

AI AND PARTICIPATORY VIDEOGRAPHY: NAVIGATING NEW POSSIBILITIES IN COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND AGENCY

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Abstract: Participatory videography (PV) has become an essential tool in social development, enabling marginalized communities to create and share their narratives, thereby fostering agency and challenging traditional power structures. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into PV practices presents new opportunities for enhancing creativity, efficiency, and accessibility. However, this integration introduces ethical considerations that must be carefully addressed. This paper examines these ethical implications through a case study of a participatory videography project in Kampung Ngampon, Solo, Indonesia. Drawing on desk research and interviews with practitioners from Indonesian NGO, Kota Kita, it explores how AI can potentially redefine concepts of participation, agency, and empowerment in PV, while examining their risks, and proposes strategies for ensuring responsible and empowering practices.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Participatory Videography; Ethics; Social Development

Introduction

Recent development thinking and practices increasingly focus on empowering the poor and historically marginalized identities. Scholars have offered nuanced definitions of empowerment, most commonly describing it as a process of change—from a state of disempowerment to one where individuals possess the agency and capabilities to make life choices (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999). Empowerment also involves expanding the “capacity to aspire” among the poor, or what Appadurai (2004) calls a “navigational capacity” to reimagine and pursue future possibilities with the necessary resources and capabilities. As a transformative process, empowerment occurs both at individual and community levels.

In this context, participatory videography (PV) has emerged as a powerful tool for community empowerment. PV enables marginalized communities to document their lived experiences, challenging existing power dynamics and advocating for change. It provides a more equitable approach to observation and knowledge creation by visualizing intangible phenomena—such as social relations and emotions—into concrete outputs. The growing affordability and accessibility of visual tools, coupled with accelerated digital technology adoption, empower participants to express themselves collectively through filmic representations. These representations can then be shared with broader audiences to raise awareness and foster conversation (Mistry and Berardi, 2012; Milne, 2012).

While discussions on participatory videography largely highlight its potential, there are ethical dilemmas to consider, particularly regarding participatory approach and visual research complexities. Additionally, as artificial intelligence (AI) technologies become more accessible and sophisticated, they bring new possibilities and challenges to PV. Much like the earlier digital technology, a lot of discussions on AI are focused on their potential, particularly related to democratization in the creative process by lowering barriers to entry, making artistic practice more open (Helajzen, 2024). While AI tools can enhance



the accessibility, efficiency, and creative potential of PV practices, they also introduce complex ethical considerations. Situating AI and AI ethics within the current landscape of practices and critically assessing its role is essential to ensure that participatory videography remains a responsible and empowering approach.

This study seeks to address the following research questions: **How can participatory visual ethical principles enhance the capacity of PV as empowering practice? How do emerging AI technologies reshape the ethical landscape of participatory videography?**

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary research and primary data collection through literature review, case study analysis and interviews:

- **Secondary research:** A comprehensive literature review was conducted, drawing from academic and grey literature in the fields of development planning, geography, visual anthropology, ethics, and AI ethics. This review established a foundation for understanding both the theoretical underpinnings of participatory videography (PV) and the ethical reconsiderations of AI integration.
- **Case study analysis and interviews:** The primary case study focuses on the PV initiative led by NGO Kota Kita in Kampung Ngampon, Solo, Indonesia. The case study includes analysis of the documentary '*Ora Obah, Ora Sekolah*' (Kota Kita, 2022), which provides practical insights into PV's applications and challenges. In addition, interviews with co-facilitators of the PV initiative from Kota Kita were conducted to explore AI's potential in reshaping participatory videography and to examine ethical considerations from a practitioner's perspective.

Case study: *Ora Obah, Ora Sekolah*, PV initiative in Kampung Ngampon, Solo, Indonesia

Ora Obah, Ora Sekolah, meaning "No Movement, No School," is a documentary film created through a participatory videography project in Kampung Ngampon, Solo, Indonesia. The project, facilitated by the NGO Kota Kita, ran from September to December 2021 (Kota Kita, 2022; Facilitator 1, 2024). *Ora Obah, Ora Sekolah*, available on digital platform, YouTube, emphasizes the importance of "*gotong royong*," a deeply rooted Indonesian concept of collective action and mutual assistance (Amalina et al., 2022; Kota Kita, 2022). The film, which features a young man facing the threat of dropping out of school due to financial

difficulties, explores the importance of effort, resilience, and community support in achieving educational goals.

