

Photovoice and Augmented Reality: New Perspectives for the Self-Representation of Sexuality in Disabled Identities [†]

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Abstract

The representation of the sexuality of people with disabilities in contemporary media is often characterized by stereotypes, omissions, and heteronormative narratives that deny the complexity and richness of their emotional experiences. This essay explores the potential of photovoice-based methodology as a tool of visual empowerment to foster processes of authentic and self-aware self-representation through the immersive dynamic that this methodology can activate. Through an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that combines special pedagogy with recent research on digital media and immersive technologies, the study seeks to understand whether virtual spaces can be configured as protected environments in which people with disabilities have the opportunity to explore and communicate their sexual identity. Photovoice thus becomes a tool of narrative resistance that overcomes barriers and counters mediatized representations, often conveyed through dynamics of ableist cyberbullying and online discrimination. The contribution highlights how the combination of participatory visual storytelling and immersive environments can generate new forms of inclusive media literacy, promoting a Visual Education that recognizes and values the diversity of human experiences. Particular attention is devoted to the educational potential of these tools in the training of educators and social workers, as well as in raising awareness within the broader community. The paper proposes a theoretical and methodological framework for the implementation of visual self-representation projects capable of transforming social perceptions of disability and promoting a culture of authentic and respectful inclusion.

Keywords: Photovoice; Augmented Reality; sexual identity; disability



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1. Introduction

The sexuality of people with disabilities is a crucial issue that is often relegated to the margins of public and media discourse, where it is constantly subject to two opposing but equally problematic treatments: invisibility or stereotypical representation. These dominant narratives, steeped in ableism, deny or distort the affective and erotic dimension, depriving subjectivities of a space for authentic recognition.

This essay aims to explore a specific methodology, Photovoice, as a theoretical tool for dismantling these limiting narratives and promoting self-determination. In particular, the analysis will focus on its potential when integrated with digital and immersive technologies, considered as new contexts for self-expression.

The investigation revolves around a central question: can virtual environments and participatory visual storytelling practices offer people with disabilities a safe space to explore and assert their sexual identity while building effective counter-narratives to challenge stereotypes? The argumentative path will start from a critical analysis of media representations of sexuality and disability. Subsequently, the theoretical foundations of Photovoice as a practice of empowerment will be introduced.

The pedagogical and social implications of its integration with immersive technologies will be explored. The aim is to outline a conceptual framework that suggests paths for a more inclusive education on affectivity and sexuality, based on the transformative power of self-representation.

2. Sexuality, Disability, and Education: Visual Empowerment and Narrative Resistance Against Ableist Representations

Sexuality is a multidimensional construct intersecting psychophysiological, psychological, social, cultural, and even legal dimensions [1]. If education is understood as a fundamental component of a people's culture, then—as an eminently cultural construct—sexuality constitutes an intrinsically educational domain and, for this reason, is of pedagogical interest [2].

When sexuality is linked to education, one cannot avoid mentioning the major pedagogical debate (international in scope, yet particularly heated in Italy) concerning the inclusion of sexuality education within the school curriculum. Indeed, while this manuscript is in press, Italy remains one of the few European countries that does not provide for sexuality education in the school curriculum, despite the *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe* [3] issued by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, which emphasize that the school system is the most effective mediator for enabling learners to develop an informed and conscious approach to sexuality.

The picture becomes even more complex when sexuality is examined in relation to disability. The sexuality of people who, due to physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive characteristics, are subject to disabling processes [4] is marginalized or even rendered invisible, with the consequence that these individuals are denied the exercise of certain fundamental rights, including the right to sexual health [5].

While much of what we know about sexuality derives from gender studies, it is also true that these studies have not sufficiently intersected with, or engaged, the so-called Disability Studies [6]. Above all, for a long time, there has been a lack of a genuinely intersectional approach [7] capable of investigating how multiple marginalized identity variables interact with one another, amplifying discriminatory effects and giving rise to new and multiple forms of oppression [8]. Thus, whereas gender studies have consistently recognized self-determination as central across domains—including the sexual domain—within disability studies sexuality remains, even today, a widespread taboo [9].

