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# Photo journals with refugee youth: Methodological reflections of conducting research during the pandemic

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## Article abstract

The use of visual methods as a research tool has increased worldwide, along with the need to understand the nuanced and contextual benefits, challenges, and risks of their use. Based on participatory approaches, visual methods can offer an adaptable, interactive, and critical way of engaging with refugee young people, making research more accessible and representative. In Montreal, the COVID-19 pandemic forced programs, services and research involving refugee young people to adapt to meet the needs of this population while respecting physical distancing guidelines. Little is known about the strengths and challenges of using visual methods in the context of physical distancing, especially with refugee young people. In this paper, we describe some of the strengths and challenges of using photo journals, a form of visual methods, with refugee young people (11-17 years old) to document their experiences participating in Say Ça!, a Montreal community-based mentoring program, during the pandemic. Six young people participated in photo journals and individual interviews, and 11 volunteers participated in focus group discussions. The journals prompted young people to describe themselves, their favourite moments at Say Ça! and moments when things did not go as planned. In the findings, we describe opportunities and challenges of using photo journals to engage migrant young people in research during the pandemic. Photo journals facilitated building a rapport with young people, overcoming communication challenges, ensuring valid consent throughout the study, and addressing power dynamics between participants and researchers. Challenges included recruitment, confidentiality, and study logistics. In this paper, we present key lessons learned from using photo journals as a method to capture the perspectives of refugee young people. We argue that by including the views of service users, programs may gain a richer understanding of the elements that contribute to refugee young people wellbeing and, ultimately, help improve community-based support for this population in Montreal and other welcome programs.

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## ARTICLE THÉMATIQUE

***Photo journals with refugee youth: Methodological reflections of conducting research during the pandemic\****Emilia Gonzalez <sup>1</sup> and Monica Ruiz-Casares <sup>1,2</sup>**Abstract/Résumé**

The use of visual methods as a research tool has increased worldwide, along with the need to understand the nuanced and contextual benefits, challenges, and risks of their use. Based on participatory approaches, visual methods can offer an adaptable, interactive, and critical way of engaging with refugee young people, making research more accessible and representative. In Montreal, the COVID-19 pandemic forced programs, services and research involving refugee young people to adapt to meet the needs of this population while respecting physical distancing guidelines. Little is known about the strengths and challenges of using visual methods in the context of physical distancing, especially with refugee young people. In this paper, we describe some of the strengths and challenges of using photo journals, a form of visual methods, with refugee young people (11-17 years old) to document their experiences participating in Say Ça!, a Montreal community-based mentoring program, during the pandemic. Six young people participated in photo journals and individual interviews, and 11 volunteers participated in focus group discussions. The journals prompted young people to describe themselves, their favourite moments at Say Ça! and moments when things did not go as planned. In the findings, we describe opportunities and challenges of using photo journals to engage migrant young people in research during the pandemic. Photo journals facilitated building a rapport with young people, overcoming communication challenges, ensuring valid consent throughout the study, and addressing power dynamics between participants and researchers. Challenges included recruitment, confidentiality, and study logistics. In this paper, we present key lessons learned from using photo journals as a method to capture the perspectives of refugee young people. We argue that by including the views of service users, programs may gain a richer understanding of the elements that contribute to refugee young people wellbeing and, ultimately, help improve community-based support for this population in Montreal and other welcome programs.

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## Introduction

The use of visual methods as a research tool has increased worldwide, along with the need to understand the nuanced and contextual benefits, challenges, and risks of their use (Pain, 2012). Within participatory approaches, visual methods can offer an adaptable, interactive, and critical way of engaging with refugee youth, making research more accessible to this often underrepresented population (Robertson et al., 2016; Vecchio et al., 2017). In Montreal, the COVID-19 pandemic forced programs, services, and research involving refugee youth to adapt to the needs of this population while respecting physical distancing guidelines. In this paper, we describe some of the strengths and challenges of using photo journals, a form of visual methods, with refugee youth to document their experiences participating in a Montreal community-based mentoring program during the pandemic.

