Feature topic article

MIA
MEDIA INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

Blurring the frame: youth-defined photographic expression in participatory research on adverse childhood experiences

Media International Australia
2026, Vol. 199(1) 151–172

DOI: 10.1177/1329878X261433326
journals.sagepub.com/home/mia
Sage

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) contribute to 75% of mental illness cases in the UK before age 24, yet their emotional impacts are rarely explored through young people's perspectives. This study investigates how youth with ACEs use blurriness in photography as a form of emotional expression and narrative control. Using a participatory methodology, young people acted as co-researchers through photography tasks, Jamboard discussions and blog reflections. Blurred images – emerging spontaneously – became key artefacts for reflection and meaning-making. Thematic analysis, informed by Constructivist and Chaos Theories, found that blurriness symbolised confusion, fragmentation, vulnerability and distance. It also offered a way to express difficult emotions while avoiding overexposure. Participants associated blurred photography with youth visual culture, especially social media aesthetics that value imperfection and authenticity. This research demonstrates the potential of arts-based, co-produced methods to amplify marginalised youth voices and proposes a participatory visual framework for exploring emotional expression among young people affected by ACEs.

Keywords

participatory visual methods, blurred photography, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), youth mental health, arts-based research, emotional expression, social media

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Introduction

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been widely documented as a significant precursor to mental ill-health in young people, with research consistently showing that nearly three-quarters of mental health conditions manifest before the age of 24 (Kessler et al., 2005; NHS Digital, 2022). Recent evidence shows that 7 in 10 children under the age of 8 report at least one ACE, with 3 in 4 young people who have experienced ACEs developing significant mental health challenges by age 18 (Public Health Wales, 2025). These challenges are further compounded by socio-economic deprivation, systemic inequalities and disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Hughes et al., 2017; Lal and Gupta, 2025). ACEs not only affect short-term well-being but are also associated with a reduction in life expectancy of up to 20 years.

Despite growing awareness, extensive blind spots remain in understanding the depth and breadth of how ACEs impact young people's mental health – particularly from the perspective of youth themselves. Without their insights shaping our understanding, there is a risk that societal and service-based responses may inadvertently disempower or stigmatise young people. When institutional vocabularies around mental health do not align with the lived vocabularies of youth, the disconnect can compound distress and erode resilience (Elliott et al., 2005; Gómez-Restrepo et al., 2016).

While interdisciplinary fields such as health, social science and youth studies increasingly embrace creative and participatory approaches, dominant research cultures – particularly those aligned with clinical or policy-driven agendas – continue to prioritise conventionally validated methodologies. This shapes what questions are asked, which voices are considered legitimate, and what forms of knowledge are recognised. Consequently, research approaches that seek to amplify the voices of the most marginalised may be undervalued or dismissed as lacking rigour.

In alignment with recent scholarship, we argue that arts-based research – particularly when rooted in participatory and creative practices – offers a critical alternative to dominant paradigms that may marginalise certain voices (Cox et al., 2021; Teti and Myroniuk, 2022). These methods centre lived experience, emotion and relational knowledge, creating spaces for meaning-making that are both inclusive and ethically responsive (Bell and Pahl, 2018; Jonas-Simpson et al., 2022). These creative practices are also deeply enmeshed in the visual languages and emotional vocabularies young people use across social media platforms, where personal storytelling, mental health discourse and aesthetic experimentation often intersect. This is especially crucial for youth with lived experience of ACEs, who may find conventional academic or clinical frameworks alienating.

We also contend that the process of arts-based inquiry itself holds untapped potential – not only in surfacing the unseen and unheard but also in absorbing knowledge from communities in ways that challenge extractive or hierarchical research practices. Creative approaches can help decolonise interdisciplinary research spaces by valuing alternative epistemologies, supporting transformative learning, and fostering youth-led agency.

During this retreat, the youth researchers identified an emergent visual pattern: participants frequently produced photographs that were out of focus or blurred. What first appeared to be technical error soon revealed itself to be a powerful expressive device – prompting deeper inquiry into how blurriness functioned within the participants' visual storytelling as shown in Figure 1.

This paper explores how blurriness, typically dismissed as imperfection, became a meaningful visual language through which young people with ACEs communicated emotional ambiguity, instability, protection and identity. It reflects on the symbolic and metaphorical resonance of blurred imagery and how it challenges traditional notions of visual clarity, narrative coherence and

Figure 1. Image taken by young person during participatory photograph activity.

representational 'success'. Drawing on Martin Jay's (2005) theorisation of blur as a metaphor and Gerhard Richter's technique of the 'sliding glance' (Elger, 2009), we examine how youth use photographic blurriness to generate multi-layered meaning.

