



Applying Photovoice to the Study of Asian Immigrants' Information Needs

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Abstract. Immigrants in their new country may have diverse and complex information needs. Appropriate methods are part of scientific discourse on how to effectively engage with immigrants to reflect their information needs and life experiences. This paper discusses the application of the photovoice method to study Asian immigrants' information needs as they settled in South Australia. As a participatory approach, photovoice allowed immigrants to take photos to actively record their own information needs and concerns. We reflected how photovoice can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of immigrants' information needs by overcoming language barriers and expressing personal feelings and emotions. Photovoice is considered to be a useful method for studying vulnerable or underrepresented populations.

Keywords: Asian immigrants · Immigrants · Information need · Photovoice · Visual method

1 Introduction

Photovoice is a method using photographs to give people a voice within their community (Wang and Burris 1997). Wang and Burris (1994) used the idea of a “novella” composed of images representing someone’s “story”. Some years later, they used the term “photovoice” to describe “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (Wang and Burris 1997, p. 369). As the focus of the photovoice is the photographs, the participants may feel part of the research team rather than the research subject (Julien et al. 2013). Photovoice was explicitly devised to give a voice to people who have little or no access to policy makers to record, document, and discuss their life as they see and capture it through images (Wang and Burris 1997).

Besides written and spoken resources, visual information is also an important component in the process of information sharing between the researcher and the participant (Given et al. 2011). Photos taken by research participants provide visual information from the participants' perspectives, facilitate their self-expression, and offer a basis for discussion (Wang and Burris 1997). Importantly, photos may provide a

bridge linking researchers and participants, where communication, especially involving emotions, may be inhibited by cultural norms or language inadequacies. Visual methods including participatory photography have been recently utilized in studying human information behavior but such studies are still scarce.

Previous research in the information behavior field has employed photovoice as a data gathering method that can capture rich details of participant expression (Julien et al. 2013). However, there is limited research concerning immigrants' information behavior using visual methods (Hicks and Lloyd (2018); Pollak (2017)), particularly in the Australian context (Khoir et al. 2015). Corresponding with Prosser and Loxley's (2008) and Hartel and Thomson (2011) epistemological approach as "positivist-interpretivist continuum", the paper presents a methodological discussion drawing upon the study of Asian immigrants in South Australia, reflecting of photovoice use within the context of immigrants' settlement. It explores how a photo can provide a voice to a participant's experience and open a dialogue between researchers and participants, providing a rich contextual narrative by overcoming barriers of verbal expression. The paper seeks to answer the research question: How can photos capture immigrants' information needs? The study contributes to the value enrichment and more nuanced understanding of using photos as data within an information behavior study, particularly when dealing with people from non-English speaking backgrounds. The deepening and enhancing of perspective that comes from the use of photos taken by participants, which are then discussed in depth with the researcher, allows the complexities of information needs to be revealed.

2 Study Context and Procedure

The study was conducted in Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. The South Australia population is 1,716,966, with one-third of these being immigrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). Despite the fact that the number of immigrants continues to grow, more research is needed concerning immigrants' information behavior in the Australian context (Khoir et al. 2015). The 2016 census shows that India, China, Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia have become the top five Asian countries contributing to immigration in Australia. A total of 35 participants living in Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia (average length of stay was 7 months), were recruited to participate in the study. They comprised: eight Indians, 15 Chinese, five Vietnamese, four Filipinos, and three Malaysians, reflecting the distribution (Creswell 2009) of the total immigrant population of each country of origin.

The original use of photovoice by Wang and Burris (1994) employed a camera provided by the researcher. From the research viewpoint, "cameras are powerful data-gathering tools for complex or busy research environments in which the fieldworker is not able to observe everything of relevance in a limited timeframe" (Hartel and Thomson 2011, p. 2221). In this study, all participants chose to use their own mobile phones with camera features, smartphones now being an everyday aspect of their lives. In the initial meeting, either face-to-face or by phone, the researcher clearly explained the procedure of picture taking. The participants were asked to provide at least five photos taken over a period of five to seven days with their own mobile phones based on

the research guidelines provided. They were asked to capture facts, barriers, opportunities and any interesting things related to their experience when dealing with information during their settlement process. The photovoice guidelines used simple accessible language to ensure all participants from any background could understand what to do. The participants could also provide existing photos from their phone storage as long as they were related to the study themes. In total, 258 photos were collected, which were then discussed in the follow-up interview sessions with individuals. Interviews were between 40 and 60 min in length, conducted in English, and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The photovoice data was analysed using a participatory analysis approach, including the process of selecting, contextualizing and codifying (Wang and Burris 1997) resulting in several themes. Codifying one photo into the appropriate theme is a challenge as one photo may contain several topics worthy of discussion.

3 Findings and Discussions

3.1 Benefits of the Photovoice Approach: Underrepresented Communities and Their Information Behavior

Photovoice had advantages in reaching underrepresented communities, including migrants, marginalized social groups, children (Cox and Benson 2017) and refugees (Hicks and Lloyd 2018) related to their information behavior. For example, using photovoice, Hicks and Lloyd (2018) recently conducted a study to confirm that visual methods can be an entry point to study information behavior, focusing on information needs, literacies and the learning practices of refugee youth. The result demonstrated that visual methods can be “a useful way to mediate a more equitable and detailed exploration of information experiences” (p. 7). Another recent study discussing the effectiveness of photovoice, Shankar et al. (2018) explored embodied mobile information practices through photos. Involving nineteen smartphone users, they used 234 photo diary entries to understand how smartphones could facilitate information seeking process. They stated that mobile devices are considered as important as extensions of the mind and body embedded in “bodily rhythms and routines”.