## Visual methods

The use of visual methods has become increasingly popular in research with youth across a variety of cultural contexts (Lerat, 2013). With careful consideration for the context in which they are used, visual methods have proven helpful as a community-engagement strategy (Switzer et al., 2015) and a means for young people to process, document, and share their opinions about difficult topics (Brown, Spencer, McIsaac & Howard, 2020). Moreover, these methods can facilitate research with immigrant youth by addressing language and communication barriers and their difficulties building relationships, as well as countering negative perceptions towards research (Francis Cain & Trussell, 2019). This is done by offering various forms of expression, dedicating time for interaction between researchers and participants, and offering an opportunity to ‘freely and playfully’ express themselves through a research creation (Georgis & Matthews, 2021). As a form of visual methods, photo journals include a combination of participant-generated images (e.g., drawings or photographs) and text. In previous studies with youth, photo journals have facilitated youth engagement, motivation, and relationship building within marginalized groups (Shankar-Brown, 2011), as well as academic improvement and personal growth (Vaughns, 2017). Photo journals can also serve to mediate power dynamics and facilitate meaningful dialogue between youth and researchers (Anderson, 2014).

Visual methods can be a useful participant-centred method when properly adapted to the context and to the participants. This is especially true in situations where research is conducted at a distance, for instance in the context of public health measures during the pandemic. Using visual methods as a research tool, youth from diverse backgrounds have been able to generate and mobilize knowledge (Burkholder et al., 2022); represent how they understand, respond to, and are impacted by the pandemic in a variety of media (Rizzo et al., 2022); and expand the reach of their findings through social media (Pickering et al., 2022). Interestingly, many of these studies with young people either adapted or adopted visual methods as a response to the pandemic.

### Box 1. Refugee youth in Montreal during the pandemic

Montreal is an ethno-culturally diverse city where refugee youth and their families make up a significant part of the population. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic that would largely and uniquely affect the lives of recently arrived refugee youth in Montreal. As the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada, Montreal’s most disadvantaged neighbourhoods were at particular risk for the virus due to overcrowded housing, their population comprised a higher number of essential workers, and had limited access to outdoor spaces (Government of Quebec, 2020), an important element of physical and mental health for youth (De Lannoy et al., 2020). Some of the challenges faced by refugee youth in their resettlement, such as adapting to new socio-cultural norms, diminished mental health, limited access to support networks and services (Bérubé et al., 2021; Canadian Council for Refugees Youth Network, 2020; Endale et al., 2020) and negotiating their transition into adulthood (Gonzalez & Ruiz-Casares, 2021), were further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with other forms of support, community responses were crucial to mitigating the effects of the coronavirus, particularly when reaching marginalized populations (Gillmore et al., 2020). Authors in Canada have found that community engagement of diverse youth can improve youth-adult relationships as well as the quality of youth development programs (Ramey et al., 2018), suggesting the importance of involving diverse youth in community-based work.

### *Ethical considerations*

Visual methods are often cited as ‘participatory’. However, rather than automatically ensuring participation, these methods propose values, practices, and a theoretical grounding that when used reflexively can facilitate the participation and transformation of individuals and communities (Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2019). As researchers sought creative and innovative ways to collect data during the pandemic, they needed to ensure the methods adhered to safety and ethical guidelines (Samuels, 2019). Concerns have been raised around ethical scrutiny and regulation that can have harmful effects on visual research development (Wiles et al., 2012). In response, several researchers have proposed guidelines for ethical visual research that, on one hand, can provide support to researchers using visual methods in their studies and, on the other, meet the needs of Ethics Review Boards (ERBs) who review and approve these studies (Cox, 2014). For example, the guidelines proposed by Cox (2014) are based on the following six categories: (1) confidentiality; (2) minimizing harm; (3) consent; (4) fuzzy boundaries; (5) authorship and ownership; and (6) representation and audience/s.

Throughout this study, we adopted a relational ethics approach. For us, this means considering youth wellbeing and agency where participants had the capacity to make decisions for themselves (Gonzalez & Ruiz-Casares, 2021); integrating reflexive and relational research practices that contribute to the validity and depth of the data collected (Liegghio & Caragata, 2020; Meloni et al., 2015); centring ongoing and valid consent throughout the process (Ruiz-Casares & Oates, 2018); and prioritizing safety, confidentiality, and transparency when we made decisions (Graham et al., 2015). All these elements of a relational ethics approach were key to the way we designed, implemented, and adapted the study. In this paper, we reflect on our use of photo journals with refugee youth to understand the strengths and challenges of conducting research with this population during the pandemic, describe some of the ethical reflections that emerged during the study and subsequent adaptations to the research methods, and draw lessons that can be applied in non-pandemic contexts. Aligned with our view of young people as social actors with valuable contributions to research, we argue that researchers need to incorporate reflexive practices and prioritize youth engagement and perspectives when conducting social science research during and after the pandemic.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

Participants were recruited through Say Ça!, a community based-organization that delivers services to refugee youth (Box 1). We invited all 20 young people participating in Say Ça! sessions to join the study, which took place while they attended the program. Six chose to participate in the study. They had migrated to Montreal seven months to four years prior to the beginning of the study and spoke Arabic, English, French, and Spanish. Participating youth had attended weekly sessions with Say Ça! for at least four months before joining the study. Eleven Say Ça! volunteers, who assumed the roles of tutors and program coordinators, also participated in the study. They had been a part of the program for over a year. Table 1 describes participant demographics in more detail.

