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When participation meets protection: The generative failure of a photovoice with trans youth in care

Cuando la participación enfrenta la protección: el fracaso generativo de un proyecto de fotovoz con jóvenes trans en sistemas de acogida

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Abstract
This article examines the "generative failure" of a "Photovoice" project conducted with transgender youth in Quebec's child protection system—the first study of its kind in this context. Although initially designed as a six-phase participatory action research model, the project had to be reoriented toward individual qualitative interviews and photo elicitation due to significant institutional, technical, and ethical barriers. Drawing on trans-affirmative and anti-oppressive frameworks, the study analyzes four key challenges: i) structural barriers to recruitment and access caused by institutional control; ii) tensions related to the use of mobile devices in controlled, highly surveilled spaces; iii) the impact of digital exclusion and isolation on participants' autonomy; and iv) emerging ethical dilemmas regarding the use of smartphones as compensation versus coercive incentives. The findings highlight a fundamental conflict between the emancipatory goals of Photovoice and the coercive and protective logic of child welfare institutions. The study concludes with practical recommendations for researchers and professionals.

Keywords: child welfare, digital exclusion, Participatory-Action Research, photovoice, trans-affirmative research

Resumen
Este artículo examina el «fracaso generativo» de un proyecto de «photovoice» llevado a cabo con jóvenes trans en el sistema de protección de la infancia de Quebec, el primer estudio de este tipo en este contexto. Aunque inicialmente se diseñó como un modelo de investigación-acción participativa en seis fases, el proyecto debió ser reorientado a entrevistas cualitativas individuales y la elicitación fotográfica debido a profundas barreras institucionales, técnicas y éticas. Con base en marcos transafirmativos y antiopresivos, se analiza cuatro retos fundamentales: i) los obstáculos estructurales para el reclutamiento y el acceso causados por el control institucional; ii) las tensiones relacionadas con el uso de dispositivos móviles en espacios controlados y de alta vigilancia; iii) el impacto de la exclusión digital y el aislamiento en la autonomía de los participantes; y iv) los dilemas éticos emergentes sobre el uso de los teléfonos inteligentes como compensación frente a incentivos coercitivos. Los resultados ponen de relieve un conflicto fundamental entre los objetivos emancipadores de photovoice y la lógica coercitiva y protectora de las instituciones de bienestar infantil. Se concluye con recomendaciones prácticas para investigadores y profesionales.

Palabras clave: bienestar infantil, exclusión digital, fotovoz, investigación-acción participativa, investigación Trans afirmativa

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Photovoice is a participatory action research method that entrusts cameras to people so they may act as recorders and potential catalysts for change in their own communities (Seitz & Orsini, 2022). Grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and documentary photography, photovoice seeks to shift the power of representation from the researcher to the community (Wang & Burris, 1997). In social work, this methodology is deeply aligned with the values of social justice and empowerment, providing a platform to center the voices of marginalized groups (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019).

However, implementing participatory methods within highly restrictive environments, such as child protection residential centers, reveals a fundamental tension between the researcher's goal of participation and the institution's mandate of protection. This article reflects on a four-year study conducted in Québec -the first of its kind- focusing on trans youth placed in out-of-home care. These youth belong to one of the most marginalized and underrepresented populations in the Québec child welfare system. Our primary objective was to examine how institutional practices impact the safety, development, and resilience of these youth, focusing on both supportive and harmful experiences from their own perspectives. Ultimately, we aimed to engage them in building a body of knowledge to inform systemic changes that respect their needs, well-being, and rights as trans youth in care.

The justification for choosing photovoice was rooted in our commitment to an anti-oppressive standpoint (Caron et al., 2020; Chibaya et al., 2025). We sought to avoid the risks of "forced telling" (Skeggs, 2004) -where participants feel pressured to narrate trauma for the researcher’s benefit- by facilitating a voluntary, participant-led storytelling process. In the context of group homes and rehabilitation centers, photovoice was envisioned as a tool of resistance to "reverse the rules of surveillance," (Jarldorn, 2016) allowing youth to reclaim agency and "return the gaze" of the institution. Furthermore, recent international research has confirmed that photovoice is particularly well-suited for adolescents in institutional care, as it helps them express feelings about complex socio-spatial environments (Nolbeck et al, 2020).

