

## Using Emoji in Research with Children and Young People: Because We Can?

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**Abstract.** Participatory and rights based research with children and young people emerged over the last few decades. The participatory tradition describes children as human beings with a right to participate in research on questions important to their lives. Visual methods such as drawing, mapping and photography have been adapted from positivist traditions in childhood research and from qualitative research in general. More recently, digital technology has been rapidly changing and expanding, affording a myriad of new possibilities for researchers. This paper considers the use of new technologies, specifically emoji, in conjunction with other visual methods such as video and digital interactive mapping, to improve participant engagement and interaction with the research topic in ways that are salient for children and young people.

Using three case studies, the paper reports on the theoretical development, application and experiences of researchers using these technologies as qualitative data collection methods in different contexts. We bring the studies together to suggest theoretical and practical possibilities for the use of emoji as an emerging visual method that could be used for qualitative data collection in diverse contexts. Each of the three studies obtained ethics approval from approved institutional ethics committees and relevant formal consent from all participants. The paper found that the three studies demonstrate the contribution of methodological reflexivity to ensuring that methods made possible by advances in technology add analytical substance.

Our reflections raise important points in the consideration of emoji as a fruitful methodological tool in rights based, participatory research with children. Firstly, emoji as a research tool requires little instruction or front loading prior to use with participants. This helps the emancipatory aims of qualitative research with groups whose voices are largely excluded in the creation of knowledge because the traditional use of more structured questioning (such as in questionnaires and structured interviews). Secondly, while all the emoji allowed children and young people opportunities to interpret the internal and external narratives of the symbols in a variety of ways, the increased ambiguity of the symbol resulted in a greater amount of ideas, disagreement, and negotiations generated. As the number of emoji available for use on electronic devices continues to increase, as well as the diversity of the symbols available, opportunities to use emoji as a methodological tool across a variety of research disciplines and topics will continue to expand. The use of emoji facilitated a shift in hierarchical power balances between the researcher and the young person and opened the space for young study participants to determine what was important for the researcher to know, and to enact control over their participation in the research process.

**Keywords:** interactive mapping; emoji; participatory; young people; children; qualitative methods

