

Capturing Nordic Identifications through Participatory Photography

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This study explores how participatory photography can be used in researching upper secondary students' identifications with what it means to live in one of four Nordic countries. Participatory photography can be described as a way to study identities and identifications, since it allows the participants, in our case upper secondary students, to control how they portray their perceptions of who they are (Holm, Londen & Mansikka, 2015).

The aim of this study was to explore how upper secondary students in the Nordic capitals identify themselves with the Nordic region by using participatory photography. The following research question was addressed: (1) How can participatory photography as a research method be used to study upper secondary school students' identifications with the Nordic and the Nordic region? (2) What does it mean to them to live in a Nordic country?

The data analyzed consisted of 571 photographs taken during spring 2018 by a total of 104 students in the metropolitan areas in Helsinki, Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen. A majority (f=63/60.5 %) of the participants were female. Some schools were more culturally diverse than others. The students were asked to photograph, with their mobile phones, themes that they associated with the Nordic region and that in some way captured how they experienced living in a Nordic country.

The research team categorized the students' photographs according to the emerging themes, but also into informative photographs and symbolic photographs (Holm, Londen & Mansikka, 2015; Elliot, Reid & Baumfield, 2017). The analysis of the photographs and their captions showed that students associated themselves mostly in a positive way with the Nordic region, though also some critical attitudes were identified. The students perceived their privileges of living in the Nordic welfare states (such as free education, health care, social security as well as safety and equality) as one of the most important themes. The Nordic nature was another main theme. The youth culture was also a theme frequently portrayed and discussed. Other common Nordic themes were youth culture in relation to alcohol, and in contrast, healthy living (healthy food, sport, outdoor activities). The students also associated the frequent use of technology and social media in everyday life as a way of being a Nordic citizen.

Visual ethnography in education as a method enhanced the upper secondary students' way of giving meaning to what living in the Nordic countries means to them. Moreover, the method enables the students to become co-researchers together with the research team in both an aesthetic and narrative way. The study offers insights into how participatory photography can be a useful and engaging method (Holm, 2018) in both local and cross-national research. The captions pushed students to compose thoughtful photographs in order for the photographs to have an understandable meaning. In summary, this study brings forth insights into how participatory photography can serve as a useful and activating method with young people in both local and cross-national educational research.

Keywords: Participatory photography, identification, upper secondary students, Nordic region

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