### **Box 2. Profile of the partner organization**

#### **What is Say Ça!?**

A volunteer-run, youth-for-youth community-based organization that delivers free services to about 20 refugee young people (10-17 years old) in Montreal.

Every Saturday morning, young people and volunteer tutors meet for language tutoring and cultural activities.

Responding to physical distancing measures, Say Ça! shifted to an online program delivery in March 2020.

For more information, please visit their website: [saycamontreal.ca](http://saycamontreal.ca)

**Table 1. Participant demographics and data collection methods**

Participant	Age (years)	Countries of origin	Gender	Data collection method
Youth (n=6)	11 to 17	Cameroon, Chad, Lebanon, Uganda, and Venezuela	4 females 2 males	Photo journals and individual interviews
Say Ça! volunteers (n=11)	20 to 35	Canada (Montreal), Colombia, Egypt, France, Iran, Peru and Syria	7 females 4 males	Focus group discussions
Researchers <sup>a</sup> (n=1)	27	Colombia	1 female	Participant observation

<sup>a</sup> The second author was less involved in data collection.

We developed a university-community partnership with Say Ça! that emerged from conversations between the researchers and the director around the organization's current needs and how research could support those needs. The partnership informed the research design, in particular the choice of visual methods, as well as facilitated collaboration and mutual support, encouraged reflective and documentation practices within the organization, and supported participant recruitment and retention (Samuels, 2019). Additionally, the study followed an iterative process that included consultations with the Say Ça! leadership team at key decision-making moments such as research design, implementation logistics, methodological adaptations that took place throughout, and research outputs. In consulting with Say Ça!, we were able to contextualize the study by gaining an understanding of the organizational needs, interests, and resource limitations, as well as knowledge of the participants and their contexts.

### *Measures and procedures*

With the support of Say Ça! volunteers, we delivered 'care packages' to the young peoples' homes, which included journalling materials (i.e., a journal, a disposable camera, markers and pencil crayons, and a glue stick) along with a description of the study and an informed consent form. Following public health measures, we wore masks, used hand sanitizer frequently, and kept a 2-metre distance during every visit to participants' homes.

Throughout the journalling activity, young people documented their experiences participating in the tutoring program before and during the pandemic as well as their own reflections of using the journals. We encouraged participants to use the language with which they felt most comfortable and to use photos, writing, and/or drawings. The journal prompted participants to reflect on their favourite moments at Say Ça!, moments when things did not go as planned, and what they looked forward to with Say Ça!. Before beginning the activity, we invited young people to participate in an online one-hour photography workshop where one of the researchers introduced the project and the materials in the 'care package'. Following the photography workshop, one of us communicated with the six young people for clarifications as they worked through their journal entries. Having ongoing and transparent engagement with young participants has been cited as a way to recognize their autonomy (Taylor et al., 2018), especially so during the pandemic (Beauvais and Knoppers, 2021). After two months, we invited the young people to an interview (online or phone) with one researcher to share their journalling experience and to assist in the interpretation of the visual data (Bagnoli, 2004). Participants were asked to reflect on the content of their journals as well as the overall journalling process to document the strengths and challenges from their perspective of using this method. Participants chose to have the interviews in English, French or Spanish. Interpretation was available but not used since the interviewer spoke the three chosen languages fluently. Interviews took place at a time that was convenient for the participants (Samuels, 2019). Secure communication protocols were implemented, such as a password protected Zoom link and a phone number to reach in case the call was interrupted. Young people received a gift card

to recognize their participation in the study (Seymour, 2012); we did not perceive this as a significant incentive to their engagement.

