

Sight (Un)seen: learning experiences from fieldwork using qualitative visual methods

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Abstract

Purpose – This purpose of this research note is to draw on “visuality” and “the right to look” – concepts which challenge authoritarian classifications of what is visualised – to critically examine the use of qualitative visual methods.

Design/methodology/approach – The author expands on and discuss insights from fieldwork and interviews conducted with participants of nature-based events in Sweden.

Findings – Researchers who use qualitative visual methods face ethical dilemmas in relation to the complex interactions between research participants and researchers, and therefore, ideally need to learn to balance the power dynamics between visualities.

Practical implications – Researchers ideally need to recognise the absence of straightforward answers when using qualitative visual methods and carefully consider who should realistically represent the images for research. At times, the findings of such research may need to challenge the participants’ own visual intentions.

Social implications – Scholars should address certain ethical considerations, as the intentions in conducting qualitative visual research may conflict with what the participants wish to have visualised.

Originality/value – The insights from this research note provide insights into how ethical implications might be addressed when two visualities meet in research context.

Keywords Visuality, The right to look, Photo elicitation, Nature-based events, Visual methods, Ethics

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Visual methods involve a complex interplay of power dynamics in determining who frames images between hosts and guests (Scarles, 2014). Simultaneously, researchers and their research participants are also deeply entangled in a diverse array of representations. This complexity of representations is significant for scholars conducting photo elicitation, a qualitative technique in which researchers ask participants to produce images of their reality to discuss them later during interviews (Rose, 2016). Indeed, this technique can generate sensory and imaginative visualities that represent participants’ perspectives on tourism (Matteucci, 2013; Ivanova *et al.*, 2021), but the meaning behind the images depends on who holds the power to capture the moment and portray reality (Rakić, 2011). In other words, when the research participants have the power to represent their image for research, a methodological issue emerges if the research participants wish to conceal specific details.

In this research note to this special issue, this researcher–participant dynamic is explored. I use my own fieldwork as an example to explore the methodological implications of transferring power to research participants (see Eriksson and Clausen, 2024). I approach this discussion through a post-qualitative lens (St. Pierre, 2019), which challenges the notion that qualitative inquiry must rely on pre-existing methodologies, to emphasise continuous variation across respondents by focussing on differences in internal logic and actions within my fieldwork.

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This research note begins with a description of my fieldwork experiences. Subsequently, I introduce Mirzoeff's concept of "visuality" (2006) and "the right to look" (2011) to discuss who holds the power to determine what images represent. This section is followed by a discussion of my methodological choices during my fieldwork and interviews. This research note concludes with reflections on the ethical dilemmas inherent in using qualitative visual methods. Overall, my aim is to offer future guidance for researchers navigating the visual turn discussed in this special issue, particularly regarding power dynamics, ethics and the researcher's role in the field (Pernecky and Rakić, 2019; Rakić and Chambers, 2011).

2. Recounting the research design

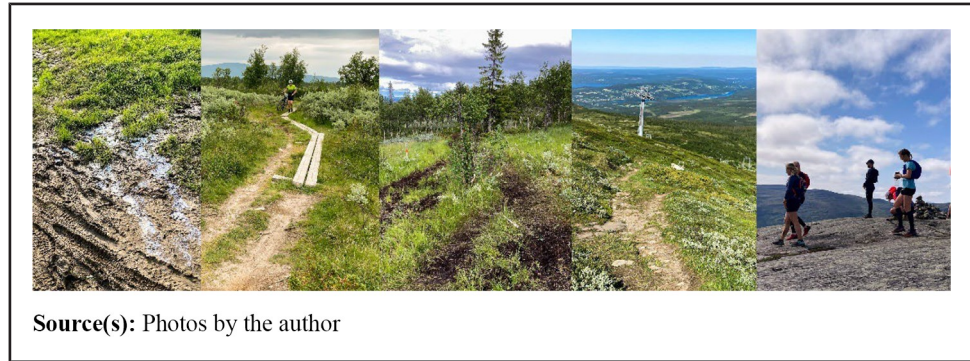
To understand how event participants relate to the physical impact that they have on nature during their event, I focused on a trail running and mountain bike event in the county of Jämtland, Sweden, in 2021 (Eriksson and Clausen, 2024; Eriksson, 2023), each event with around 400–600 participants. Such nature-based events encourage participants to engage with and appreciate nature through sports-based activities (Margaryan and Fossgard, 2021), but they also have a physical impact on nature, such as soil and trail erosion (Ng *et al.*, 2018). The cumulative effects of these activities can pose significant threats to ecosystems, particularly in alpine areas such as Jämtland (see Wall-Reinius and van den Brink, 2023). Having conducted studies in the area (see Margaryan and Eriksson 2023; Eriksson *et al.*, 2023), I was aware that this event caused notable impacts on nature.

