thus, the importance of participatory visual methods emerged from a project that was designed to test a model to enhance older users' engagement with digital cinema heritage (Ercole et al., 2016) through the mediation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001). In this case, a younger generation (digital natives) were involved to support the older users' engagement with digital cinema heritage as seen in Figure 3. By engaging with the geo-visualised digital collection, older participants provided rich memories of their cinema-going experiences. Before being shown the digital map, older cinema-goers offered limited and generic memories, but when 'seeing' a geo-visualisation of their neighbourhood, they discussed in depth their recollections of attending a number of cinema theatres that are now no longer in operation. The geo-visualisation of cinema venues was further developed to create a digital archive, CineRicordi, that integrated the data collected during the *Italian Cinema Audiences* research project with participant-generated visual material.



## **Discussion**

All the case studies indicate the increased value afforded by the use of visual participatory methods with older people and underscore the potential for them to contribute to research projects as co-producers of knowledge (Bindels et al., 2014; Age UK, 2007). By virtue of the number of years lived, older people have a rich seam of lived experiences which can contribute substantially to our understanding of almost any subject area, as championed by organisations such as Age UK, the Centre for Ageing and the University of the Third Age. Older members of society in our three cases had more time to give to research and, in addition, were able to reflect on and critique the research projects in terms of methods and the potential relevance of outputs, echoing Clough et al.'s 2006 suggestion that the elderly wish to shape rather than be shaped by research agendas set by others. Critiquing the projects by our participants involved such activities as making suggestions to amend the research designs to better suit them, reviewing the draft findings for sense-making, and encouraging further use of visual materials as stimuli. In addition and recognising participants as experts (Bindels et al., 2014) by allowing them to generate their own visual or audiovisual material and including them in the planning and curation of dissemination events, such as an exhibition of their own images, added substantially to the data generated across all three cases.

The overarching similarities which can be drawn out from the three case studies to answer the research question of how do visual participatory methods engage older people coalesce around the themes of the visual nature of memory, the shared nature of the visual and the depth of engagement via inclusion of and socialisation for older people that visual participatory research can provide.

The power of visual as a trigger

Visual material whether self-generated photographs in case 1, familial photographs in case 2 or image enriched maps in case 3 acted as a physical bridge that linked past experiences to the present day (Wilson, 2018) and in doing so brought memories back to life to be subsequently shared and reflected on (Wang and Redwood -Jones, 2001). In all three cases the role that visual artefacts play in facilitating research with older people is foregrounded. As Harper (2002) amongst others have established, images can heighten memory recall. The crucial role played by the visual in recollection was emphasised by several participants, one older member of the public commented that *“visual memories are more special than mere memories”* (case study 3, cinema audience participant). Simply by having lived longer and having amassed more memories older people involved in research may be stimulated by visual props to reach back into their memories to surface responses for researchers.

Photos played different roles for the participants (Brescó de Luna and Rosa 2012) . For some, photos enabled them to present their past stories to others. For others the images provided opportunities to explore neglected feelings and suppressed emotions *“Looking now, I remember feeling foolish that I didn’t know how to edit my photos before sharing them”* (case study 2 participant) and to reflect on societal differences and similarities between their past lives and now. For example, case study 1 participant stated *“look at this, you see we children had no shoes, even in the family photo. Not like children now”*. Images taken by one person and shared can echo the lived experiences of another person and assist in unlocking previously unarticulated observations (Mysyuk and Huisman, 2020).

### The shared nature of the visual

Older participants may at times, be reluctant to engage with in the early stages of research because of the high level of trust required (Christopher et al., 2008) or because of a feeling of being intimidated by an academic environment (Bindels et al., 2014). Within the participatory focus of our projects, visual elements played a pivotal role in building rapport (Pain, 2012) and overcoming the challenge of engendering trust.

For example, images worked as a facilitator of trust by opening conversations and anecdotes between people.