However, it is essential to clarify from the outset that this project could not be fully completed according to its original six-step design. Initiated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project faced profound challenges. Rather than viewing this as a simple methodological hurdle, we adopt a lens of "generative failure". We posit that a generative failure occurs when the breakdown of a participatory design reveals the structural conditions that make participation partial or impossible. By critically analyzing the institutional, technical, and ethical barriers that forced the project to pivot from a collective photovoice to traditional qualitative interviews, we offer unique insights into the structural limits of participatory methods in closed settings (Ponic & Jategaonkar, 2012; Packard, 2008). Accordingly, the objective of this article is to examine how the incomplete implementation of a photovoice project with trans youth in care reveals the institutional, digital, and ethical conditions that shape the possibilities and limits of participation in restrictive child welfare settings.

Trans youth in care

The term trans youth refers to minors whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth (i.e., non-cisgender youth). It is used as an umbrella concept encompassing a range of non-cisgender identities, including trans, non-binary, gender-fluid, and questioning youth. The focus on trans youth in care is necessitated by their significant overrepresentation and intersectional marginalization within the child welfare system (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2014). These youth often experience minority stress, exacerbated by institutional practices such as misgendering, pathologization, or the loss of identity-affirming connections (Walker, 2021).

The substantive findings from this project have been reported elsewhere (Robichaud et al., 2026). They show that trans and non-binary youth in care navigate residential environments shaped by binary gender arrangements, placement instability, misgendering, uneven access to gender-affirming support, and limited knowledge of their rights. Participants also emphasized the importance of supportive care workers and affirming relational practices. These findings document the *in-situ* experiences of trans

youth in care and highlight the structural and relational conditions that shape their safety, autonomy, and well-being within child welfare settings.

Building on these findings, this article shifts the analytical focus from youths' lived experiences to the methodological conditions that shaped the research process itself. Specifically, it asks what the incomplete implementation of a photovoice design reveals about the institutional, digital, and ethical conditions that make participation possible, partial, or impossible in restrictive child welfare settings.

Method

Research positionality

Grounded in an anti-oppressive standpoint, our research team comprised cisgender, transgender, and non-binary members with professional backgrounds in social work and sociology. This composition allowed for a dynamic "insider/outsider" perspective, which was essential for building trust with participants and navigating the cissexist and heteronormative structures of the child welfare system (Klein et al., 2015). We recognized that our own identities and academic positions influenced the power dynamics within the research, and we sought to actively minimize these imbalances through a collaborative and reflexive approach (Caron et al., 2020; Chibaya et al., 2025).

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework

We adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework using photovoice methodology, as developed by Wang and Burris (1997). Photovoice was chosen specifically because it centers the expertise of those most impacted by systemic inequities -in this case, trans youth in care- shifting the power of knowledge production from researchers to the youth themselves (Skeggs, 2004). By providing cameras and facilitating critical dialogue, the method was intended to help youth document their lived experiences while avoiding the "forced telling" of trauma common in traditional qualitative methods (Skeggs, 2004; Willett et al., 2021). Furthermore, photovoice offered a unique tool for youth to "reverse the rules of surveillance" and express their views on their restrictive socio-spatial environments (Jarldorn, 2016; Mountz et al., 2018).

Intended research design: the Six-Steps

We developed a photovoice project tailored to the realities of trans youth who were currently or recently placed in child protection settings, while simultaneously dealing with public health restrictions imposed in foster care settings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Inclusion criteria were: (i) being between 14 and 21 years old; (ii) self-identifying as trans, non-binary, gender-fluid, gender creative, questioning, or otherwise non-cisgender; and (iii) being currently placed in a child protection setting in Québec or having exited care within the past two years, provided that the youth had been subject to a placement measure of 30 days or more. Eligible care settings included foster homes, intermediate resources, group homes, and rehabilitation centers. No additional exclusion criteria were applied beyond not meeting these inclusion criteria. The study initially aimed to recruit ten participants. This target was intended to support both individual engagement and the collective stages of the photovoice process.

The project was originally structured around a sequential six-step design intended to move from individual reflection to collective social action:

1. Preparatory Meeting: An orientation to the project, emphasizing ethics, camera safety, and power dynamics (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001);
2. Semi-Directed Interview: A guided conversation to establish rapport and collect baseline qualitative data;
3. Photovoice Phase: A 14-day period where youth used provided smartphones to document their daily lives based on prompts regarding safety and resilience;
4. Focus Groups: Collective discussions with trans youth who had completed their photovoice, to analyze photos (data) and identify common themes;
5. Digital Exhibition: A public presentation curated by the youth to showcase their work;

6. Knowledge Exchange Forum (KEF): A final stage bringing together youth, researchers, and policymakers to discuss findings and advocate for systemic change.