People with impairments have no access to any form of sexual or affective education, are subjected to prejudice and discrimination within health services, and receive no support for sexuality in care policies and practices [2]. Moreover, they often experience dynamics of anti-sexualization and de-sexualization [10], and are exposed to negative media representations that perpetuate stereotypes and stigma [11]. All of this can negatively affect the self-realization and independence of persons with disabilities, even as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [12] affirms an inextricable link between quality education, health and well-being, inclusive equal opportunities, and human rights.

These forms of marginalization are embedded within a system of oppression affecting disabled people known as “ableism” [13]. Through this oppressive system, there has been a veritable expropriation of the disabled sexual body, in favor of an image of asexual and less

threatening corporeality—more controllable—so-called “controlling images” [14] aimed at making the repressive treatment of disabled people’s sexual behaviors appear inevitable.

There is therefore a need to develop a counter-imaginary, that is, a new production of images and definitions (and thus of meaning) that re-centers persons with disabilities, with the aim of granting them the power to narrate themselves, deconstructing the discriminatory barriers generated by our system and fostering their capacity for self-determination and self-narration. This essay explores the potential of a photovoice-based methodology as a tool of visual empowerment to facilitate such processes of self-representation, and as an instrument of narrative resistance to counter mediatized representations, which are often conveyed through discriminatory dynamics rooted in ableism.

3. Photovoice and Immersive Environments: Toward New Paradigms of Participatory Representation

The crucial issue that emerges at the intersection of Photovoice and immersive technologies is ontological and political in nature: how can a visual artifact—whether a two-dimensional image or a navigable virtual environment—transcend its representational function to become a space of resistance, care, and identity re-signification?

From this perspective, visual production takes shape as a genuine “technology of the self,” a performative gesture through which the subject does not merely communicate but constitutes themselves, reclaims agency, and acts in the world. Each image, each co-constructed environment, becomes an embodied testimony and a liminal threshold: a site of negotiation between visibility and vulnerability, exposure and protection. The subject does not passively “show” their story, but inhabits it, performs it, and becomes its critical and self-aware curator.

Immersive Photovoice thus emerges as a device of epistemic and counter-hegemonic resistance. Within a socio-cultural landscape saturated by discursive normativities, including ableist, heteronormative, racialized, and standardized representations of the body and subjectivity, the act of producing images of oneself within a protected and participatory space constitutes a form of withdrawal from logics of control and symbolic violence [15]. The methodology transforms into an apparatus of counter-narration in which participants, by photographing or modeling environments in VR, oppose dominant narratives with situated, plural, and embodied perspectives, deconstructing the scopic regime of power. The image ceases to be a “mirror of reality” and becomes a political and affective gesture, a visual enunciation of (self-)recognition [16].

When applied to educational and social contexts, immersive Photovoice opens up heterotopic spaces: protected “other spaces” that are crucial for subjectivities intersecting multiple forms of marginalization. Within metaverses or immersive platforms, the construction of an avatar or a personal environment is not merely a playful act, but an identity laboratory. It enables the modeling of a post-organic body, the experimentation with fluid and nomadic identities, and the performance of the self outside the threat of judgment and social sanction [17]. Through this “safe displacement,” participants can negotiate new forms of presence and existence, exploring dimensions of the self that are otherwise repressed or rendered invisible.

From a pedagogical-political standpoint, this evolution represents a powerful tool of empowerment. The user is transformed from a passive consumer of technology into the author, narrator, and architect of their own symbolic universe. Immersive Photovoice is grounded in a pedagogy of subjectivation and agency, in which images and virtual environments operate through a complex dialectic between protection and revelation: they function as a screen, shielding against traumatic exposure, while simultaneously acting as a medium that enables new and profound forms of communicating lived experience [18].

A further dimension concerns the active opposition to symbolic violence and its digital manifestations, such as cyberbullying. Immersive environments, when co-designed according to ethical and participatory principles, can evolve into communities of care and digital resilience. Shared visual storytelling not only catalyzes empathic processes but actively builds networks of biopolitical solidarity [19]. The mediated and co-produced narration of the self allows vulnerability to be reformulated as enunciative power, transforming trauma into political discourse and isolation into strategic alliance.

