What about «face value»? The ethics of the no-face approach to cellphilms in Mali

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Outline of the presentation

Part 1: Ethics in visual research: Beyond polarization and double standards

- Showing or not showing children's face?
- Negotiating ethical standards
- Agency and the 'no face' approach to cellphilms

Part 2: PREAM and the 'no-face' approach in Mali

- The context of the study
- Hiding faces: more than just a protection measure
- The esthetics of the 'no-face' approach : images of cellphilms from youth

Part 1: Ethics in visual research: Beyond polarization and double standards

More than just « a face »

❏ With the ascent of media technologies, images have become powerful tools that shape how we see and understand the world.

❏ Emotionally charged pictures attract donations and are increasingly being monetised ➔ Commodification of images of poverty and suffering (Jefferess, 2002).

❏ While the characteristics of the images used by media and development agencies have evolved (from dirty starving child to playful girls at schools), the face of 'the other' remains of high value.

❏ Images are representations of the world used to assert discourses of power.

Polarization and double standards

Fight for digital privacy and the right to be forgotten by social media in Europe and North America.

→   Media and development workers fill their websites and reports with photos and videos of children from the countries where they work.

Millions are spent on 'empowering' young people

→   We don't let adolescents decide for themselves how their image should be used.

Use of discourses of decolonization, empowerment and promotion of agency

→   We adopt neo-colonial views of people from aid receiving countries assuming they can't understand the consequences of their image being shared on Internet

Showing or not showing adolescents' faces in cellphilms?

- **How 'informed' can consent and ascent really be?**

- **Can we really guarantee that images will only be used the way we intend them to be?**

- **How can we know that an image is really harmless?**

Negotiating Ethical Standards

« (…) the responsibility to ensure that research involving humans meets high scientific and ethical standards that respect and protect the participants.. » (TCPS2, 2018:5)

Respect for Persons   Concern for Welfare

Justice

- **The line between protection and paternalism can be thin**
- **Positionality influences how risks are defined & assessed**
- **Partial or inaccurate understanding of the reality on the ground may influence REB's decisions**
- **Perceptions of what poor people know and do not know**

What can be done VS what should be done

Perceptions in Canada VS Perceptions in Mali
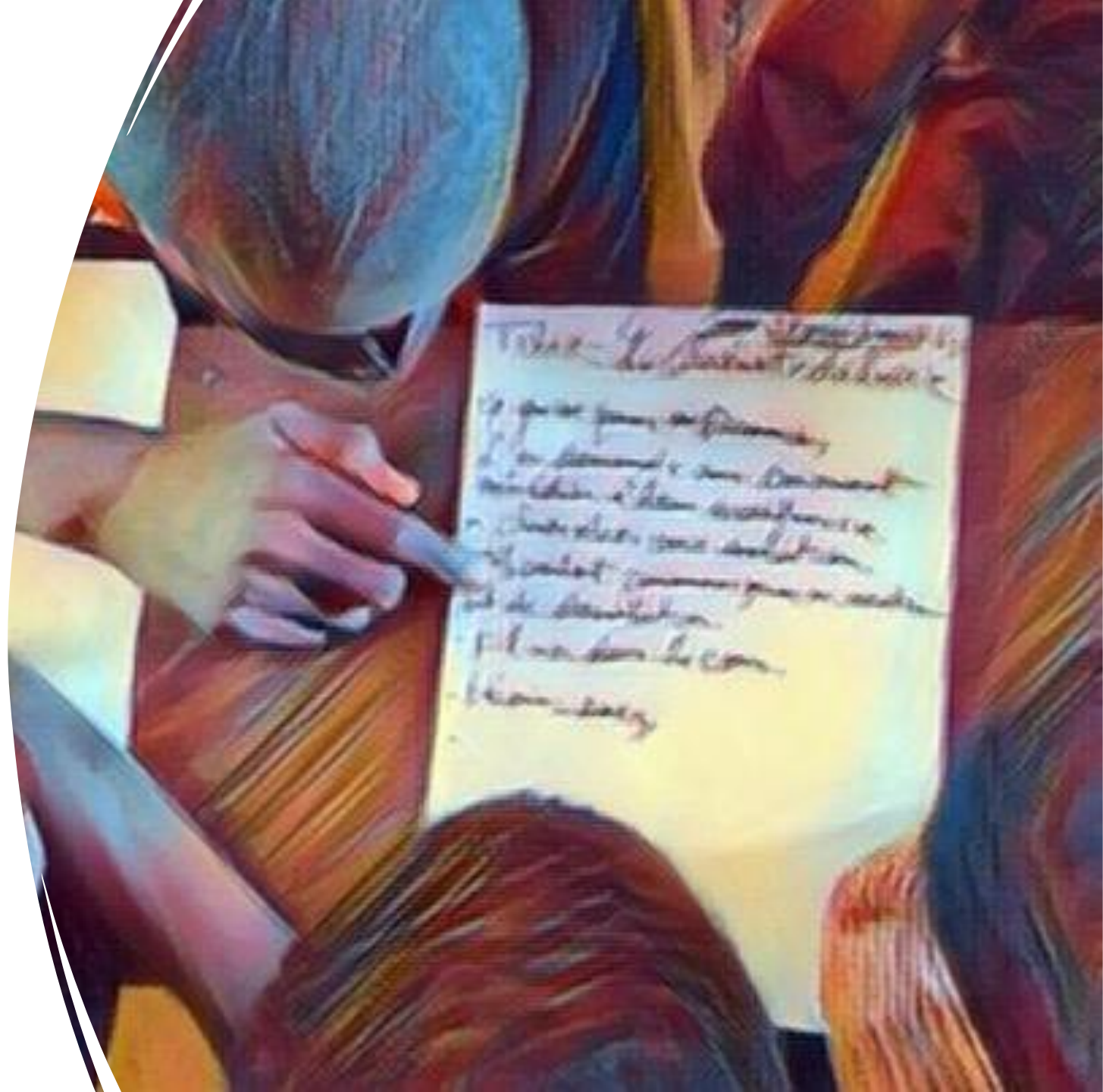
The 'No Face' Approach