Ethics, recruitment, and access

Ethics approval was secured from two universities and six regional child protection agencies in Québec. Recruitment was conducted through a multi-channel approach, including social media (Facebook and Instagram) and direct outreach within institutional channels. To reach trans youth across various care settings, we implemented outreach strategies targeting research agents, service managers, and residential care teams. Once ethics approval was obtained, recruitment flyers, and information sheets were circulated through institutional communication channels, including email chains, internal newsletters, and service managers. We also offered to present the project directly to frontline staff and residential care teams; however, access to these teams depended on institutional approval and local service availability. As a result, the research team had limited control over how, when, and to whom information about the study was ultimately transmitted.

Although the initial photovoice design aimed to recruit ten trans or non-binary youth in care, the implementation of the project was substantially limited. In total, three youth participated in the initial orientation session and guided interview before the original photovoice design was discontinued. Participants were between 14 and 16 years old and self-identified as trans or non-binary. They were all currently placed in child protection settings in Québec, including group homes and rehabilitation centers. No focus group, digital exhibition, or knowledge exchange forum could be completed.

Consistent with photovoice ethics, smartphones were provided to the three participants who did not have other means to participate in the project. The phones served both as research tools and as a form of ethical compensation for their time and labour. Smartphones were necessary to allow participants to take photographs, record voice memos, communicate with the research team, and transfer their materials independently. Because access to digital devices is often restricted in child protection settings, we paid particular attention to ensuring that the provision of smartphones did not compromise the voluntary nature of participation. As discussed in the Results section, this decision raised important ethical questions about the line between enabling participation and creating a potentially coercive incentive in a context of digital deprivation.

Scope of the analysis

The substantive findings from the individual interviews and photo-elicitation sessions conducted as part of this project are reported elsewhere (Robichaud et al., 2026). The present article has a different analytical focus. Rather than reanalyzing the content of participants' narratives, it examines the methodological conditions that prevented the original photovoice design from being completed.

Accordingly, the empirical material analyzed here consists primarily of documented recruitment efforts, ethics and access procedures, field notes, team reflections, interactions with institutional actors, participant encounters, and implementation challenges related to the use of smartphones, digital access, placement instability, and the impossibility of completing the collective stages of the project. We treat these materials not as peripheral to the study, but as central to understanding how participatory research unfolds in restrictive child welfare settings. The analysis was conducted reflexively by the research team through iterative discussions of the documented barriers encountered during recruitment, implementation, and follow-up. This process was not intended to produce a thematic analysis of participants' lived experiences, which has been reported elsewhere, but rather to identify recurring methodological patterns across the recruitment, implementation, and follow-up phases of the project.

Because the photographs were produced for a collective virtual exhibition that could not be completed, and because we were unable to revalidate their meaning and use with participants afterward, we chose not to reproduce or interpret them in this article. This decision reflects our commitment to ensuring that participants -not researchers alone- shape how their images are contextualized and disseminated.

The methodological pivot: from collective to individual

The generative failure of the project began at the recruitment and implementation phases. Over a two-year period, only three participants were recruited. By the time a new participant entered the project, previous ones had often been moved to another placement facility or had exited the care system, making follow-up impossible. Even when participants had completed the individual photovoice phase, it became difficult to maintain contact with them over time because of placement changes, loss of contact, and transitions out of care. Recruitment delays, digital isolation, and placement instability therefore prevented the collective stages of the photovoice process from being completed in a timely and ethically sound manner. Without the possibility of maintaining contact with participants and bringing them together for focus groups, the subsequent stages of the project, including the digital exhibition and knowledge exchange forum, could not be implemented.

As a result, the project could not proceed as a full six-step photovoice design and was transformed into a qualitative interview-based study, preserving only the first two planned stages: the preparatory meeting and the semi-directed interview. Rather than treating this pivot as a simple methodological limitation, we analyzed the barriers encountered as findings in themselves, documenting the structural conditions that made participation partial or impossible for trans youth in care. Because research findings that diverge from initial objectives are often overlooked -and because we believe it is essential to bring greater nuance to the advantages and limits of photovoice- the following section presents four key challenges that emerged from this process and highlights their implications for future applications of photovoice in restrictive settings.

Results

The following section presents four methodological barriers that we analyzed as process-based findings that reveal how institutional, digital, and ethical constraints shaped the possibilities and limits of participation for trans youth in care in Québec.