Complementary to the journaling activity, we conducted three two-hour bilingual focus group discussions (FGD) with volunteers and documented participant observation during organizational meetings and informal conversations with volunteers. FGD took place with the aim to contextualize the study, map out the history of the organization and explore the young peoples' experiences participating in the program during the pandemic as well as how the organization adapted to deliver the program. Emilia Gonzalez facilitated the FGD while a trained bilingual graduate student took detailed notes. One FGD was conducted in person while the other two took place over Zoom to respect physical distancing measures.

From the beginning of the study, we documented participant observation in chronological and systematic field notes, recording observations about the context, relationships, informal conversations with participants, non-verbal cues, research process, and researcher's positionality. Triangulated with the photo journals, both FGD and participant observation were appropriate to elicit different perspectives about the program to guide program development (Krueger & Casey, 2014) in the case of FGD, and to improve our interpretation of the data (Musante & DeWalt, 2010) and the positionality of the researcher (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011) in the case of participant observation.

### *Analysis*

We audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and denormalized the interviews and FGD. We invited participants to choose their own pseudonyms used in this paper (Allen & Wiles, 2016). The interview and FGD transcripts, along with the FGD detailed notes and our fieldnotes, were coded thematically using NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). We developed a codebook with codes derived from an initial read-through of all data sources. Codes also included reflections about the research process such as the rapport with participants, features of youth discourse (Spyrou, 2016) and effects of the pandemic. After grouping the codes into categories, providing a short description for each and discussing possible gaps (Gibson & Brown, 2009), we applied the codebook to the journals, transcripts and fieldnotes. For this paper, our analysis triangulated across all data sources and focused on codes that captured the strengths and challenges of using photo journals from the perspective of the participants and researchers.

The analysis of photo journals and corresponding interview transcripts were done simultaneously, as meaning of the images depends on the interpretation shared by the participant during the interview (Gomez, 2020). In this sense, we considered the content of the images not as something static and complete, but as "a departure point for apprehending something of [the youth's] world and world-making" (Mitchell, 2006, p. 63). During the analysis, we paid attention to the way participants framed their images as well as what was omitted from them (Literat, 2013). We translated quotes from Spanish and French into English for the publication of results to enhance understanding by a wider readership and to protect the confidentiality of participants. There was no need to translate quotes during analysis since both researchers are fluent in the languages used.

Approval was obtained from the ERB at the McGill Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences.

### **Results**

The following section describes our reflections on some of the strengths and challenges of using photo journals with refugee youth during the pandemic.

#### *Strengths of using photo journals*

Confronted with the impossibility of meeting with young people face-to-face due to public health restrictions, photo journals emerged as a creative and thought-provoking way to engage refugee youth in research during the pandemic. We found this research tool useful to build rapport with youth, make research more accessible for participants, centre youth engagement, promote ongoing valid consent, and address power dynamics between the researcher

and participants. In the following paragraphs, we reflect on each strength and its implications for conducting research in the context of a pandemic and draw on lessons learned for engaging youth in research useful in conditions beyond the pandemic.

### *Building rapport with youth*

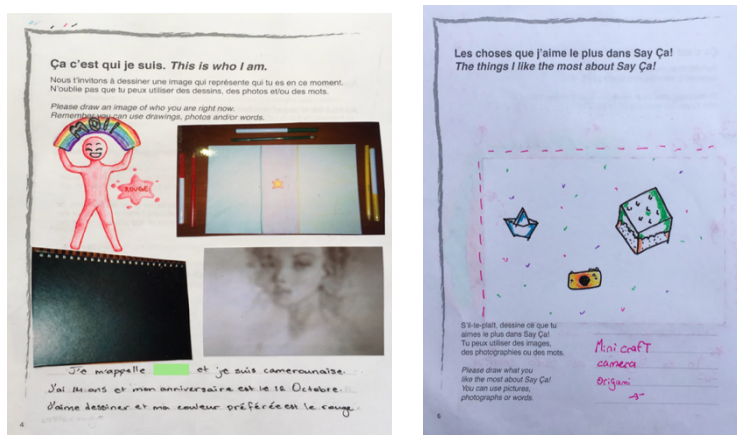
Implementing strategies for rapport building with participants is often cited as a key element to conducting meaningful research with youth (Kirk, 2007; Tickle, 2017). For example, previous work with refugee youth emphasizes the value of spending time with participants to build trust and working with organizations that have pre-existing relationships with the youth (Francis Cain & Trussell, 2019). In a time of physical distancing where most of our interactions took place virtually, building rapport with youth was especially challenging during this study. The delivery of the photo journals, and consequent visits to pick up and drop off materials, were an opportunity for us to meet participants in person, while ensuring public health measures were followed. These interactions facilitated a more personal connection with participants, and often with their families, as they asked questions about us and the study. In later visits, the appreciation and eagerness we observed from various young people also gave us a sense of their level of engagement in the study.