By exploring the aesthetic, emotional and epistemological potential of blur, this study contributes to emerging conversations in participatory visual research and youth mental health. It advocates for a deeper appreciation of how creative methodologies can generate knowledge and connection – particularly among those whose voices are often left out of dominant research paradigms.

Centring young people aged 10–24, the project brings together multi-modal participatory arts practice and interpretivist phenomenology to develop an understanding of mental health grounded in diverse lived experience (Holroyd, 2007). Throughout the paper, we use the term 'young people' in line with the broader age range commonly adopted in ACEs and services research (10–24). The dataset analysed here, however, draws specifically on eight co-researchers who participated in the photography strand and reflective retreat activities (12–22). Accordingly, our interpretation of 'blurriness' is grounded in this 12–22 sample, while remaining attentive to the wider youth framework in which the study sits. Importantly, young people were involved not only as participants but as co-researchers. In one phase of the project, youth researchers and members of the research team attended a writers' retreat, using the retreat space to collaboratively reflect on and interpret the project's arts-based portfolio.

Background and rationale

ACEs refer to a set of potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood – including abuse, neglect and household dysfunction – that have been shown to impact mental and physical health throughout the life course (Bellis et al., 2019; Felitti et al., 1998). Since its inception, the ACEs framework has informed policy and practice across education, health and social care sectors. However, it has also faced critique for its individualising tendencies, limited attention to sociopolitical context and potential for deterministic interpretations (Edwards et al., 2017; Walsh, 2020).

Moreover, while the epidemiological link between ACEs and poor mental health outcomes is well established, far less is known about how young people themselves experience, interpret and express these impacts – particularly outside of clinical settings. Emotional dysregulation, memory fragmentation and verbal inaccessibility are common among trauma-impacted youth, making

traditional research methods insufficient for accessing their inner worlds (Kapitan, 2011; Malchiodi, 2011).

In response, arts-based and participatory methodologies have gained ground in youth mental health research as more inclusive, ethical and emotionally attuned approaches. These methods support co-production, creativity and emotional resonance, enabling marginalised youth to represent their experiences on their own terms (Cox et al., 2021). Photography – and photovoice in particular – has proven a powerful tool in this regard, offering youth a way to externalise internal states, explore identity and communicate meaning visually (Teti and Myroniuk, 2022; Wang and Burris, 1997). In parallel, social media has emerged as a key site for youth expression, where photography plays a central role in shaping identity and emotional narratives. Recent research highlights how visual trends on platforms like Instagram and TikTok promote aesthetic imperfection, emotional honesty and curated vulnerability (Abidin, 2021; Tiidenberg, 2018). These digital spaces influence how young people frame their self-expression – including the use of photographic blurriness – as part of everyday meaning-making and peer communication.

Our study builds on this work by focusing not only on photography as a medium, but on a specific visual and metaphorical element: blurriness. In photographic terms, 'blur' refers to a loss of sharpness caused by (a) motion blur (movement of camera/subject during exposure) and/or (b) defocus blur (the subject falling outside the focal plane). Defocus blur is shaped by depth of field and lens aperture; aesthetically it can appear as 'bokeh', where out-of-focus areas become a soft field that redirects attention and produces mood. In everyday phone photography, blur can be accidental (low light, movement) or deliberately produced (selective focus, portrait modes, intentional camera movement). While often considered a technical flaw, blurriness has been reclaimed in both contemporary art and youth digital culture as an aesthetic that conveys emotion, instability and authenticity (Jay, 2005; Richter in Elger, 2009). Among ACE-impacted youth in our study, blurred images became a site of meaning-making – evoking movement, chaos, ambiguity and emotional protection. We treat blur here as both an optical phenomenon and an aesthetic choice that participants re-signify through meaning-making. This paper examines how blurriness was interpreted, redefined and mobilised by young people as a visual language rooted in their lived experience.

By situating this work within current literature on ACEs, creative methodologies and visual semiotics, we aim to demonstrate how blurred imagery challenges dominant research paradigms and opens up new possibilities for youth-led knowledge production in mental health research. We also engage with broader discussions on subjectivity and representation in qualitative and creative research, recognising that meaning-making is contingent, situated and often embodied (Blackman, 2008; Leavy, 2020; Pink, 2020).