Eleven residents of Kampung Ngampon “actively participated in the filmmaking process, attending training sessions and engaging in hands-on practices” (Interview with Facilitator 1 & Facilitator 2, 2024). Further, synthesized from the interviews, the facilitators emphasized on applying approaches that are “more flexible, adaptive to local contexts, and using user-friendly application and tools” (ibid, 2024). Participants, who are makers and actors of the film, described the experience as “collaborative, dynamic, and open”, highlighting the shared ownership of the project (Kota Kita, 2022)

Literature Review

This literature review explores the role of empowerment, participation, and ethical knowledge production within social development, with a focus on applications and implications of AI in the practice of PV. This review draws on several literatures to define empowerment as a dynamic, participatory process aimed at social justice and parity in development contexts. Further, it examines critical perspectives on participation, visual methodologies, and the ethical considerations of PV, and situating AI in the practice. Key themes include the interplay of power and knowledge, the potential of visual research to democratize representation, and the ethical complexities in visual research. By organizing the literature under these themes, this review provides a foundation for understanding the potential and ethical challenges of AI-integrated PV in responsible and empowering social development practices.

- ***Critical approaches to participation***

The provided literature review in this section highlights several critical approaches to participation, emphasizing the need to move beyond simplistic notions of empowerment and acknowledge the complexities of power dynamics and knowledge production in PV. Participatory videography, as a research tool aims to empower marginalized communities by enabling them to represent themselves and challenge dominant narratives. This approach aligns with the Participatory Action Research (PAR) tradition, influenced by Freire’s (1972) concept of “conscientization,” which emphasizes raising awareness and stimulating political action.

However, some literature also warns the potential pitfalls of participatory approaches, arguing that they can be potentially tyrannical and extractive. Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Pottier (2003) critique the tendency to romanticize “local knowledge” or oversimplify community voices. Mosse (1994) argues



that participatory research, like PRA, often becomes an extractive process where outsiders gather information without genuine local involvement. Another critique focused on the pursuit of consensus, which Gaventa and Cornwall (2006) suggest can mask social complexity and obscure dissenting voices. This emphasis on consensus can create a false sense of unity and overlook the power dynamics and inequalities within communities.

These literatures emphasize the relational nature of power, drawing on earlier work from Foucault's (1975), which posits that power is not held by individuals but is embedded in social relationships and discourses. This understanding highlights the need for negotiation and reflexivity in participatory processes. Reason and Bradbury (2006) argue that participation should be seen as a "process of coming to know," involving ongoing negotiation and reflection among participants. Finally, the literature stresses the importance of context-specific participation. Haraway (1998) advocates for situated knowledge and reflexive approaches that consider historical and social contexts. Applying this to participatory videography means recognizing that each community has unique power dynamics, cultural norms, and historical experiences that shape the participatory process.

In the same vein Medrado and Verdegem (2024) warns epistemological injustice in the Global North-Global South knowledge production about AI ethics and emphasize empathy, autonomy, and dialogue in participatory AI. Wherein empathy and dialogue address power dynamics and autonomy promotes collective rights, fostering more inclusive and fair AI practice.

- ***Ethics, reflexivity, and institutional limitations in AI-driven visual methodologies***

In this section, the sources highlight ethical complexities following the integration of AI into visual methodologies, particularly participatory videography (PV). Visual data, like image, video, and map, and visual research methods, such as photography and videography, are powerful tools to capture lived experiences (Wiles et al., 2008; Pink, 2006). Yet, they risk oversimplifying subjects and reinforcing power imbalances (Sontag, 1989). Contemporary approaches in visual research, particularly those that highlights participation, advocates collaborative and respectful practices that prioritize human agency and practitioner's reflexivity (Milne, 2016; Shaw, 2012).