In addition to these few in-person interactions, we were able to continue the conversation over text and phone calls with them during the two months of the project. This continuous one-on-one interaction allowed us to answer questions as they worked on their journals and we got a sense of their progress and level of engagement. Although both in-person and virtual ways of connecting with youth were resource and time intensive, they were key to building rapport and trust with them, and ultimately to promoting their engagement in the study.

### *Accessible research*

Another element that was key to engaging young participants in the study was to adapt the methods to be more accessible to refugee youth. For example, we integrated visual methods that invited various forms of learning and expression, such as writing, taking photographs, and drawing. We also invited participants to express themselves in the language of their choice. This was especially important for refugee allophone youth who were in the process of learning English and/or French. Tina, for instance, chose photographs and drawings and wrote in French whereas Alejandra preferred drawings and English texts (Figure 1). Similar to our study, other work with refugee youth have found visual methods to address language barriers (Vecchio et al., 2017).

**Figure 1. Tina (14 years) and Alejandra (11 years) express themselves in writing, drawing, and photography through their photo journals**



Young people commented about how photo journals allowed them to participate in a variety of ways that were appropriate to their age. When asked if she would recommend the journaling activity to other young people, Alejandra answered:

It depends on how old they are because the little ones I don't think they can do it, like the younger ones like six or something like that. But because they don't know how to use those things [the cameras]. And I think it's more like taking a picture like this and turning it upside down like this, from experience. And the older ones like my age and older, like my brother who did it better than me, so I think it would work with other people.

To make journaling more accessible, one youth suggested “more fun questions (...) like you could have tiny little drawings describing what you mean” rather than words that the journal prompts. Previous studies have cited using visual research as an engaging way of creating knowledge while lowering barriers to participation and breaking down power imbalances (Moskal, 2017; Vecchio et al., 2017).

### *Youth engagement in research*

Previous studies have shown how integrating visual and art-based components in research methods can facilitate meaningful and effective engagement of young people (Flores, 2007). During the informal communications with Say Ça! staff, we were able to learn about the study participants' interests, strengths and challenges. These conversations informed our decision to integrate visual methods into the study as a way to respond to the participants' realities. In turn, young people frequently commented on how much they enjoyed working on the journals as they aligned with their interests and hobbies. For example, Tina shared that since the pandemic “was kind of boring” the journal activity was a fun opportunity to draw. She added, “I like drawing so much. It really helped me to see what I like and who I am.” Alejandra also shared her positive experience with the journal:

I really liked [the journal activity]. Because I like taking pictures, I like blogging what's going on. So, it was like starting to be a blogger. And more than that, I liked it because it asked us to write things that happened to us here in the quarantine. And in our houses, since we're running out of things to do, that activity made us look for things to answer every question and I liked the activity (...) I think that little by little I am learning to use those vintage cameras.

One of our main lessons learned from using photo journals was the importance of prioritizing the process over the results. For some participants, the journaling project was an opportunity to learn about themselves, to develop a new skill, and to feel motivated during the pandemic (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Tina drew a picture of herself journaling as one of the activities she enjoyed the most during the pandemic**



Several young people commented on how engaging it was to learn how to use the disposable cameras. Some felt ownership over their journal and indicated they felt proud about their contributions to the study. When engaging youth in research, their experiences while participating are valuable in themselves. Their engagement can also help us assess the quality of our data as well as improve methods we use. In their work with girls and young women in Quebec during the pandemic, Thompson et al. (2020) noted that participating in research visual methods improved their wellbeing during lockdown. Other researchers have also found that when incorporating children as social actors in research during the pandemic, they were able to learn new skills, explore new topics, interact with others, share their perspectives and collect meaningful data (Cuevas-Parra, 2020).

In our study, this also occurred despite the fact that the photos and journals did not always turn out the way young people had hoped:

DJ Sushi: Ok so you know the plant was supposed to be all pretty and bright and everything despite how bright they are. (...) Well, it turned out to be blurry. It was actually supposed to be yellow and green and all perfect. But the camera has problems.

Interviewer: Mmm. So, the image did not come out as you expected?