Moreover, this study does not present photography/photovoice as a new model; it builds on established participatory visual and sensory ethnography scholarship (Cox et al., 2021; Pink, 2020; Teti and Myroniuk, 2022; Wang and Burris, 1997). The contribution is the analytic focus on blurriness as a youth-defined aesthetic and ethical strategy within ACE-informed participatory work.

Theoretical framework

Constructivism provides the primary analytic frame for this paper, guiding how we interpret blur as meaning produced through social context, relational experience and youth interpretation. Chaos and photographic optics/bokeh are used as supporting concepts to extend (rather than duplicate) the constructivist reading, particularly where participants describe instability, movement, concealment or atmosphere.

Table 1. Theoretical frameworks, their roles and applications in the analysis of blur.

Theoretical framework	Role in analysis	Application in findings
Constructivist Theory	Explains how meaning is constructed from experience	Participants' personal narratives of blurriness
Chaos Theory	Highlights the unpredictability in emotional lives	Depicts emotional instability through blur
Bokeh Model	Discusses technical and aesthetic aspects of blur	How blur is used artistically and emotionally

Constructivist Theory, as formulated by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky (Pass, 2004), posits that knowledge and meaning are actively constructed through individuals' interactions with the world, shaped by their prior experiences. In this study, constructivism helps explain how participants treat blur not as a technical fault but as an expressive resource – reworking it to convey affect, memory and the complexity of lived experience.

Constructivist Theory is also particularly pertinent here because interpretation is inherently subjective: participants do not simply record scenes but actively shape what blur communicates through captions, sequencing and reflection. Blur becomes meaningful through this interpretive labour – connecting image-making to personal narrative, relational context and youth digital aesthetics.

Chaos theory is used more selectively to interpret moments where participants describe blur in terms of movement, volatility and nonlinearity (Hossenfelder and Palmer, 2020) – for example, when blur is linked to running, disruption or emotional instability. In these instances, blur helps visualise how small shifts in a moment (light, motion, mood) can transform what an image conveys, without requiring a single fixed or 'resolved' meaning (Table 1).

Additionally, the Bokeh Model (Nasse, 2010) offers a technical lens through which to examine the aesthetic implications of blurriness in photography. While Constructivist and Chaos theories provide insight into the emotional and symbolic resonance of blurriness, the Bokeh Model highlights the precision and creativity involved in producing intentional blur. This model is employed to analyse how participants use various photographic techniques to manipulate the focus and depth of field, thereby creating images that visually communicate their internal chaos and emotional ambiguity. The aesthetic choices made by these young photographers are not merely accidents or technical errors but are deliberate acts of artistic expression, aligned with current trends in social media and youth culture that embrace imperfection.

Methodology

This study was guided by three research questions co-developed with the youth researchers.

RQ1: What do blurred images represent to young people with lived experience of ACEs?

RQ2: How do young people perceive and use blur as part of their visual self-expression?

RQ3: How does meaning unfold around blurred images for both the maker and the viewer (including affective 'punctum' moments and culturally shaped 'studium' readings)?

These questions shaped the design of the photography activities, the reflective prompts and the thematic analysis presented below:

Participatory research method

This study adopted a participatory research design, engaging young people with lived experience of ACEs as co-researchers throughout key stages of the project. Youth participants were involved in shaping the research focus, particularly during creative workshops where themes and visual practices emerged organically from their contributions. While the initial research design was developed by the academic team, it remained flexible and responsive to the input of youth collaborators, particularly in data generation and interpretation.

Co-researchers participated in the production and reflection of visual artefacts (e.g. photographs) and contributed to the analysis through guided discussions, annotation and group dialogue during reflective events such as the writers' retreat. Some young people also participated in dissemination activities, including public exhibitions, presentations and panels at Parliament. Where appropriate and with consent, they have been credited by name. All co-researchers were compensated for their time in line with ethical guidelines and the project's youth engagement policy.

While adult researchers held structural responsibility for project management and publication, we sought to foster equitable collaboration through shared decision-making, flexible facilitation and ongoing dialogue. We acknowledge that power dynamics cannot be fully equalised, but we are committed to transparency, reflexivity and accountability in our use of the term 'co-researcher'.