Digital isolation as a structural barrier

A critical finding was the profound degree of digital isolation experienced by trans youth in care. Although we adopted a dual recruitment strategy -through social media and institutional channels- the social media strategy yielded no participants. To understand this outcome, we turned to the insights of our participants and community partners. They pointed to the extent of social and digital isolation experienced by youth in care. In many residential settings -particularly rehabilitation centers- access to digital devices such as cell phones, tablets, and computers is tightly controlled, restricted, or outright prohibited. When youth are permitted to use these devices, they must often do so in communal spaces (e.g., the unit's living room) and under supervision, with staff entitled to monitor their activity. Understandably, exploring sensitive topics such as gender identity and expression in such settings is fraught with risk. The lack of privacy exposes youth to potential judgment, intimidation, or even violence from peers or staff. In this context, trans youth in care are unlikely to "stumble upon" a recruitment flyer on social media.

For the participants that were recruited, they often lacked basic digital literacy and faced structural barriers such as limited or no access to Wi-Fi, restricted use of social media, and a lack of private digital spaces. What began as a logistical adjustment -providing mobile data to participants due to the lack of Wi-Fi in many care units- quickly revealed a deeper, structural issue: the digital and social isolation of trans youth in care. Early in the project, both staff and participants informed us that internet access was either unavailable or highly restricted in their living environments. To ensure participants could receive training, communicate with the research team, and upload their photovoice materials, we provided cellphones with data plans.

However, this solution brought new challenges. The participants used up their 5GB data allowances within the first 24 hours -sometimes within hours. This rapid consumption was not necessarily due to misuse, but rather to a combination of factors: curiosity, limited prior access to digital tools, and a lack

of awareness about data usage. In some cases, participants used the data for streaming or social media-activities that, while unrelated to the research, reflected their desire to connect, explore, and engage with the digital world.

On two occasions, we replenished the data, but it was quickly consumed again. This placed us in a difficult ethical position. On the one hand, we were committed to respecting participants' autonomy and their right to use the phones as they saw fit. On the other hand, without data, they were unable to complete their photovoice or share their materials -compromising their ability to participate meaningfully. Replenishing data for all participants was not financially sustainable, and doing so selectively risked creating inequities or perceptions of favoritism. Compounding this issue was the discovery that many participants lacked basic digital literacy. During the initial preparatory sessions, youths needed support with fundamental tasks such as using the camera, navigating apps, or uploading files. While digital fluency is often assumed among teenagers, our experience showed that this assumption does not hold for youth in care. Their limited and often supervised access to technology had left them unfamiliar with tools that are otherwise considered commonplace.

This situation exposed a structural dilemma. In care settings where digital access is restricted or monitored, simply providing a cellphone with data is not enough. It also requires sustained digital coaching and infrastructure support -needs that exceeded the original scope of our research team. We fully recognize that for a teenager in foster care, accessing the internet may serve more urgent personal needs than uploading research materials. Still, the degree of digital and social exclusion we observed was striking and concerning and should be accounted for when thinking about conducting a photovoice. This finding has broader implications. It challenges researchers to avoid assumptions about digital access and fluency among marginalized youth. It also calls for systemic interventions in care environments to address digital exclusion -not only to support research participation, but to promote equity, autonomy, and connection in young people's everyday lives. Finally, it raises important considerations for future projects that rely on mobile technology or social media for recruitment and data collection: access to devices must be accompanied by access to infrastructure, training, and support.

Institutional gatekeeping and recruitment bottlenecks

The recruitment phase highlighted a significant "bottleneck" within institutional channels. Despite extensive outreach strategies, we received fewer than five inquiries from potential participants over a two-year period. While this low response rate could be attributed to the small number of trans youths in care, existing research suggests otherwise. Studies have shown an overrepresentation of trans youth among those aging out of care in Québec (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2023), and practitioners reported a growing presence of trans youth in the care system. The limited number of inquiries therefore cannot be explained solely by population size.

Faced with the context of digital isolation, we were forced to rely almost entirely dependent on care workers to reach the target population. We met with numerous managers who expressed interest in the project and committed to promoting it within their teams. However, none accepted our offer to present the project directly to frontline staff. As a result, we had no way of verifying whether information about the study was effectively communicated to care workers across the hundreds of sites where trans youth might reside. The multiple layers of communication created a bottleneck that may have prevented both care workers and youth from ever learning about the project.

The decision to provide smartphones also shaped how the project was received within institutional settings. Although we cannot determine how the study was discussed within each team, conversations with institutional informants suggest that introducing smartphones was not perceived as a neutral methodological choice. In many care settings, mobile devices were already embedded in rules concerning safety, supervision, and behavioural regulation. The phones provided for the study were therefore not only research tools; they also raised concerns about internet access, unsupervised communication, and the potential disruption of existing rules governing digital device use.