The research design was inspired by how Hinch and Kono (2018) captured event participants' sense of place by encouraging them to take photos during their participation. For the events I studied, the organisers required the participants to carry smartphones for emergencies. I took this opportunity to reach out to potential research participants via social media groups and asked them to take pictures of the physical impacts on nature they encountered during their run. Despite the potential research participants' initial enthusiasm, none of them took or sent any photos following the event. I adjusted the recruitment process, and with the organiser's endorsement, I approached participants when they collected their bib numbers and provided a brief explanation of the task. As before, no photos were returned by the research participants' after the event. I even asked friends who participated, but they too did not observe any significant impacts aside from minor littering. Consequently, I assumed that event participants found it difficult to take photos during their participation.

Since I observed that there were noticeable impacts on nature after the events, I adjusted the methodology by taking photos of these impacts myself and showing them to the research participants during interviews. For recruitment, I contacted an organiser of a local mountain biking event of a similar scale to meet potential research participants face-to-face and invite them for online interviews following the event. This recruitment method proved successful, and I replicated this approach for two further running events later that summer. I finally conducted a total of 50 semi-structured interviews – 15 with research participants from the mountain biking event and 35 with research participants from the running events. During the interviews, I presented the participants with 10 photographs – seven showing environmental impacts and three illustrating participants' cognitive experiences (see Figure 1).

Emotional responses were elicited when the research participants realised that they had not fully understood the extent of the impact on nature until seeing the photos afterwards (Eriksson, 2023). Although the results generated interesting findings, the shift in methodological representation raises an ethical dilemma; it can be questioned whether I, as a researcher, revealed something to the research participants that they did not want to experience. To discuss this dilemma, I introduce two concepts to explain how the visualities of images are represented.

Figure 1 Examples of photos shown during the interviews



3. Visuality and “the right to look”

Rather than scholars determining what to depict for research, research participants can be given the power to generate perspectives on social positions and relationships by taking photos (Rose, 2016). This process allows research participants to control and reflect on their perspectives on a topic, such as on tourists (Matteucci, 2013), and “re-position” the narrative of the research (Ivanova *et al.*, 2021). Photos, in particular, can reveal the multi-layered and hidden meanings of fleeting moments, such as during events (Pernecky and Rakić, 2019). However, researchers should consider whether the research participants aim to portray objective reality or subjective representation because, ultimately, it depends on who contextualises the images (Rakić, 2011). Moreover, when research participants are given the ability to determine visibility, the researcher strips the ability for the research participants to determine and represent the validity of what is visualised.

Visuality is not straightforward, however. Tracing the history of the concept of visibility, Mirzoeff (2006) identified two distinct representations: Visuality 1 represents the representation of a coherent, standardised image controlled by the modes of production, and Visuality 2 represents resistance to direct power and creates space for visual expression beyond intended messages. The former reflects formalised images, such as how event organisers depict “pure nature” for nature-based events (Margaryan and Fossgard, 2021), while the latter can be exemplified by providing hosts with the opportunity to take photos of tourists to reverse their gaze. These two types of visibilities are not separate or dichotomous but co-exist as parallel expressions of different representations of the same image – a so-called “complex visibility” (Mirzoeff, 2006). Notably, however, there is always someone who controls visibility.

To avoid having a specific intended narrative of what is visualised, Mirzoeff (2011) invoked the claim of “the right to look”. Specifically, he asserted that authoritarian control over visibility should be challenged to explore what would otherwise remain hidden by authoritarian containment. Authorities have the power to classify, separate and aestheticise dominant preferences; an example is when police at a crime scene tell bystanders to “move on, there’s nothing to see here” (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 474). There is always something to be seen, but it is a controlled visibility. Similarly, when research participants are granted the power to create their own narrative (Ivanova *et al.*, 2021), they gain authoritarian control over what is visible and have the power to remove what they do not wish others to see: “move on, there’s nothing to see here”. Consequently, researchers using qualitative visual methods will ideally question whether the visibility produced by research participants unveils something beyond the standardised mode

of production the researcher wants to represent or merely reinforces preconceived ideas about a specific subject that the research participants wish to visualise.