Situating AI in the reading of visual data, Thomson et al. (2024) explore the impact of AI-generated images, particularly as journalism product. Their study highlights key issues such as misinformation, where photorealistic AI images



blur the line between reality and fabrication, reputational risks, and distortion in representations. These challenges emphasize the need for technical guidelines and responsible AI use to maintain audience trust and integrity. Moving beyond general discussions on AI ethics, recognizing the role of AI in participatory visual ethics is to recognize the complexities that arise stemming from AI's generative capabilities via machine learning, which allows machines to learn in ways similar to human beings (Li & Pang, 2024). The authors, studying AI in transforming fandom, an established example of participatory culture, urges the reconceptualization of human-community-machine interactions. This reconceptualization should closely examine "how AI is shaped by and shapes human interactions", and address ethical concerns related to authenticity, manipulation, and ownership (Li & Pang, 2024).

In response to the literatures above, this section then reviews institutional ethical guidelines and AI guidelines from multiple sources (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika, 2023, UNESCO, 2022, British Sociological Association 2017). Each provides foundational and normative guidelines for ethical research, such as informed consent, beneficence, confidentiality, and data protection. However, they also reveal crucial gap in providing practical guidance for navigating the nuanced ethical considerations inherent in both participatory research and AI-integrated visual research.

Hagendorff (2020) advocates for a shift in approaching AI ethics, moving beyond a rule-based system that can become a "tick-box exercise" and instead, incorporating principles of virtue ethics. Integrating virtue ethics emphasizes cultivating principles such as care, empathy, and justice into the AI ethics landscape and focuses on the individuals involved in the development and implementation of the technologies. As will be further explored below, the study argues that while virtue ethics alone is not a solution, it offers a broader and nuanced view in exploring both AI ethics and participatory visual research. Centering virtue ethics encourages broadened scope of action that could help to address the ethical risks most prominently observed in visual research like power imbalances, unjust representation, and diminishing contextual sensitivity. The study draws inspirations from several literatures that advocate for context-specific frameworks that prioritize exercise such as ongoing dialogue and reflexivity, thus encourages a nuanced, collaborative model for ethical decision-making in AI-integrated participatory visual research (Helajzen, 2024; Medrado & Verdegem, 2024; Thomson et al., 2024; Hagendorff, 2020).

Navigating AI in participatory videography: a framework for ethical considerations in the sites of visual interpretation



Gillian Rose's (1996) method of critical visual interpretation emphasizes that images are not objective truths but are constructed through social processes. Rose's framework focuses on three sites where meanings are negotiated: reading, writing, and audiencing. In this discussion, the order of these sites has been altered, placing reading (visual interpretation) before writing and audiencing. This reversal is intended to emphasize that, in participatory videography, the creation (writing) of an image is usually informed by the intention to question and correct unfair and disempowering representations.

The discussion under each site provides a framework for assessing ethical considerations in AI-integrated participatory videography:

1. **The “site of reading”** involves critically examining the knowledge that shapes an image, questioning whose knowledge informs the visual and its relation to power dynamics (Rose, 1996). In participatory videography, the process is implemented as a process of building critical awareness that informs the later visual practice. In AI-integrated PV, this act of “reading” becomes layered with ethical concerns as AI introduces new layers of knowledge and raises questions about whose perspectives they reflect. AI can amplify biases, misrepresent marginalized communities, and the opaque nature of AI complicates understanding of outputs and complicates assessment of embedded knowledge (Hosseini & Holmes, 2024; Medrado & Verdegem, 2024). Thus, we must reconceptualize “reading” in AI-integrated PV, critically examining the entire process and acknowledging power dynamics and potential for exploitation. It requires researchers to assess their influence on interpretations (reflexivity). On a practical note, to realize critical reading for awareness, initiate capacity building from the start of the research process by investing time to build trust among participants and researchers (Mistry & Shaw, 2021). Employ methods like interviews and narratives (Lounasmaa et al., 2020) to enable collective critical positioning, and facilitate inclusive dialogues, ensuring the research theme genuinely reflects community concerns (Surjadi, 2022).
2. **The “site of writing”** in Rose's (1996) framework focuses on the collaborative process of image creation, involving negotiations about the purpose, strategies, and tools used toward empowerment. Participatory visual research offers opportunities by pairing participation with visual practices to facilitate equitable knowledge production and more just representations of identities. However, without critically reconsidering situated and contextual ethical principles, this can be misleading. Further, integrating AI in the process adds complexities regarding authenticity, agency, and