This context may have influenced the dissemination of the project through institutional channels. While we cannot conclude that care teams explicitly resisted disseminating the project because it involved smartphones, the broader institutional unease surrounding digital access likely contributed to the cautious, filtered, and uneven circulation of the study within care settings. This unease became part of the recruitment bottleneck analyzed in this article. Institutional recruitment also meant that the responsibility of introducing the project to trans youth fell to care workers -individuals who may not have felt adequately informed or confident to do so. Moreover, their positionality introduced a potential conflict of interest. As anti-oppressive researchers, we were acutely aware of the risk that care workers might selectively inform only certain youth -those perceived as well-behaved or as having a "good" gender transition- while excluding others who had not yet disclosed their gender identity or were unable to do so due to environmental constraints.

This selection bias has been discussed in the literature (Mountz et al., 2018), but in our context, it was compounded by the power imbalance between care workers and youth, and by the social isolation inherent to the care system. Recruitment is a foundational component of any photovoice project, and in our case, it significantly limited the method's potential. The combined effects of digital and social isolation, restricted access to participants, and structural barriers within the care system underscore the need for more transparent and detailed reporting on recruitment strategies in photovoice research. Doing so can help future researchers avoid the pitfalls of low recruitment and better adapt their methods to the realities of marginalized populations.

The smartphone: ethical compensation versus coercive incentive

Identifying the right device for participants to capture and share their photos and voice memos was one of the most complex challenges of the project. Ethically, it was essential to provide participants with tools that would allow them to produce high-quality content while maintaining their autonomy and privacy. Since the final goal was to present their work in a digital exhibition, the images needed to meet certain technical standards. Additionally, participants had to be able to record voice memos to contextualize their photos -an integral part of the photovoice methodology.

Equally important was the need for a secure and private way to transfer the material. The project was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic and involved youth across six regions, making in-person data collection impossible. Moreover, to respect participants' autonomy, we wanted to avoid requiring them to rely on care workers or institutional staff to submit their work. For example, mailing printed photos would have required access to a post office -often only possible with adult assistance- potentially compromising confidentiality and creating a sense of surveillance or judgment.

We identified three essential criteria for the device: 1) High-quality photo capture suitable for digital exhibition; 2) Voice recording capability to allow participants to narrate the context of their images; 3) Secure and independent data transfer, without requiring institutional mediation. Few devices met all three requirements. Disposable cameras were quickly ruled out: they didn't allow participants to review, edit, or delete photos, nor to record voice memos or transfer files digitally. Digital cameras addressed the first two needs -photo quality and autonomy in image capture- but lacked a simple, private way to share content with the research team.

Cellphones emerged as the only device capable of fulfilling all three functions. They offered: 1) High-resolution cameras suitable for exhibition; 2) Built-in voice recording and communication apps; 3) Internet access for secure file transfer and access to community resources. However, this solution came with its own set of challenges. First, the cost of purchasing and distributing phones was significant. Second, there were concerns about potential misuse and safety concerns -such as accessing inappropriate content, using it in prohibited times or communicating with unsafe individuals. Finally, we knew that many participants did not own a cellphone, or had one that was broken, outdated, or lacked a functioning camera. Despite these limitations, cellphones represented the most viable option. They allowed participants to engage with the project on their own terms, in their own time, and without institutional oversight -an essential condition for fostering trust, creativity, and a sense of ownership over their narratives.

Compensation versus incentive

Given that cellphones are costly and often considered luxury items -particularly for youth in care- their perceived value quickly became a central ethical concern. We were fortunate to have the budget to purchase phones for up to ten participants, which aligned with our recruitment target. Had more youth expressed interest, we could have extended this provision. However, Research Ethics Boards (REBs) raised concerns about the potential for undue influence: would the offer of a free phone pressure youth into participating? What if some youth joined the project solely to receive a phone? What if someone wanted to withdraw but felt obligated to continue in order to keep it? What if a phone was lost, damaged, or not returned? These concerns required careful ethical consideration.

To address them, we chose to offer the phones unconditionally. By framing them as gifts rather than incentives, we ensured that participation remained voluntary and that youth could withdraw at any time without consequence. This approach reduced the risk of coercion and reinforced our commitment to trust and respect. We also challenged the paternalistic assumption that youth would participate only for material gain. While we acknowledged the possibility that some might be motivated by the phone, we accepted this risk as consistent with our values. In our view, assuming that youth lack genuine interest in research unless incentivized undermines their agency and capacity for engagement.