Thus, I argue that researchers sometimes need to take a counter-visual stance. In such cases, [Schept \(2014\)](#) discussed the need to break authoritarian intentions that keep certain realities hidden by taking photos to intervene and restructure the gaze, as his work was to understand what lies behind inaccessible prison walls to see what states try to conceal. When there is such a disruption between representation and reality ([Rakić, 2011](#)), qualitative visual methods become so crucial. Researchers should not simply accept what research participants depict at face value ([Schept, 2014](#)), but as [Scarles \(2014, p. 332\)](#) explains, "...space exists for research that acknowledges the tangible, physical, object, and material world and their mediating significance" (as cited in Lester and Scarles, 2013). Although there are objects and situations where researchers disrupt existing power dynamics beyond surface-level representations, an ethical dilemma emerges if researchers claim "the right to look" behind research participants' visual intent. I further elaborate on this dilemma using my fieldwork in Jämtland.

4. Scrutinising qualitative visual methods

This section critically contextualises some challenges of visibility by, first, discussing the power dynamics inherent in my fieldwork process and, second, addressing the different interpretations of images that emerged during interviews.

4.1 Fieldwork

In line with previous studies using photo elicitation (e.g. [Hinch and Kono, 2018](#); [Ivanova et al., 2021](#); [Matteucci, 2013](#)), I began the fieldwork by transferring the power to the research participants to depict their reality. However, when I took the photos myself, I removed the participants' ability to tell their narratives. Researchers should question whether the fieldwork intends to depict reality or represent it ([Rakić, 2011](#)); I either had to accept the participants' representation that there is nothing to be seen or, similar to what [Scarles \(2014\)](#) discussed, engage with the physical reality that I experienced during my observations. According to the participants, there were no impacts to be seen: "move on, there's nothing to see here" ([Mirzoeff, 2011](#)). However, to understand what the event participants felt about the physical impacts on nature they did not depict, I had to illustrate this discrepancy by taking photos myself.

The different representations of the impacts of the event in [Figure 2](#) highlight a division between visualities. The left photo represents a symbolic portrayal of the event participants' participation from a Visuality 1 perspective – a normalised image similar to the idealised picture conveyed by the organisers ([Margaryan and Fossgard, 2021](#)). In contrast, the right photo represents my counter-visual narrative, reflecting my intention to reveal a perspective contrary to the authoritative visibility – namely, a Visuality 2 perspective. When I gave the research participants the task of representing their reality, I expected that we would share the same visibility. However, due to our differing visualities regarding the events, the research participants could neither perceive nor capture the impact on the trails that I wanted them to depict, even when I directly asked them to take photos of it.

By taking the photos myself, I also decided what constituted the "correct" impacts on nature for the research. In this process, however, I removed the participants' power to shape their narrative, contradicting previous suggestions to give power to research participants (e.g. [Ivanova et al., 2021](#)). Although, there may be another side to this shift. As shown in [Figure 3](#), contrary to being merely the result of an operational challenge, the lack of responses also became a way for the research participants to control what I, the

Figure 2 Left: Participant's representation of the nature-based event (published with permission from an undisclosed participant); Right: Researcher's representation



Figure 3 One of the few photos depicting environmental impacts (published with permission from an undisclosed participant)



researcher, was allowed to observe. In this way, research participants could shape their narrative by withholding photos. While this was not an intentional coherent or collective process, each of their individual actions determined what impacts were visible, meaning they had adopted an authoritative stance. As a result, to represent my observations, I had to

shift to counter-visual research (Schept, 2014) and claim “the right to look” (Mirzoeff, 2011) to make the research relevant.

When I decided to take the photos, I also gained the power to determine the narrative. Unlike Mirzoeff (2011, 2006) and Schept (2014), who directed their counter-visual efforts against the power of the authoritarian state, the research participants in my study did not hold that level of power. On the contrary, I entered the field with specific knowledge. Although I do not have an ecological background, my claims regarding the events’ environmental impacts were supported by previous literature (e.g. Ng *et al.*, 2018; Wall-Reinius and van den Brink, 2023) – yet, I determined the narrative.

Research participants were not entirely powerless; when the research participants are holders of Visuality 1, the aim of the researcher is to disrupt the visibility of “pristine nature” to show the impacts caused by these events with a Visuality 2. Hence, the division between visualities is not clear-cut (Mirzoeff 2011, 2006). In other words, when researchers use qualitative visual methods, they simultaneously operate within these two states of visibility. The key ethical question is not just about who holds the power of representation but how researchers navigate between different layers of Visuality 1 and Visuality 2. I elaborate on further this navigation between visualities regarding interviews in the next subsection.

