



Methods for Change

Mobile Visual Methods

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Mobile Visual Methods



In this approach, participants visually record their journeys or document significant elements of the landscape as they travel or move around a place. As such, Mobile Visual Methods are particularly useful for understanding lived, everyday experience. Mobile Visual Methods often involve research participants creating visual data themselves, through photography, film, drawing or map making.

They can also involve the researcher accompanying participants with a camera or other technologies as they move in or through a particular space, such as a city, a transport network, or institutional setting. The data produced is then used as a prompt for subsequent discussion. This approach can therefore be a powerful tool for highlighting elements of everyday mobility that may be difficult to access in a static interview, including 'embodied' dimensions - the ways that individuals experience and relate to places through the body. Visual data generated through this approach can also be used to collaboratively produce a creative output such as a film or exhibition, and therefore to create something tangible that gives participants a sense of ownership and achievement.



How do Mobile Visual Methods create or contribute to change?

By foregrounding participants' individual perspectives, this approach can expose the variety of ways in which people engage in, and move around public or private spaces. They can therefore help to challenge assumptions that we all move and experience places and infrastructures in the same way – assumptions which often underpin urban and transport policy, for example. For research participants, involvement in such creative methods can be transformative, particularly in projects where visual data is used to develop a co-produced output. As well as recognising and validating under-represented experiences of place and mobility, working collaboratively on a film or exhibition can provide participants with opportunities to gain valuable vocational skills. Collaborating to edit film footage or curate images, for example, can also provide opportunities for participants to be involved more deeply in the research process and to actively contribute to the analysis and sharing of findings.

The outputs created can be used to raise public awareness around an issue, and they have the potential to highlight different experiences and reframe dominant opinions or perspectives. Research conceived collaboratively with a charity, public sector organisation or community group can also contribute to shaping policy and priorities by drawing attention to under-represented or under-explored experiences. Research using Mobile Visual Methods with visually impaired young people, for example, has shown how organisational policies aimed at 'independent mobility' for this group can be unhelpful. By illuminating the interdependent relationships and social interactions that often shape experiences of moving around a place, in this research Mobile Visual Methods highlighted that conversations about 'assistance' could be much more effective than aims to establish independence.

What ideas or concepts are connected with Mobile Visual Methods?

Mobile Visual Methods combine elements of visual, ethnographic and participatory research. They can be understood as a form of 'go-along' in which the researcher takes part in and observes the everyday experiences and practices of participants, while they are on the move. Go-along methods have been applied by social scientists for decades. While accompanying participants as they engage in an activity is often an integrated element of participant observation in ethnographic approaches, mobile methods have been systematically applied since the mid-2000's, when the study of 'mobilities' became popular in Geography and related disciplines.

As a participatory method, participants are viewed as partners in the research who play an important role in the co-creation of knowledge. In addition to emphasising collaborative relationships between researcher and researched, Mobile Visual Methods also integrate a form of technology into the research. This could be anything from a smartphone app to a disposable camera or handwritten diary. Mobile Visual Methods often involve the participant producing audio-visual data themselves, by wearing film cameras on their body (e.g. chest or headcams), or taking photographs on their phone as they travel around a place. The creative and visual materials that are produced can be useful for examining non-verbal, emotional and sensory experiences of a place. Like other 'elicitation' methods, in which photographs, maps or objects are introduced into the research encounter to stimulate discussion and reflection, the researcher and participant then explore these audio-visual materials together to generate interview data.



Why might I want to use Mobile Visual Methods?

- As a creative method, this approach can provide an enjoyable and meaningful way for participants to be involved in research. The rich, audio-visual data created are particularly useful for prompting discussions about practices, phenomena or social issues that would be less easy to access in a static interview.
- With a focus on experience in motion, Mobile Visual Methods can help to expose and challenge assumptions that we all move through and navigate space in the same way. By exploring mobilities from the perspectives of participants, Mobile Visual Methods can be particularly useful for understanding differentiated experiences – how different individuals or groups experience movement through a place in contrasting ways.
- Mobile Visual Methods are useful for understanding pace, tempo and rhythm. Wearable video technology, such as GoPro cameras, can generate data related to external rhythms and movements in the environment as well as internal rhythms such as breathing, with changes in pace indicating, for example, moments in which the wearer experiences heightened states of anxiety.
- This approach can allow researchers and participants to get a sense of the micro-level and sensory details of moving through space (e.g. surfaces, textures, soundscapes) and can provide opportunities to notice and talk about elements of day-to-day lives and embodied experience. Videos created from cameras worn on the chest, for example, can reveal much about the tactile nature of surfaces such as pavements in the city. They can also highlight moments of connection and interdependency with other people moving around the same place, which may otherwise be overlooked.
- Mobile Visual Methods can generate compelling visual data, but the process is time and labour intensive for participants and researchers. Facilitation and guidance from the researcher is critical throughout the process, and time should be allowed for additional support, follow-ups, and contingencies.