Within this framework, immersive Photovoice embodies a “technology of hope,” a tool for the exercise of radical imagination. It is no longer merely a matter of documenting reality, but of designing possible worlds, of symbolically creating environments of belonging and possibility. Through practices of visual co-creation, the image ceases to be an inert object and becomes a dialogic, relational, and therapeutic space, where political resistance takes on aesthetic, educational and affective forms [20].

4. Conclusions and Future Prospects

In this context, immersive Photovoice embodies a “technology of hope,” a tool for exercising radical imagination. It is no longer just a matter of documenting reality, but of designing possible worlds, symbolically creating environments of belonging and possibility [21]. Through practices of visual co-creation, the image ceases to be an inert object and becomes a dialogical, relational, and therapeutic space, where political resistance takes on aesthetic, educational, and affective forms. This contribution has highlighted how the Photovoice methodology, in its recent digital and immersive forms, represents one of the most relevant frontiers of participatory educational research today. Born in the field of Community-Based Participatory Research (as a tool for community empowerment), the Photovoice experience has gradually taken on broader pedagogical meanings, establishing itself as a space for narrative resistance and identity construction [22]. When visual representation becomes a means of narrating oneself and interpreting the world, the pedagogy of the image is transformed into a pedagogy of care, voice, and relationship.

Integration with technology opens up new epistemological possibilities for contemporary visual education. These environments allow participants to inhabit the image and construct shared three-dimensional narratives, overcoming the limitations of traditional photographic language. Immersive Photovoice thus emerges as a space for identity negotiation and symbolic protection, where photography is no longer a simple representation, but an embodied and relational experience, capable of promoting agency, self-representation, and visual citizenship.

From this perspective, the methodology offers a dual value: on the one hand, it constitutes a tool for visibility and democratic participation, useful for countering the ableist, sexist, or discriminatory logics that permeate visual languages; on the other hand, it acts as a transformative pedagogy, as it invites teachers, researchers, and educators to reconsider the role of the image in education as an ethical and political practice. In this sense, visibility is not an accessory tool, but a form of embodied knowledge that builds connections, produces meaning, and generates possibilities for inclusion.

Looking to the future, the trajectories of development of this methodology branch out in many directions, presenting both crucial challenges and unprecedented opportunities. A first perspective concerns methodological and ethical research. While the transformative potential of immersive Photovoice is evident, it is now imperative to conduct longitudinal studies that assess its long-term impact on participants’ identity, community cohesion, and ability to influence social policies. At the same time, there is a need to develop specific ethical frameworks for participatory research in immersive environments. Issues such as the ownership of data and digital artifacts, informed consent in virtual

contexts, the management of disembodiment, and the guarantee of psychological safety require careful consideration to prevent these spaces of liberation from becoming new arenas of vulnerability.

A second challenge, of a technological and social nature, is related to accessibility. Immersive technologies risk amplifying the digital divide, excluding the very communities that Photovoice targets. A key future perspective will therefore be to promote not only access to tools, but also the co-design of platforms. Instead of adapting to existing commercial environments, research groups and communities could collaborate with developers and designers to create ethically oriented virtual spaces that embody the principles of inclusion, safety, and participation in their very architecture.

A third direction of development concerns the expansion of immersive Photovoice beyond research contexts [16]. Its potential in clinical and therapeutic settings, for trauma processing or self-exploration, is immense. In formal education, it could revolutionize the teaching of subjects such as history, civics, or the arts, allowing students to “inhabit” different perspectives. Above all, its ability to generate empathy through embodied experience makes it a formidable tool for policymaking: presenting a policymaker not with a report, but with a navigable virtual experience, co-narrated by citizens, could represent a qualitative leap in the effectiveness of advocacy.

Ultimately, the biggest challenge is not technological, but pedagogical and political. The ultimate goal of immersive Photovoice is not simply to “give voice,” but to transform listening and educate the gaze of those in power. Its task is to cultivate a critical visual citizenship, capable of deconstructing dominant narratives and building digital ecologies based on mutual care and recognition. The real frontier will be to ensure that these powerful technologies are put at the service of humanization, connection, and social justice, fully realizing the promise of a pedagogy that, through images, becomes a practice of liberation.

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