In relation to the Asian immigrants who participated in our study by using their own smartphones to capture photos, photovoice was very effective because it passed some degree of control to the participants even as it enabled the researchers to address their aims. It elicited information and data that would not be available from the sole application of either a survey or an interview. The great strength of this technique is that it empowered participants to select criteria to discuss and then allowed them to direct the interview. Photovoice prioritized the participants’ concerns and enabled them to express and led the story that they would like to share. It was found that our participants felt comfortable to tell the story through photos and expressed their unmet concerns in Australia. We found that, photovoice techniques, where participants themselves take photos and then use them as a trigger of an interview, involved a sustained engagement between the researchers and participants to create a relatively natural conversation through pictures. The engagement was also shown in Gomez’s

(2016) study of information behavior of undocumented Latino immigrants in the USA and Colombia using Fotohistorias which combined participatory photography and in-person interviews.

3.2 Ethical Considerations of Using Photovoice

As the research involved images, it is necessary to consider several important aspects of research ethics. Within the ethics principles dealing with vulnerable group (Hugman et al. 2011), it should be clearly stated to the participants that all photos would be treated confidentially and used only for research purposes, ensuring the participants understood when they submitted photos with people's identifiable faces. Asking permission from people before taking photos and being aware of the sign prohibiting the taking of photos were also important to note. Participants understood that all faces were blurred in the reports to respect people's privacy. An explanation on "safety first" was also crucial, including no trespassing, not going to unsafe places and not taking photos of criminal activities, sensitive, or embarrassing situations.

3.3 Overcoming Language Barriers

Undertaking an interview in a non-native language might be a challenge for some people. Translators could be employed in such situations; however, English was used as the communication language in this study considering that around 80% of the participants considered their English skills to be good or excellent. Compared to other research methods, using photovoice allowed both interviewee and interviewer to settle into a conversation, akin to a semi-directed interview, based on photos taken by the interviewee. The photos helped to stimulate their stories and made the discussion easier. Photography offers a shared platform to communicate together when English is not the first language. Photographs are a way to communicate without relying solely on words, as also in line with previous studies (Brigham et al. (2018); Hicks and Lloyd (2018)). Photovoice is a suitable method when the researcher and the participant do not share a common language (Pollak 2017).

3.4 Access to Participants' Priorities and the Inclusion of Emotion

Photovoice discloses participants' views of their personal stories and allows researchers to understand the issues around which participants feel strong emotion (Julien et al. 2013). This is enhanced when the researcher is able to establish a relaxed communication with participants. For instance, Megan, a participant from China, showed a photo of her much loved cat and talked about how she had desperately searched on the Internet about cancer in cats following the veterinarian's diagnosis. She also spoke with her friends about the treatment. She was crying when she told the story thinking about the death of her cat and expressed her feeling of loss. This gives a real insight into how information behavior and emotions were interwoven and how people prioritized situations that were meaningful to them.

For vulnerable groups like immigrants and refugees, photovoice constitutes "a way to allow participants to exercise agency over what parts of their life they choose to

show and how they choose to frame their experiences” (Lambert 2014, p. 47). In a study by Brighama et al. (2018), young refugee and immigrant women’s migration towards their learning experiences in Atlantic Canada was discussed by using a transnational feminist framework. Using photography over a period of two years, they focused on formal and informal learning experiences; relationships and journeys of migration, which explained how emotion was involved in the journey and integration process. Photovoice “can involve reflecting upon inner reverie, or dialogue, the experience of fleeting emotions, and very visceral embodied emotions” that can be stimulated through such photo discussion (Pink et al. 2011, p. 16). A similar idea, discussed recently by Thomson (2018), is the guided tour applied as one research technique. While photovoice uses photos to stimulate discussions, the guided tour relies upon “the tangible parts of a physical setting as entry points for exploring the different dimension of a given phenomenon” (p. 516).

3.5 The Need for Interpretation

Photovoice involves interpretive touches and requires carefully and sympathetically listening to participants’ perspectives and understanding the context of their images. “A key issue is how far participants are involved in offering interpretations of the images they create” (Cox and Benson 2017, p. 14). This means that the process of analysis relied on participants’ interpretations of the discussed photos, without eliminating the essence of the original story. Immigrants’ everyday lives are complex, as are their perspectives, and the researcher needs to embrace the narratives of the participants into the findings. For example, our participant Franklin showed a photo of his graduation. What he wanted to express was not his delightful accomplishment of a degree, but his hope for securing a job. He spoke of the anxiety he felt in finding a good job to support his family. We note that photovoice enables researchers to see a phenomenon from the participants’ point of view, addressing their assessment of their needs through photos, affirming the creativity of underexplored community groups, and supporting the sampling from different social and behavioral settings (Wang and Burrell 1997).

4 Conclusion

As part of the visual method, photovoice becomes a means to study information behavior. The results show how photos could provide insights into participants’ perspectives and facilitate an analytic discussion about their life experiences. Photovoice is considered to be a useful method for studying vulnerable or disadvantaged populations, such as immigrants, particularly when there are language barriers between the researcher and the participants. The technique can enable the exploration of ideas, thoughts and emotions that cannot be easily gained from traditional methods. This permits the development of a more nuanced picture of the experience of immigrants. Associated ethical concerns should also be noted.

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