DJ Sushi: Nope (...) Oh, I would actually like to share something else with you. I know I could have done better in this journal but I guess I refused to let myself do well. (...) The answer where it says is there anything else you'd like to share, yes, I could have done better with this journal I know I really could have. It would be better pictures with better light [silence] yeah (...) It would have been less [silence] plain. (...) More light in the pictures, more knowing why the pictures are there than not really there for what they mean.

We found the photo journals also supported the research process as a tool for self-reflection and to ground participants during the virtual interview. During the two months of journalling, young people had time to interact with questions in a creative and self-reflexive space that allowed them to deepen their understanding of what was being asked. This was helpful during the interviews as we had little control over the many distractions that were present in the participants' homes. When young people were distracted during the interview, the journal served as a grounding tool to pull participants back into the interview. Previous studies using visual methods created by young people during interviews have found to "open up participants' interpretations of questions and allow a creative way of interviewing that is responsive to participants' own meanings and associations" (Bagnoli, 2009).

### *Ongoing valid consent*

Another strength of using photo journals was that it facilitated gaining ongoing valid consent from young people in this context. Following the requirements from the ERB, they were asked to sign a consent form if they were interested in participating and those under 14 years of age had their parents sign as well. However, consent is not a one-time event. Rather, we see it as an ongoing conversation throughout the research process. At different times of the photo journal activity, young peoples were asked how and to what extent they wanted to participate in the study. For example, young people consented to sharing the cameras so that we could develop the photographs, and then again, the journals so we may scan them. They chose which images we got to see and which they kept to themselves. The last question in every interview was whether the young people gave us permission to use their ideas and journals for this study. We also paid special attention to non-verbal cues that indicated participant discomfort or dissent, as has been the case in previous studies (Samuels, 2019). For example,

DJ Sushi refused to answer some questions and did not want to talk about certain topics. (...) She did not seem very proud of her journal and in the end, we had a conversation about this. I think she was hesitant to answer some questions at first and just wanted the interview to be over quickly. In the middle, she asked me to hurry up so I jumped to the next question. (Researcher fieldnotes)

Similar to our study, previous work describes consent as an ongoing dynamic process and recognizes that participants' lives and interests may change (Black et al., 2018; Stein & Terry, 2013), especially during the unstable pandemic months. Moreover, valid consent also considers levels of ability and understanding of the information

provided during recruitment (Ruiz-Casares and Oates, 2018). These may become more difficult in the context of a pandemic, considering factors such as providing information online and/or while wearing masks. To add nuance, previous studies have differentiated consent to participate in a study from giving permission to share their creations (Gubrium et al., 2014). In research with refugee youth in Canada, Salam et al. (2021) also highlight the importance of ongoing consent that includes simplifying and/or translating the consent form, recognizing verbal consent as consent, respecting cultural norms and addressing misconceptions of participating in the study, in line with several considerations we took during our study. Informed consent from participants may be compromised in virtual settings as it is more difficult to verify that participants understand the information presented and consent voluntarily (Gupta, 2017). Similar to our study, other studies have highlighted the need for researchers to communicate expectations of the study ahead of time and to take time to help participants feel comfortable when conducting physically distanced data collection (Borland, 2020).

### *Power dynamics*

Addressing power dynamics is a common theme in research with youth, critically thinking about questions like how decisions are made (Fox et al., 2010), who owns the data (Schelbe et al., 2015), how other people in the environment may influence the information shared by participants, and how the researchers' positionality influences the process (McGarry, 2016). In our study, power dynamics were addressed by sharing decision-making power with the participants at several moments during the photo journal activity. For example, throughout the study youth were reminded that whatever they produced, including photos and journals, were theirs to keep. Photo journals were scanned and returned to the youth, emphasizing that they owned their work. Furthermore, the youth were invited to choose which photos the researchers could see. During every interaction, we reminded the youth that they had the choice to stop participating with no consequences to their relationship with Say Ça! mentors or to the program, researchers, or to the ownership of their journal.

Another example was giving young people the choice of doing video or phone interviews. Whereas it would have been easier to connect with them and have more information about their responses and context during a video interview, one participant preferred to speak over the phone while another decided to turn off his video in the middle of the interview.

Young people were asked not to work on their journals during mentoring sessions with Say Ça! to avoid any undue influence of mentors in their answers, and to make an intentional separation between the mentoring program and the research. Similarly, we explained the study to the volunteer mentors during a team meeting to ensure they understood their supportive role. For example, if young people asked questions about the journals during mentoring sessions, mentors were asked to be mindful of giving their own opinions and instead to refer participants to us if they had doubts about how to answer the question. We also included a question in the interview protocol that asked whether the young people received help from others during the photography and the journalling activities. While some youth received logistical support from a parent or sibling, most young people were proud to share that they had worked on the journal on their own.

