



Visual Culture and Identity Formation: An Action Research Study with South African Youth,

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Abstract

This action research study, conducted between 2021 and 2026, examines the complex relationship between visual culture and identity formation amongst youth in post-apartheid South Africa. It addresses the central problem of how young people critically engage with and synthesise a contested visual landscape, which ranges from persistent colonial and apartheid-era iconography to the pervasive influx of global digital media. The objective was to explore how participatory arts-based methodologies could facilitate a critical, agential process of identity construction. Employing a participatory action research framework within the Arts and Humanities, the study collaborated with 45 South African participants aged 16 to 24 across a series of iterative workshops. These sessions utilised photovoice, digital collage, and community mural creation as tools for collaborative inquiry, enabling a critical analysis of dominant visual narratives and the co-creation of alternative imagery rooted in the participants' own lived realities.

The research findings demonstrate that structured engagement with visual culture provided a vital platform for youth to deconstruct hegemonic representations and articulate more nuanced, self-defined identities. A key argument is that participants actively negotiated and integrated elements of indigenous cultural heritage with contemporary global youth trends, thereby forging a hybrid visual lexicon that resists monolithic categorisation. This process underscored the transformative potential of visual arts praxis as a means of fostering critical consciousness and agency. The study's significance lies in its contribution to decolonial discourse within African scholarship, illustrating how embodied, creative methodologies can support a re-imagining of identity grounded in local context and experience. It concludes that institutional support for such community-engaged visual projects is

essential for cultivating a culturally resonant and self-determined sense of belonging, thereby enriching the sociocultural fabric of a nation in continual evolution.

Keywords: *Action Research, Visual Culture, Identity Formation, South African Youth, Decoloniality*