control. AI tools can act as “co-creators,” raising ethical questions about authorship and ownership: Who holds the rights to AI-generated outputs, and how are contributions acknowledged? Can AI-generated visuals be considered authentic representations of reality? How does their use affect the credibility of PV outputs? (Thomson et al., 2024; Helajzen, 2024; Hosseini & Holmes, 2024). Further, while AI can increase efficiency by automating tasks, prioritizing efficiency alone also requires careful considerations. Ethical considerations in AI-integrated PV necessitate a shift in how collaboration is approached. Building trust with local communities through ongoing dialogue and co-facilitation is key (Mistry et al., 2015; Lounasmaa et al., 2020). Other practical approaches to consider include regular check-ins, iterative and iterative and dynamic informed consent.

3. **The “site of audiencing”** (Rose, 1996) considers how images are circulated and how platform choices influence interpretation by audiences and impact. Recognition by targeted audiences often imposes acceptable visual conventions, potentially reproducing the unjust representations the process aims to correct (Lambert and Allen, 2016). For example, amateurism typically found in participatory visual outputs may imply citizens lack seriousness. In AI-integrated PV, additional risks related to transparency, trust, and potential harm are to be considered. Disseminating AI-generated visuals on rapidly spreading platforms like social media can lead to misinformation and disproportionate impacts on vulnerable communities (Helajzen, 2024; Hosseini & Holmes, 2024). The lack of clear disclosure about AI use challenges informed viewing and risks reputational damage if AI outputs are misrepresented as “real”. To approach this, prior to visual audiencing, role of facilitators to engage participants in careful and iterative editing with informed consent are crucial to meet the intended impact of audiencing (Surjadi, 2022). Other practical approaches to achieve equitable audiencing include selecting dissemination spaces that fit communication needs— from online platforms and community meetings to larger forums; intentionally select and invite audiences to align with communication aims, and consider allies to widen reach (ibid).

Analysis of ethical considerations in participatory videography project in Kampung Ngampon, Solo

1. **Reading to develop critical awareness:** Kampung Ngampon, situated within Kelurahan Mojosongo in Solo, Indonesia is a densely populated urban kampung known for its birdcage craft makers. Mojosongo itself is a *kelurahan* (neighborhood) with the highest population density in Solo and deals with a significant poverty level. This fact sets a crucial backdrop for understanding



the visual narratives that might emerge from the PV project. The significant poverty level in the neighbourhood further added a layer of socio-economic context, shaping the themes and concerns reflected in the visual outputs.

a. NGO-mediated awareness: Since 2018, Kota Kita, an NGO, has partnered with citizens of Kampung Ngampon through various donor-funded projects, including participatory research, facilitations, and award-winning infrastructure development (Kota Kita, 2021,2022; Chan 2021). These engagements could have fostered a mediated self-awareness among the residents, prompting them to recognize their potential. Further, based on the analysis of existing visual representations of Kampung Ngampon that are available digitally, it is highly likely that the participants of the PV are influenced by the NGO's framing and the objectives of their interventions. Admitting to research limitations, interviews with participants would allow researchers to better examine the extent to which this mediation shapes the residents' understanding of their own circumstances, influence their thematic interest for the PV project, and their intention.

b. Systematized process of awareness building: The participatory action-research project facilitated by Kota Kita involved a deliberate process of developing critical awareness through PV training spanning from September to December 2021. Described by the two facilitators (2024), the structured approach had been "fulfilling, interactive and engaging". However, it is crucial to consider how the framing of the training itself, (being highly structured and controlled), the selection of materials, approaches, and the facilitator's role might influence the participants' "reading" of (their own) visual representations that influence the selection of PV project theme.

c. Ethics of participation: Based on the interviews with the facilitators and analysis of the facilitators' notes, it can be found that there have been lengthy dialogues between participants-facilitators wherein question about the direction of the participatory process and needs were openly discussed. However, it is worth considering whether the on flexibility and an iterative process genuinely empower participants to challenge existing representations and to what extent does it serve to reinforce the NGO's agenda?