Once participants gave informed consent, they received a brand-new phone to use for the project. Although we cannot generalize from our small sample, it is notable that only one participant withdrew after receiving a phone. We do not know the reason for this withdrawal and therefore refrain from speculation. However, our experience cannot suggest that the phones were the primary motivation for participation. In the context of a low-risk research project like ours, we argue that providing phones as compensation is appropriate. These devices were not offered in exchange for high-risk disclosures or participation in potentially harmful activities. Rather, they were essential tools for enabling participation in a photovoice project. Without them, youth could not create or share or exhibit their photovoice. In this sense, the phones were not rewards- they were necessary instruments for meaningful engagement in research.

Navigating the tensions between autonomy and control

As previously discussed, in many care and rehabilitation settings, the use of digital devices is highly regulated. Youth are often required to use phones or tablets in shared spaces, under supervision, and with limited access. These conditions can significantly constrain privacy -particularly when engaging with sensitive topics such as one's gender identity and expression. Being compelled to explore such themes in public or semi-public environments may expose youth to judgment, stigma, or even harm from peers or staff.

Although our protocol received approval from multiple Research Ethics Boards (REBs), new challenges emerged once participants began using their phones. One youth reported that their device was confiscated by a care worker for using it outside of authorized hours. Another participant was restricted to just 30 minutes of phone use per week -a limitation that not only made it difficult to complete the project but also led to conflict with their care worker. The youth challenged this restriction, which resulted in disciplinary consequences and further strained their relationship with staff- highlighting how institutional power dynamics can be exacerbated when youth assert their autonomy within care environments. During preparatory meetings, we clearly communicated that the research team had no authority over institutional rules and could not intervene in such matters. Still, we remain concerned that by providing phones, we may have inadvertently created tensions between youth and care staff, and more broadly, within institutional settings. While mobile phones were the most appropriate tool for this project, their use in care environments raised broader ethical questions about the researcher's responsibility to anticipate and mitigate risks that extend beyond the immediate scope of the research.

We strongly affirm the autonomy and self-determination of minors, and the photovoice method was intentionally selected to support their agency. However, in contexts where youth are particularly vulnerable- such as group homes and rehabilitation centers -other priorities, including protection and institutional control, must also be considered. In some cases, safeguarding participants may involve

addressing risks not directly tied to the research itself, such as exposure to harmful online content or unsafe interactions. From an action research perspective, the decision to provide phones was justified. Yet we recognize that without adequate support from a trusted ally or care worker -particularly in helping youth navigate digital tools and online safety- these devices may also introduce new vulnerabilities. Ensuring that such support structures are in place is essential to ethically balancing autonomy and protection in research involving minors in care.

Impact of placement instability on long-term participation

Finally, the inherent instability of the child protection system proved incompatible with the sequential, long-term nature of the original six-step photovoice design. Frequent changes in placements and the resulting social disruption made it impossible to facilitate the collective phases of the project. This instability forced a methodological pivot from a collective action research model to individual qualitative interviews and photo-elicitation sessions. While we chose not to use the photographs for a public exhibition due to these barriers, the individual material collected offered a rich, nuanced understanding of how trans youth navigate these restrictive socio-spatial environments. Results can be found elsewhere (Robichaud et al., 2026).

Discussion

This project set out to explore the lived experiences of trans youth in care through a photovoice methodology. While the method is designed to foster autonomy, creativity, and critical reflection (Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997), its implementation in a highly regulated and protective environment revealed a series of ethical and logistical tensions. The generative failure of this project suggests that the traditional photovoice model - premised on high degrees of participant autonomy and public social action- is in direct conflict with the protective and coercitive logic of the child welfare system, highlighting the complexity of conducting participatory research with marginalized youth in restrictive settings.

We use “generative failure” as an analytical proposition developed from this research process, rather than as a pre-existing methodological category. The term refers to a situation in which a research design cannot be implemented as intended, yet the reasons for this breakdown produce critical knowledge about the field under study. In the present case, the impossibility of completing the collective stages of photovoice did not simply reflect recruitment difficulties or logistical constraints. It revealed how institutional gatekeeping, placement instability, digital exclusion, and protective surveillance shape the very conditions under which trans youth in care can -or cannot- participate in research. Our study shows that the breakdown of a participatory design can become a methodological finding in itself. The failure to complete the full photovoice process exposed the mismatch between methods premised on autonomy, collective dialogue, and public action, and institutional environments structured by protection, surveillance, and control. Generative failure, in this sense, invites researchers not only to report what did not work, but to analyze what such breakdowns reveal about power, access, and the conditions of participation.