Step by step guide to using Mobile Visual Methods:

- 1. Start with collaboration:** The research should begin with a dialogue between research partners and participants to ensure that the process is collaborative from the start, and that the methods used are appropriate for the group(s) involved and the topic under investigation. Think carefully about who will be asked to create visual data and in what settings, and consider what level of commitment this will require from participants. Discuss whether this is the right approach for this research.
- 2. Decide on methods and technologies:** The initial planning and dialogue stage will also include decisions about the technologies used to record or document. These might include: wearable GoPro cameras, disposable cameras, mobile phone cameras or apps, notepads or diaries. Think about the types of data that could potentially be produced (e.g. photos, drawings, film footage, maps, written or photo journals), and how they will be used. You may want to offer participants a choice of different methods and technologies. People's backgrounds, skills and experiences vary, and not everyone will feel comfortable using the same kinds of devices.



Step by step guide to using Mobile Visual Methods:

Using new technologies may prompt some level of anxiety. Anyone drawing upon these methods should have an awareness of, and support in place, for the demands that such intensive methods can place on participants. In other words, do not underestimate the labour of participants required for these methods to work effectively. Think about strategies for mitigating any potential distress, such as giving a range of different options for participants to choose from, and scheduling regular opportunities for support and guidance.

3. Give clear instructions: Ensure that participants understand the purpose of the research, and what they are being asked to do, document or record. This could take the form of written instructions, an initial group meeting or regular check-ins. It is important to be clear about the role of the researcher in this process, e.g. will the researcher accompany the participant as they take photos or film footage in a particular location? When will they be available to offer support and guidance?

4. Use the data in follow-up interviews: Mobile Visual Methods are likely to produce a large volume of interesting, audio-visual data. There may be some 'top-down' analysis of footage, images, or writing that will be carried out by the researcher, but the main purpose of this data is to elicit further discussion which can be recorded and analysed. In these discussions, the researcher invites the participant to talk through the materials, and

may prompt the discussion with questions about which elements of the footage or images are significant and why, how participants made decisions about where to go and what to record, or how they felt when they were in different places depicted in their recordings.

5. Produce a collaborative output:

Depending on the types of data that have been produced in the project, an exhibition, film or online resource could be produced using photos or filmed material. Participants can play an important role in analysing and editing materials to produce a tangible output, and can gain valuable skills in the process. Think about how tasks will be shared, how you can draw on and develop the different skills that already exist within the group, and whether you will need to bring in any additional expertise such as film making or curating.

6. Share the findings: A co-produced creative output can be a powerful tool for sharing participants' stories with diverse audiences, and raising awareness about their experiences or perspectives. Think about where a film or exhibition could be located, and consider holding a launch event, which could invite the local community, stakeholders from different sectors, participants and their families. An online resource or social media account documenting images or films from the project could also extend findings from the research further.



Examples of Mobile Visual Methods in social science research

VI Everyday Mobilities

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The VI Everyday Mobilities project examined the relationship between urban transport and the everyday lives of visually impaired (VI) young people in London. The project was carried out between 2014 and 2018 by researchers in the Transport Studies Unit at the University of Oxford in partnership with the Royal Society for Blind Children (RSBC), a London based charity working with visually impaired young people up to the age of 26. Drawing on Visual Mobile Methods in the form of participatory film making, the project was developed with young people from the charity to explore independent mobility, using footage that they recorded with GoPro cameras.