Self-reflexivity was central during data collection, analysis and writing to identify some of the power dynamics between participants and researchers, and to understand their effects on the research process, similar to previous studies (Musante and DeWalt, 2010). We wrote this paper in first person to visibilize the explicit and implicit ways in which our positionalities as researchers influence the methods and research process. Emilia Gonzalez had more direct contact with the participants throughout the data collection. Her experiences, being a Latin-American white-passing woman in graduate school, who migrated to Canada and learned English and French as a youth, actively informed the research design and analysis of data. For example, she used methods that highlighted nuances in participants' narratives and continuously reflected on how her own experiences influenced how she interpreted the data. Meanwhile, her relationship with participants, both refugee youth and volunteers, was constructed and mediated by these social identities and the ensuing power dynamics at play. For example, having shared the experience of

migrating to Montreal as well as speaking the participants' mother tongue in some cases, contributed to building this rapport between her and the young people .

### *Challenges of using photo journals*

In the following section, we discuss some of the challenges that emerged while using photo journals, decisions we made to address these challenges, and recommendations for future research. Carrying out recruitment, preserving confidentiality, and managing logistics stand out as barriers to visual research with young people during a pandemic.

### *Participant recruitment*

Out of the 20 young people who were invited to join the study, six consented to participate. The recruitment of participants was challenging for several reasons, some of which we will comment on below and others that remain unknown to us. First, the diversity of ways in which the research was communicated to the young people (i.e., through online platforms, in Say Ça! sessions, and during short in-person visits) made the project difficult to grasp for some:

The project seems like a bit of a mystery, a thing "over there" that's not really accessible. I think even if the youth felt motivated to pick up the camera and start working, they do not have much guidance in what to do. This could in part be my fault, my lack of clarity, my speaking too fast, etc. But I think it is also the way we are engaging with the project. There have been short and sporadic spurts of engagement and I think none have been with enough time and depth for processing for students to understand the scope and feel connected to the project in any way. (Researcher fieldnotes)

Another challenge in recruitment occurred in communicating the project with young people and their families, during online sessions with Say Ça! and during the delivery of materials. To mitigate this challenge, we translated the consent forms to all languages spoken at Say Ça! (Arabic, Spanish, English, and French), and ensured mentors translated the instructions into the youth's mother tongue. However, these possible language limitations and cultural differences, compounded with the difficulties of online learning, made recruitment of young people more challenging.

Compared to other qualitative studies, photo journals were more time and resource intensive for both participants and researchers. Several young people commented on how they had to balance their participation in the journaling activity with school, extra-curriculars, and household tasks. Moreover, some youth also commented on challenges they faced as a result of their recent arrival to Montreal as well as those emerging from the pandemic. As researchers, it was important to consider the context and realities of participating young people and understand that, in some cases, it was likely that the journaling activity was not a priority for them . It is worth noting, though, that young people who chose to participate from the beginning showed commitment and continued engagement throughout the entire study.

Previous studies using visual methods with youth have also documented challenges with recruitment, noting that some young people may not be drawn to 'artistic creation' like drawings and photographs while others may not be available to commit to the duration of the study (Moola et al., 2020). Like our study, those who did consent to participate adhered very well to the study. In her studies about youth participation in Toronto, Switzer (2020) advocates for the politics of refusal and argues for non-participation not as something negative but as an indicator of agentic youth who understand the risks of participating, and make an informed decision about their participation.

### *Confidentiality and privacy*

Several aspects of the study required thoughtful consideration to ensure as much confidentiality as possible of the information obtained from participants. The combination of working within a small organization, having a small sample, and using visual methods (particularly photographs and hand-written notes) can generate more easily identifiable information. This all made us question how to best adapt the methods to protect the privacy of the participating young people within the organization. For instance, we explained to them that to protect their privacy and that of others, they had to ask for permission before taking a photo of someone else and not include other

people's faces in the photographs. As discussed in the section about power dynamics, participants were also asked not to work on their journals during the program to protect their privacy when working with tutors and to avoid undue influence in their responses.