In order to protect youth from potentially harmful environments (sometimes involving criminal activities), foster care often must create a “protective environment” by restricting youth’s liberties and contact with the outside world. While some measures can be justified by the need to protect young people from the environment they lived in, it causes serious challenges when trying to conduct empowering and emancipating research methods. Once in the hands of participants, the phones became sites of tension between the project’s emancipatory goals and the institutional rules governing youth in care. In several cases, participants faced restrictions or sanctions for using their phones outside of permitted times or spaces. These incidents revealed how institutional control can undermine the autonomy that participatory methods seek to promote. As Prins (2010) observed in a rural literacy project, community suspicion and institutional norms can significantly shape how visual tools are used—or suppressed. While we clearly communicated that the research team had no authority over unit rules, the reality remained that participants’ ability to engage with the project was shaped—and sometimes constrained—by the policies of their living environments. This raises important questions about the role

of researchers in anticipating and mitigating institutional barriers that fall outside the formal scope of the study but directly impact participation.

While photovoice is intended to “reverse the rules of surveillance” (Jarldorn, 2016), our results show that in group homes, the introduction of a smartphone often exacerbated institutional control rather than subverting it. Our findings align with literature on “total institutions” where surveillance is used to enforce normalization (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019; Jarldorn, 2016). Practitioners must recognize that for trans youth, the act of “being seen” is a double-edged sword (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2015). Research in these spaces must provide "safe enclaves" where youth can explore identity-affirming themes without the risk of their tools being confiscated as a form of behavioral discipline.

The principle of equitable access to research, as emphasized by Bauer et al. (2019) and the International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children, was significantly compromised in our study due to structural and contextual barriers. The digital isolation experienced by youth in care -stemming from restricted access to electronic devices and limited digital literacy- prevented many from encountering our recruitment materials shared via social media. The institutional recruitment process, which required us to go through care workers, introduced a layer of gatekeeping. Care workers who were informed and interested in the research project, held the discretion to share -or withhold- information about the study, potentially limiting outreach to youth they perceived as “appropriate” participants. This likely excluded youth who had not disclosed their gender identity, often for safety reasons, or who were not perceived as conforming to normative expectations of gender transition. As Bauer et al. (2019) argue, researchers must actively consider methods to reach those who are isolated or disconnected from community networks. Furthermore, the power imbalance between care workers and youth may have compromised the voluntariness of consent, particularly in a context where research is unfamiliar and where youth may feel compelled to comply with adult authority.

The barriers we encountered were not merely "logistical"; they were manifestations of minority stress (Kelleher, 2009). When care workers act as gatekeepers, they might perform "selective recruitment" based on a youth's conformity to a "good gender transition". This forces a "burden of representation" on the youth, who may feel they must perform a palatable version of their identity to remain in the study (Klein et al., 2015). These barriers underscore the need to challenge barriers rooted in discrimination and to ensure that the benefits and burdens of research participation are distributed fairly (International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children (ICERIC), 2013). Future research must prioritize trusted relationships -for example, through trusted care workers or adults- and develop outreach strategies that are sensitive to the realities of youth who are marginalized not only by their gender identity but also by their placement within the child welfare system.

Digital and social isolation: An unexpected but critical finding

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study was the extent of digital and social isolation experienced by trans youth in care. Many participants lacked basic digital literacy and had limited or no access to Wi-Fi, social media, or online communities. This not only complicated their ability to complete the photovoice but also pointed to broader systemic issues. For trans youth, digital isolation is a structural form of oppression. Without access to digital tools and affirming spaces -whether online or in person- trans youth in care are cut off from vital sources of information, support, and identity affirmation environments. The internet is often their only link to identity affirming communities and vital peer support. This finding aligns with previous research showing that access to trans communities -both online and offline- is a key protective factor for trans and non-binary youth (Pflum et al., 2015; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018). We argue that access to digital tools should be viewed as a component of digital citizenship and a right, rather than a privilege to be revoked for youth in care.

These findings call for a reframing of recruitment strategies in participatory research with marginalized youth. Future projects must prioritize trusted relationships and develop outreach strategies that are sensitive to the realities of youth who are marginalized not only by their gender identity but also by their placement within the child welfare system. Researchers must also be transparent about the barriers to

participation and the ethical trade-offs involved in providing access to technology. Only by addressing these structural and relational dynamics can we move toward more just and inclusive research practices.