Filming techniques that hide the faces of participants

- Objects
- Shades
- Written text
- Body parts (hands, feets, arms...)
- Spaces
- Persons filmed from a distance
- Persons filmed from the back
- Wearing masks or other objects hiding the face
- Framing the image without the heads
- Etc.

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Agency and the 'no face' approach to cellphilms

- **Hiding the face is perceived to be more ethical**

- **It can allow young people to express themselves more freely**

- **Theoretically reduces the risks of negative repercussions**

à **Considering the increasing reach and appeal of social media are we denying young people their right to be seen?**

à **Should they decide for themselves how best to protect themselves?**

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The project's location

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Context of PREAM: The crisis in Mali

- Armed conflict in the central and northern regions (since 2012)
    - Terrorism and jihadism
    - Tensions between communities
- Recurring droughts
- Political Instability
- Repeated workers' strikes
- COVID-19
- International sanctions

Hiding faces: More than just a protection measure

A. A sign of visual creativity and innovation

B. An aesthetic option

C. An ethical choice and principle

D. A form of agency

E. A fashion, a trend, an artform

F. A way of challenging the viewer's horizon of expectation

G. A way of engaging the viewer's empathy and agency

Why we chose the 'no face' approach in PREAM

☐ **After undertaking power mapping and identifying gatekeepers**

☐ **To satisfy ethical requirements**

    ☐ **Ensure confidentiality and privacy**

    ☐ **Respect the rights and will of the participants**

    ☐ **To ensure the safety and anonymity of the adolescents**

☐ **As confidence and trust building measure**

☐ **To focus more on the message and important objects**

☐ **To lay emphasis on the symbolic dimension of cellphilming communication**

☐ **To focus more on body movements, gestures, activities**

☐ **To tease out viewer's critical reflection and imagination**

The esthetics of the 'no-face' approach

- ☐ Produces more visual effect

- ☐ Promotes creativity and abstract thinking

- ☐ Focuses on signs, objects and things

- ☐ Engages ethical thinking

- ☐ Highlights the other parts of the body

- ☐ Universalizes the message while maintaining the particularity of the participant's story

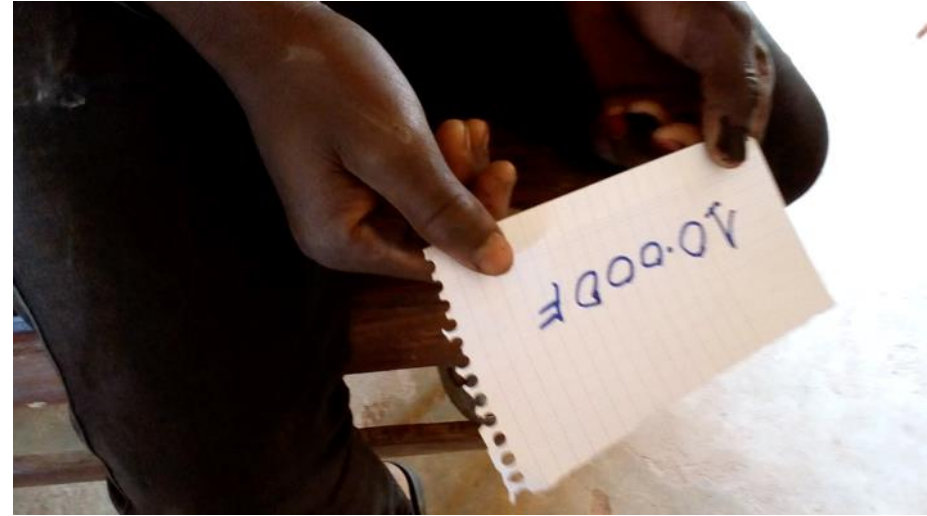- Symbolizes the *glocalized* dimension of visual research aesthetics

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Cellphilm prompt:
"You will create cellphilms on having the capacity to act and help yourself or not having the capacity to act and help yourself."

Projection of cellphilm: Looking for water

The gendered dimension of the 'no-face' approach in Mali

Highlights traditional gender roles of women

Showcases women's time-consuming domestic chores

Stresses gender inequities and differentiated agency

Ensure more protection regarding women and men

Fits local context while expressing global concerns

Conclusion:
More food for thought!

1) What is the 'no-face approach' revealing about *the gaze of the Other?*

2) Does it reinforce or dismantle clichés and stereotypes?

3) To what extent does it hamper or improve adolescents' agency and control of their body and ideas?

4) How can we reduce bias in visual research, with and without face?

5) How can we shift the gaze and ways of looking at the no-face cellphilms in the Global South?

6) From what positionality, ethical stance or epistemological paradigm should we approach adolescents' no-face cellphims from the Global south?

We thank you for your attention!

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