4.2 Interviews

The distinct visual representations became increasingly clear during the interviews. Figure 4 shows an example of an image that perplexed the research participants in terms of the high level of soil impact at the event (Eriksson and Clausen, 2024). This instance in Figure 4 illustrates that while the research participants adopted a

Figure 4 One of the more significant visible impacts of the event



Source(s): Photos by the author

perspective of Visuality 1, when I showed photos that did not align with how they perceived the event, I made them aware of my counter-visual intent of Visuality 2. Indeed, because events are brief moment in time, photos are an important resource for highlighting their implications (Pernecky and Rakić, 2019). I guided the research participants to observe their experience of the event from a different perspective. However, the ethical issue with imposing my counter-visual expression was that I projected a particular visuality and a specific controlled narrative during the interviews.

The interplay between visualities leads to the question of who holds the “correct” image of what constitutes an impact. Hence, by selecting and showing the photos to the research participants, I claimed to reveal something that had been hidden from me. This methodological approach was effective because the participants came to develop a different visuality during the interviews (Eriksson, 2023). These results would have been significantly different had the participants taken the photos themselves. Therefore, when researchers give their research participants the power to take photos, their visuality is the outcome, but when researchers take the photos to show them, the disruption of the participants’ visualities becomes central. The findings of a study depend on which visuality researchers choose to represent. However, the latter approach is far more ethically challenging to justify than the former.

These distinct visualities that emerge during subsequent interviews highlight the ethical issue of who holds the power over the narrative. As my interviews aimed to uncover a specific narrative regarding the impacts on nature, the ethical crux was that I had already defined the representation of the impacts. As Mirzoeff (2011, p. 474) asserted, “we know it, and so do they”; thus, I assumed there was something hidden behind their authoritarian intent. I held the power to counter the research participants’ visual narrative during the interviews, much like Mirzoeff’s (2011) assertion to counter authorities’ instruction to “move on, there’s nothing to see here”. I placed the research participants in a difficult position where they had to respond to my counter-visual representation as if they were the authorities. While this involved a navigation of the intricate interplay between complex visualities (Mirzoeff, 2011), there was a delicate ethical balance in introducing a disruptive perspective that is particularly worthy of attention – especially when the researcher reveals a physical reality (Scarles, 2014). Researchers therefore ideally need to draw attention to the complexities of visualities to identify who categorises, separates and aestheticises visuality and counter the research participants’ initial visual intentions.

5. Concluding thoughts

I conclude by inviting future scholars to participate in the visual turn in tourism research (Pernecky and Rakić, 2019; Rakić and Chambers, 2011; Ivanova *et al.*, 2021) and discussed in this special issue, to further explore the complexity of visuality of their choice of methods. By analysing my fieldwork and interviews, I have offered insights for researchers to further scrutinise how they interpret the intricate interplay of visuality. I have raised questions regarding who holds the authoritarian intent of producing images during fieldwork, particularly concerning the ethical challenges involved in countering research participants’ internal modes of visuality. Overall, I found myself in a position of significant power to claim “the right to look” (Mirzoeff, 2011) and to impose a specific narrative by deciding what the images should represent. For future researchers, it is important to note that researchers do not entirely control visuality, and that research participants also hold power in selecting a visuality. As such, visual methods create tension between Visuality 1 – an authoritarian perspective – and Visuality 2 – a disruptive visualisation. In my case, research participants’ perspectives were shaped by a commercialised image of pure nature (Margaryan and Fossgard, 2021; Eriksson and Clausen, 2024), which I sought to

counter. Future researchers should consider the possibility of reconciling the interplay of contrasting visualities – which is part of what makes qualitative visual methods so powerful!

The main argument I wish to contribute is that researchers' perspectives need to sometimes challenge and juxtapose their research participants' perceptions. Qualitative visual methods are not merely about reinforcing authoritarian visibility (Schept, 2014) or countering it through the reverse gaze (Ivanova *et al.*, 2021) but critically reflecting on the visual intent of touristic experiences. In the future researchers using qualitative visual methods will hopefully find ways which will enable them to navigate these intersecting and often conflicting visualities. Visuality defines linearity; there are no straightforward paths to determining which visibility should be prioritised. Indeed, tourism scholars need to recognise that research participants can intentionally shape the visual intent, and at times, scholars could also choose to actively resist their participants' influences to unveil and challenge visualities.

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