We asked participants to find a private space where they felt comfortable and would not be interrupted for the interview. However, many interviews were interrupted by family members who needed to communicate with young people or simply check in on how the interview was going. In one case, when a youth could not remember the name of an activity, their mom unexpectedly gave the answer. Other researchers have also noted confidentiality as a challenge when using visual research, both because the data are very distinct and because participants often want to be credited for their work (Gubrium et al., 2014). Similar to our study, chosen pseudonyms can be used to credit participants for their work (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Furthermore, ensuring privacy can be a challenge when conducting online interviews (Gibson, 2022), especially in the case of young people being interviewed from home.

### *Study logistics*

The delivery of materials was a resource intensive operation. In the company of a Say Ça volunteer, we drove over 150 kilometres in one day around the city to deliver packages to 20 young people in 14 households. One of us was able to meet most of the young people and some parents to introduce ourselves and the project. All packages were handed in at a distance, by using masks and hand sanitizer. Young people received the packages with great appreciation. Trips to the homes of the six participants who completed the journals occurred four other times: to pick up the cameras, drop off the photos, pick up the journals, and drop them off again. This required a great amount of time and coordination with the participants. In one case, a youth tested positive for COVID and we had to reschedule the visit. In future studies with photo journals, other ways of delivering the physical materials could be developed, such as using mail services or asking participants to send documents virtually. More generally, we recognize that meaningfully engaging in research with youth can be resource intensive, even outside of the context of a pandemic.

Another logistical challenge was adapting to constantly changing public health measures and ERB guidelines, which led to several iterative reflections about ethical practices considering the context:

I feel pressure from the ERB to be doing research a certain way that often conflicts with how Say Ça! functions, all of which sometimes conflict with how I work and how I would like to work. And everything is moving so fast! I think extending the photography/journaling time was a good idea but now I see no clear finish. It's a balance between being flexible and then having some boundaries. Today is a boundary because we've established it's the last day to send consent forms. And even now, I'm debating whether I should try something else before moving on to the next stage of collecting cameras. (Researcher fieldnotes)

Flicker et al. (2007) argue that, while community-based participatory research (CBPR) attempts to address ethical concerns that emerge from more traditional research, often ERB procedures may be unintentionally placing communities at risk by continuing to use frameworks ill-suited for CBPR.

Although we did not document their effects, safety measures such as wearing masks and keeping a two-metre distance could have influenced the dynamic between the participant and researcher (Saint & Moscovitch, 2021) and this would be interesting to explore in future studies. On a positive note, a new expedited ethics review process and direct communication with ERB officials facilitated the necessary amendments to the ethics permit (for example, delivering materials so the young people could participate in the study and conducting interviews online).

We recognize several limitations in this study. First, the small sample size makes it difficult to apply to other young people in the program and to other contexts. However, the small sample size also allowed for more time and depth in data collection and analysis. Since the study was done in collaboration with Say Ça!, young people may have hesitated to share difficult experiences with the organization due to their concerns of negatively affecting their relationships with volunteers or their participation in the program. While many considerations were taken to protect

their privacy, we recognize that ensuring full confidentiality is very difficult in this context and as a result of these methods as discussed in the sections above. Various individual factors (e.g., communication and perceived artistic skills) and contextual factors (e.g., school and extracurricular activities) may have influenced the youth's access, ability, interest and extent of participation in photo journalling. These may have impacted the quality and quantity of data obtained. Future studies could explore the reasons why young people decide not to participate in studies as this may give insight into strategies for youth engagement in research. Finally, teaching young peoples to use the cameras during the online photography workshop proved challenging. As a result, the quality of the photographs was in some cases affected. For instance, one participant thought the flash was to make photos sparkly and used it in all the photos, which later came out all dark. Additional training and opportunities to practice may be needed based on the level of familiarity of participants with photo-taking.

## Conclusion

The pandemic forced us to adapt our questions and methods so that we could conduct research with refugee youth while respecting physical distancing. Yet more importantly, it made us think critically about how we relate to and communicate with participants, how we obtain valid consent and ensure confidentiality, and how we negotiate power dynamics with participants and with other institutions. In this article, we presented some of the ethical reflections that emerged from the use of photo journals and guided the research process and outcomes. Following these reflections and in line with our position in recognizing young people as social actors with valuable knowledge and an ability to generate quality research, we argue that researchers need to prioritize youth engagement and perspectives in the context of physical distancing, despite its challenges. Moreover, researchers need to incorporate reflexive practices when implementing the necessary adaptations to conduct social science research during and after a pandemic.

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