Beyond the visual elements providing a strong anchor point from which to develop and extend opinions, the sharing of these surfaced views and perceptions between and across all the participants in the case studies was notable. The collective sharing of valuable information based on a visual starting point between people who had been strangers prior to the project was surprising to the research teams. The older participants were copious in their sharing of information once prompted by the visual stimuli and once trust was established.

The opportunity to showcase their own digital skills and share their knowledge with others both visually and verbally was embraced warmly by our participants in case study 2, thus giving this group a strong voice in the research (Aldridge, 2014; Clark, 2010). This supportive, non-judgmental, sharing between peers appears to have encouraged participants to enhance their own digital skills, a further indirect benefit of visual participatory research. *“I have learnt a lot from talking and sharing images with this group, some are now my new friends”* (participant case study 2).

Furthermore in addition to sharing across peers, the intergenerational interaction and mediation on the part of a younger, tech-savvy, generation in case study 3 enhanced engagement with the creation of digital platforms in which older participants were both curators and users.

#### Depth of engagement through inclusion and socialisation of older people

Not only was evidence provided of the empowering nature of using and sharing participants' own photographic material (Dodman, 2003) as a way to retain connectivity with the wider environment, as illustrated by *“I remain part of the world”* (case study 1, workshop participant). But also the importance of socialisation with others across the other case studies was specifically commented upon *“[the project] stimulates our relationship with others”* (case study 3, participant). As such, visual participatory

research with older people can also act as a mechanism for social support as an indirect benefit of engagement in research (van der Riet, 2008). The opportunity for socialisation acted as an incentive for a deeper level of engagement, possibly as the cases studies involved series of workshops rather than single researcher- participant interactions. Worth noting is the very low rate of participant drop out in case studies 1 and 2 , where only 3 participants across both studies did not fully complete the projects.

Whilst we cannot fill the entire gap of lack of knowledge outlined by Doyle and Timonen (2010) about older people's perception of being included in research, we were struck by our participants' comments such as "*oh it's like my opinion matters*" (case study 2, participant). Furthermore, the very act of coming together for a research project became a social act for our elderly participants, who were able to interact, meet new people and catch up with people they knew. These interactions even on a small scale can help to alleviate feelings of social isolation, engender trust in being involved in research and elicit stronger engagement with the research project.

#### Ethical considerations in incorporating older people's own visual material

The diversity of visual material provided by the participants, particularly in case study 1 and 2 surprised the research team but also lead to ethical challenges. Photographs of family included those deceased and also those in residential care. These images may have conjured up painful or difficult memories but the participants wished and chose specifically to share those images. For example, '*It helps to keep them alive in my mind*' (participant case study 1) as she spoke of wanting to share a photograph of her deceased daughter. Acknowledging the potential for psychological harm and the ethical responsibility of the researchers, where relevant, the researchers incorporated staged consent for specific approval to include each image used at different stages of the research. Furthermore to alleviate any concerns by families about the safe retention of images used and in consideration for the contributions to the research made by the images, participants were offered the option of physical copies of their images, a digital archive. Indeed, in case study 1, a small printed book containing their individual images was produced to share with the families and friends and as a legacy of the project.

## Reflections

Having provided insight into how visual participatory research engages older people, reflections now follow including challenges and suggestions for good practice for undertaking this type of participatory research (Mey and van Hoven, 2019).

While a research plan is important in order to gain engagement from participants, researchers also need to retain a certain level of flexibility throughout the project. In this new, flexible role, the researcher must acknowledge a greater level of vulnerability and the potential for a large quantity of diverse data to analyse. The novel flexibility required also means that it is difficult to predict or plan for what the research might elicit, and a more iterative approach may need to be adopted as evidenced in case study 3 where visual co-creation took a more prominent role once the researchers realised its potential. Further, this flexibility may cause points of doubt for the researchers as their own established subject or experience specific practices in qualitative research may be called into question when they choose to trial or adopt novel approaches.