2. Writing as a creative process to build capacity and agency: The "site of writing" in Kampung Ngampon's participatory video project, encompassing the entire production process from pre-production to post-production has demonstrated a commitment to capacity building and fostering genuine and creative expression within the community.



a. Accessible AI and empowerment: Choosing CapCut as the primary tool during training significantly impacted the project's accessibility and empowerment dynamics. This user-friendly, AI-powered app was chosen to accommodate the participants' preferences and familiarity with the applications (Interview with Facilitator 1, Facilitator 2, 2024). The use has lowered the barrier to entry for participants from diverse backgrounds and skill levels, allowing for more dynamic training situations for basic filming and editing skills. It aligns with the broader goals of democratizing media production and ensuring that technological advancements benefit individuals and communities often excluded from traditional filmmaking processes (Helajzen, 2024). The project highlights how simple AI integration can be a useful tool for fostering inclusivity and enabling a wider range of voices to participate in visual storytelling. As the process unfolded and will be later described in the following section, CapCut was selected exclusively for training purposes and did not change the facilitators' agenda to do editing with a more advanced and sophisticated AI-powered tool. Production timeline and aesthetic agenda informed this decision (Facilitator 1, 2024). However limited the impact of CapCut in the later process, the open and deliberative approach to choose CapCut as a training tool can still be considered as virtue ethics in practice informed with dialogue, consensus, and iterative consent.

b. Phased training and iterative process: The project's structured approach, encompassing pre- production, production, and post-production phases, underscores the importance of capacity building in participatory visual research. This approach ensured that participants developed the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in all aspects of filmmaking (Interview with Facilitator 1, 2024). The iterative process, while potentially time-consuming, allowed for ongoing feedback, adjustments, and a deeper understanding of the technical and narrative elements of video production (Facilitator 2).

c. Storyboarding as a space for imagining otherwise: The storyboarding phase played a crucial role in fostering creative expression and collective decision-making. The facilitators described this stage as a space for imagining, where participants collaboratively developed the storyline, characters, and visual elements of the film (Interview Facilitator 1, Facilitator 2, 2024). This process encouraged dialogue, negotiation, and consensus building towards the selection of a title and theme that touched upon the socio-economic context of the community and imagining a 'pursuit of education and economic goal to



achieve upward mobility” (ibid, 2024). This focus on collective narrative construction highlights the potential of participatory visual methods to challenge dominant narratives and amplify community aspirations.

d. Training on practical skills and inclusive process: Training and hands-on experience with equipment like Android phones, rig stabilizers, microphones, and lighting equipment contributed to practical skills development within the community (as summarized by Facilitator 2, 2024). This emphasis on readily available resources further reinforces the project’s commitment to a human-centered, inclusive approach that is both accessible and relevant to the community’s context. The use of basic filmmaking techniques and familiar technology allowed participants to focus on expressing their ideas and perspectives rather than dwelling with complex technicalities.

e. Navigating time and resource constraints: The sources acknowledge the inherent tension between the benefits of an iterative, participatory process and the potential challenges of managing time. This dilemma is common in participatory visual projects where extensive community engagement requires significant time investments. Striking a balance between prioritizing in-depth participation and accommodating practical constraints is an ongoing challenge that necessitates careful planning and resource allocation.