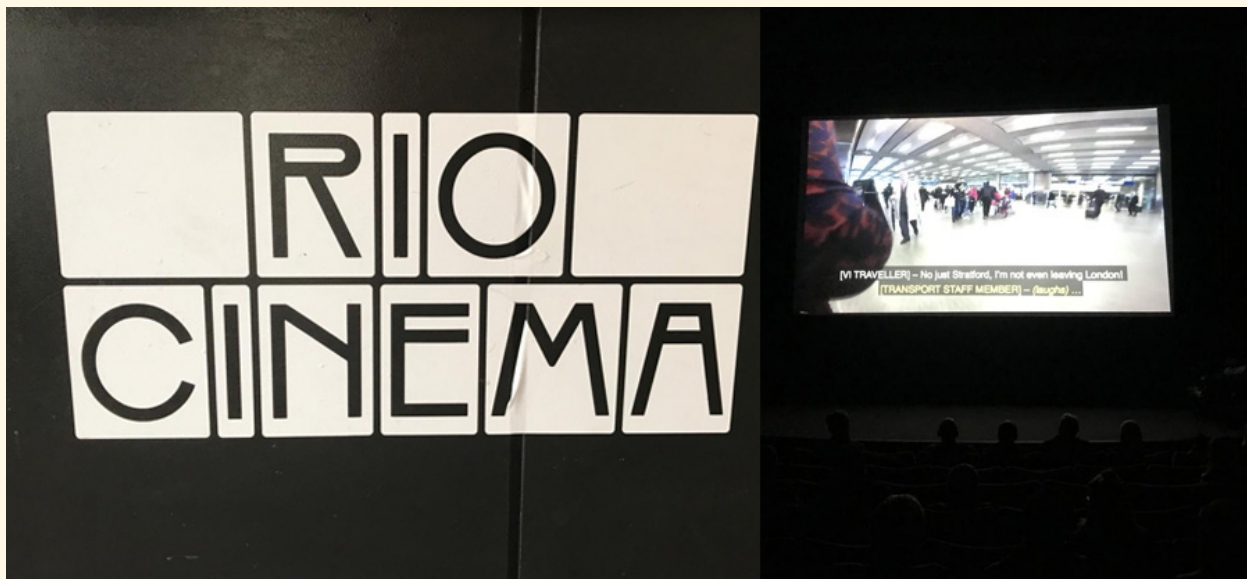
The project responded to a lack of qualitative research about how visually impaired young people negotiate their journeys between different transport modes. This research

examined how these experiences relate to other aspects of visually impaired young people's everyday lives, for instance; moving towards adulthood, achieving 'independence', speed/ time, access to services and employment, family relationships, mental health, and much more.

During the project, visually impaired Londoners (aged 18 – 26) used GoPro cameras to film their everyday journeys through the city, recording over 20 hours of footage. They then edited and narrated their videos making a series of short films, which show both good and bad experiences of travelling around London. The **videos** share moments of in/accessibility, interdependence, care, connection, frustration, support, and pride.



VIMobilities panel discussion at the film launch event



VIMobilities films were screened at a launch event at the Rio Cinema in Dalston, London

The video content was captured between 2014 and 2016, and forms part of a wider video database which contains key moments from visually impaired young people's everyday journeys. To produce these films researchers ran three workshops with participants, in which video content was reviewed, discussed, edited, and narrated to tell six different stories. The film making and research team then worked together to weave these elements into six short films, with regular input from participants along the way. The music that accompanies the films was composed and selected by the project participants and stories are told in their own words.

The six short films were premiered at Rio cinema in Hackney, inviting a range of stakeholders and community members, and Transport for London (TfL) have used some of these films in their accessibility training. The [VI Mobilities website](#) aims to provide a forum for young visually impaired people to continue sharing and talking about their experiences, as well as raising awareness of these experiences amongst transport planners, practitioners, travel assistants, and the public.



Where else could Mobile Visual Methods be used?

Mobile Visual Methods have the potential to be used in a wide range of contexts. They are particularly useful for community organisations, public sector bodies and businesses that are interested in understanding how places, environments and infrastructures are experienced by different groups and individuals. Photo or film methods could be drawn on in research aiming to understand residents' day-to-day experiences of active travel or public transport networks in different neighbourhoods, for example, or seeking to explore how parks and green spaces are used and valued in cities, with findings feeding into future planning decisions or campaigns.

Mobile Visual Methods are also well suited to charities or service providers interested in developing meaningful and creative research and outputs alongside service users, community stakeholders and other beneficiaries. Projects based around the collaborative production of a film or photo exhibition can provide an engaging focus for children and young people to document their unique perspectives within educational or cultural institutions, for example, or with patient groups to understand how clinical settings are navigated and experienced. They could also be used by commercial organisations interested in understanding the emotional or sensory dimensions of different consumption spaces such as pop up markets and shopping centres, or at public events and gatherings.

Top tips

1. Be patient. This approach can take time and it requires significant commitment from participants and researchers.
2. Do not underestimate the 'demands of the method'. The expectations that are placed on participants when using creative, innovative approaches are significant, since they are very time consuming and require ongoing commitment, rather than a one-off-meeting. It is important that participants are well prepared and guided, and that they get something out of their involvement as well.
3. Be available and approachable. As a researcher, it is important to provide clear instructions and to be available throughout the process. The relationships developed between researchers and participants in this research are key to its success.



Further reading

Research project webpage:

- VI Mobilities

Journal articles:

- Pluralising the walking interview: researching (im)mobilities with Muslim women
- Interdependent temporalities and the everyday mobilities of visually impaired young people*

**If you are unable to access the full version of this article, please email the author to request a copy*

To reference: Middleton, J., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Mobile Visual Methods' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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