The challenge of incorporating digital dimensions within visual participatory research should not be underestimated. Our cases highlight an array of digital material, platform use and ways of engaging with older people. As lack of trust is one of the barriers for older people to engage with new digital technologies (Gatto and Tak, 2008), the diversity of digital visual material and its acceptance and use by our older participants was only possible once trust had been established. The use of geo-visualisation has been instrumental in exploring the spatial dimension of cinematic memories in case study 3, seeing streets and venues on a digital map triggered specific, powerful memories of cinemas frequented by participants. Further, through sharing digital skills in a trusting and supportive environment, where the participants felt safe, both a depth and breadth of valuable data was provided by participants in case study 2.

Table 1, summarises suggestions for good practice.

**Table 1. Good practice suggestions for visual participatory research with older people.**

<p><b><u>Emergent themes of visual participatory research with older people</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>Good practice suggestions</u></b></p>
<p><b>Visual as a trigger</b></p>	<p>Older people respond strongly to visual cues as visual cues may provoke or give rise to memories which can then be directed towards the purpose of the research. Share physical visual stimuli which could be artefacts, photographs and or digital materials either generated by the participants themselves or provided to enhance older participants' engagement with the project.</p>
<p><b>Shared nature of the visual and participatory research</b></p>	<p>The interactive ethos of participatory research encourages sharing amongst participants, especially older people once trust is established. Activities to engender trust at the outset of a project such as using people's names, providing researcher generated material to initiate conversations before moving to participants' own material and being explicit about what will happen to any visual material used will facilitate belief in the project which results in greater sharing. Using the visual makes familiar the unfamiliar particularly with groups not conversant with research environments.</p>

<p><b>Visual material skills</b></p>	<p>Where relevant, include digital dimensions in the project and offer training in relevant digital skills and provide support through tech-savvy co-participants/ researchers and intergenerational interactions; use digital tools and technologies (digital photo album, a dedicated online space, etc.) throughout the project to help participants become self-sustaining and encourage them to make use of newly developed digital skills in future activities (such as online art groups).</p>
<p><b>Engagement through inclusion of and socialisation for older people in research</b></p> <p><b>Ethical considerations pertinent to visual materials and older people in research</b></p>	<p>Allow sufficient time for the development of relationships with and between participants before and during data collection. Through socialisation, which is enhanced owing to the nature of participatory research, older participants contribute more in-depth and nuanced data. A greater level of engagement is likely which results in richer data and also lowers drop out and non-completion rates in research projects.</p> <p>Ensure that participants are comfortable with any use of their own visual material and the sharing of it between participants, research team and any other audiences. This can be achieved through obtaining specific and staged consent at relevant points in the project. Offering participants additional physical or digital copies of any of their own material for themselves or their wider families proved popular and could be adopted across other projects.</p>

## Conclusions

Visual participatory research can create strong positive engagement of older people as co-producers in research and can provide novel insight into research questions. The visual methods outlined in this paper served different purposes but all facilitated strong participant engagement resulting in rich and insightful data. On reflection the use of visual methods in all of our case studies enabled participants to 'connect' with each of the research projects at a deeper level as the different visual tools created a 'pull' that involved people and their emotions. The visual elements also appeared to act as a bridge for participants to interact with each other during the group activities, thus developing a strong sense of community around the research projects. The use of images, video material and visualisation software broke down initial reservations and helped familiarise the unfamiliar, which may be especially relevant for a generation of people who have traditionally been excluded from much academic research. Our recognition of their expertise gained through their lived experiences and our placing of the participants at the centre of each research project enhanced the trust they exhibited.

Although the potential benefits of incorporating visual methods in participatory research have been made explicit, the limitations of such an approach should be acknowledged. Our sample was not representative of the wider older population as it included only those who were physically able, living independently and accustomed to using smart digital devices to some degree. It is also worth considering that for older participants, by virtue of their wealth of lived experiences, visual methods are more likely to evoke memories both pleasant and unpleasant, and this will require sensitive management. Future research should take such limitations into account when engaging in visual participatory research. A mitigating factor could be adopting a multi-modal approach, which could allow further balance between implementing visually-driven research and embracing other inclusive practices.



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