3. Navigating audiences and authenticity: The analysis of the “site of audiencing” in Kampung Ngampon’s participatory video project unveils a complex interplay between AI’s potential to enhance accessibility and the ethical considerations surrounding authenticity in participatory visual representations. The sources reveal several key decisions and dilemmas related to AI’s role in shaping the video’s audience engagement:

a. Balancing professional needs with community direction: While the community collectively shaped the video’s content, Kota Kita staff as the facilitators made key decisions regarding AI’s application in the editing phase. This highlighted the challenge of balancing professional expertise with community agency. The choice to incorporate dramatic background music, voiceovers, and L-cuts to “make the video more engaging” raises questions about whose understanding of “engaging” is being prioritized (Interview with Facilitator 2, 2024). The interview recorded that the decision was driven by the community’s desire to be presentable as best they could to the potential audience. However, as AI technologies become growingly accessible, critically assessing AI-driven aesthetic choices to be in alignment with the community’s vision and not impose



mere external standards of visual appeal is crucial for maintaining the project's authenticity and not reproducing unjust representations.

b. Expanding accessibility and "beautification": Another AI use was for the speech-to-text AI to translate the local Javanese language into English aimed to broaden the video's accessibility to a non-Javanese audience. The interviews with facilitators have confirmed that the participants were included in the editing process, positioning this as a strategic, participants-led decision to achieve impact. In another instance, the facilitators acknowledged a desire for a more "beautified" visual representation, prompting the use of AI features in Adobe Premiere Pro to "enhance, dramatize, and fictionalize" certain aspects of the film (such as the insertion of background voice to illustrate the character's inner thoughts to support the plot) (Facilitator 2, 2024). This raises critical questions about the potential for AI to be used to conform to dominant aesthetic conventions or cater to audience's expectations, potentially compromising the amateurship and authenticity that often characterize participatory visual outputs. The tension between "amateurship" and "beauty shots" reflects a broader debate within participatory visual methodologies: to what extent is it permissible to modify visual representations for broader appeal, especially when the goal is advocacy? In the case of Kampung Ngampon, collective agreement and a "bottom-up" process of aspiration guided the decisions from the participants, thus, ensuring its empowering potential. For future reference, it is crucial to ensure that participants have a comprehensive understanding of the potential implications of these choices on the perception of their narratives.

c. Optimizing dissemination strategy and navigating misperceptions: The choice of YouTube as the primary platform for dissemination reflects a pragmatic consideration of its reach, ease of access, and popularity. However, the lack of dedicated campaign resulted in low viewership and further poses questions about the potential of the final video to correct unjust representations. In 2022, however, the video was disseminated in a small viewing event for the participants and Kampung Ngampon residents and evoked collective sense of belonging and stimulated conversations about the "creative potentials of people of Ngampon" and created demand for similar initiatives in the future as it "provides beneficial technical skills" (Interview with Facilitator 1 & Facilitator 2, 2024).

Furthermore, reflecting on the researcher's own positionality as audience, the final AI-integrated video output could create misperceptions about its



“documentary” status due to its aesthetic enhancements. While the degree of aestheticization was learned to be “not heavy,” for future reference, the potential for AI-driven modifications to blur the lines between documentary and fictionalized representation necessitates transparency with the audience regarding the role of AI in the production process.

Navigating possibilities of ethical and empowering AI-integrated participatory videography

Drawing from the reviews of ethical reconsiderations in participatory videography and the tensions presented in the case study, this work presents emerging recommendations for situating AI in PV practice. Ethical considerations must be contextualized by aligning AI use with evolving community dynamics and project goals, engaging participants in critical steps of the process and actively addressing power imbalances. This can be done, including through the implementation of iterative informed consent and dialogue. Next, integrating AI to improve efficiency in achieving meaningful community participation ensures that technology enhances rather than obscures agency and just representations of the communities. Finally, facilitators advocating transparency and open dialogue about AI’s role develops trust (including from the viewers), and most importantly, for participants to make informed decisions about the ethics of participation, visual making, and AI’s integration. This way, technological decisions are more aligned with community values and needs and ensure that AI serves as a tool for empowerment.

Conclusion

The integration of AI into participatory videography offers transformative possibilities for empowering communities. However, realizing this potential requires reconsiderations of ethical approaches that prioritize contextual community needs, agency, empathy, care, and ongoing reflections. The study advocates for the positioning of ethics as a technique of seeking. When it is thoroughly and critically addressed alongside the participatory process, it evolves together, so as to harness the power of AI to support participatory, community- led visual making while upholding the values of social justice and human dignity.



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