Limits

This article has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on a methodological and process-oriented corpus rather than on participant-generated empirical material. The materials analyzed include documented recruitment efforts, ethics and access procedures, field notes, team reflections, interactions with institutional actors, participant encounters, and implementation challenges. While these materials are highly relevant to the article's purpose, they do not provide the same type of empirical grounding as a full photovoice corpus composed of participant-selected photographs, collective discussions, and youth-led interpretation.

Second, the project involved a very small number of participants and was situated in a specific socio-institutional and historical context. Only three youth participated in the initial stages of the photovoice project before the original design was discontinued. The findings are therefore shaped by the realities of Québec's child protection system, by the specific institutional contexts in which recruitment took place, and by the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified access restrictions and complicated in-person engagement. As such, the analysis should not be read as generalizable to all child welfare settings or all participatory projects with trans youth in care.

Third, because of placement instability, loss of contact, and the discontinuation of the collective stages of the project, we were unable to return to participants to discuss the methodological findings presented in this article. This is a significant limitation for a study grounded in participatory ethics. We could not ask participants how they interpreted the barriers encountered, what they believed had shaped their participation, or how they understood the institutional, digital, and ethical constraints analyzed here. For this reason, the article should be understood as a reflexive analysis by the research team of the conditions that limited participation, rather than as a fully co-constructed interpretation of those conditions with youth themselves.

Rethinking participation in restrictive contexts

Despite a growing body of literature on photovoice, there remains a notable lack of clarity regarding the practical and ethical dimensions of implementing this method with marginalized populations such as trans youth in child protection care. A key contribution of this article is the conceptualization of generative failure as a methodological and analytical resource for participatory research in restrictive settings. By documenting a photovoice project that could not be completed as initially designed, we show that methodological breakdowns should not be treated only as limitations to be minimized or briefly acknowledged. When examined reflexively, they can reveal the institutional arrangements, power relations, and material conditions that shape who can participate, under what conditions, and at what cost. In this study, generative failure made visible the limits of participation for trans youth in care, particularly when research methods premised on autonomy, collective dialogue, and public action encounter systems organized around protection, surveillance, and control. This contribution invites researchers to report failed or partial participatory processes more transparently and to analyze them as important sites of methodological knowledge.

Our findings suggest that participatory research with trans youth in care must be reimagined to account for the structural constraints of institutional life. Providing access to tools is not enough; researchers must fight to defend trans youth's rights to digital citizenship, and also anticipate the need for innovative recruitment strategies, digital and security training, negotiate institutional policies, and remain attentive to the broader context in which participation occurs. Photovoice remains a powerful tool -but only when its full process can be honored. Future researchers must carefully assess whether the structural realities of their field sites allow for the sustained engagement that photovoice requires. Otherwise, they risk compromising not only the method's integrity, but also the trust and agency of the participants they seek to empower.

To move the field forward, we propose the following actionable shifts for conducting participatory research with trans youth in care:

Provide unconditional tools with proportionate support

Providing a device is insufficient if the youth lacks Wi-Fi or data, or the digital literacy needed to use it safely and autonomously. Future projects must include resources for digital coaching, data replenishment, and technical support, so that participants are not further disadvantaged by the structural conditions of digital and social isolation. Researchers should also be prepared to advocate for youth's right to digital literacy and for the importance of safe online socialization, particularly for trans youth whose access to affirming communities may depend on digital connection.

Build methodological flexibility into the research design

The inability to complete collective stages, such as focus groups or public exhibitions, should not be treated only as a methodological failure. In restrictive settings, such breakdowns can generate important knowledge about the conditions that make participation possible or impossible. Researchers should therefore prepare "pivot plans," such as individual photo-elicitation, private digital galleries, or alternative forms of participant-led dissemination, to preserve youth autonomy and support their desired forms of photovoice production.

Advocate for Policy Reform

Researchers and practitioners must challenge residential policies that use digital access as a behavioral reward or sanction. For trans youth in care, digital access should be recognized as a protection and well-being factor, not merely as a privilege to be withdrawn. Participatory action researchers must remain attentive to the ways institutional rules can restrict participants' capacity to engage fully in research and should document and challenge rights-related barriers when they undermine meaningful participation.

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CrediT

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During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used NotebookLM and ChatGPT for the purposes of language editing, structural reorganization, and the translation of specific segments from French to English. Specifically, technology was utilized to align the article with the standard IMRAD (Introduction, Methods,

Results, and Discussion) research structure. The authors declare that AI tools were used solely to enhance the clarity, flow, and formatting of the text. No original qualitative data, empirical findings, or core intellectual conclusions were generated or analyzed by Artificial Intelligence. Following the use of this technology, the authors critically reviewed, verified, and edited all content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work presented.