Participants and recruitment

Eight youth co-researchers aged 12–22 within a wider youth frame (10–24) were recruited for the study. Given the participatory and arts-based design, this paper aims for depth rather than breadth. The small sample is therefore treated as an information-rich co-researcher group, and the claims are intended to support transferability through contextual detail rather than statistical representativeness. Participants were recruited via Youth Participant Advisory Groups (YPAGs) affiliated with the project, including a local youth mental health network and other local youth mental health networks. YPAGs were composed of young people who provided ongoing feedback and guidance to the project, and recruitment focused on those who expressed interest in participatory arts-based research.

The group was diverse in terms of identity and experience: two participants identified as Muslim, all identified as neurodivergent, and one participant was physically disabled. While formal demographic data was not collected quantitatively due to the ethically sensitive and creative nature of the study, participants self-identified as having lived through childhood adversity, including but not limited to emotional trauma, neglect, family breakdown and loss (Table 2).

Photography and visual methods

Photography was used as a central mode of expression and inquiry in this study. Participants were given digital cameras or used their own devices, which they often used for social media. Social media in this study functioned primarily as (a) an aesthetic reference frame and (b) an everyday context participants drew on when interpreting their images. Participants frequently referenced Instagram and TikTok conventions (e.g. 'faceless accounts', intentional imperfection, mood-driven

Table 2. Participant identifiers (P1–P8) are used to support analytic clarity while preserving anonymity. Identity markers are included only where participants chose to disclose them as relevant to their reflections. Ages are reported as at the time of participation; one participant's age is withheld to further reduce identifiability.

Participant ID	Age	Gender (self-described)	UK region (broad)
P1	21	Male	South East England
P2	20	Female	London
P3	16	Female	Yorkshire & the Humber
P4	19	Male	Midlands
P5	18	Not disclosed	South West England
P6	12	Not disclosed	South West England
P7	22	Not disclosed	South East England
P8	18	Female	Yorkshire & the Humber

imagery) during Jamboard and retreat discussions; however, the study did not scrape or analyse participants' social media accounts. Where participants chose to discuss or show an image that had also been posted online, we treated the *participant's reflection* as the data, and included the image only with explicit consent and the option to withdraw. No formal instructions were provided on how to take photographs; instead, the approach was deliberately open-ended to allow for creative freedom. This flexibility aimed to centre the participants' perspectives without imposing aesthetic or thematic expectations.

A notable outcome of this approach was the number of blurred photographs produced by participants. These were not prompted by the research team but emerged organically through the process. Initially treated as accidental or technical issues, the recurrence of blurred images became a focus of discussion during a later Writers Retreat, where participants were invited to reflect on the visual material they had created. It was during these conversations that young people attributed meaning to the blur – describing it as a reflection of emotional states, uncertainty, movement and memory. Several participants also drew connections between photographic blurriness and social media aesthetics, where imperfection, partial visibility and mood-driven imagery are common. This re-framing of blur shifted the analysis and became a key focus of the research.

Photography sessions were facilitated by academic researchers and visual practitioners. Participants had full control over which images were shared, discussed or included in dissemination.

Use of Jamboards

Jamboards were used during a writers' retreat to facilitate collaborative brainstorming and data collection. Participants shared keywords, artistic notes and personal reflections on how blurriness appears in their photography and daily lives. Jamboards provided a dynamic and interactive platform for visualizing and organizing these ideas in real-time (Rahmasari and Chasanatun, 2024).

Sharing of blogs

In addition to Jamboards, participants were invited to contribute blogs, offering deeper narrative reflections (Fox, 2024) on blurriness through various lenses. Participants shared deeper insights on blurriness through the lens of scientific (Physics – based on their educational background),

personal experiences and artistic expression. These blogs enrich the study by providing detailed, personal accounts that complement the collective insights gathered from the Jamboards.

Data analysis

The dataset comprised participant-produced photographs and zines, written reflections, blog posts and Jamboard contributions generated across workshops and the Writers' Retreat. Audio-recorded group discussions (where applicable) were transcribed; text-based materials (Jamboard posts, written reflections, zine captions) were compiled verbatim into a single analytic corpus. These materials provided rich qualitative accounts of how participants understood and used 'blurriness' in relation to emotion, memory, privacy and digital aesthetics.

Analysis was participatory and iterative. First, during the Writers' Retreat and follow-up sessions, young people engaged in co-interpretation by clustering images, generating keywords and discussing what blur 'does' and what it 'means' across different contexts. This stage produced a participant-authored set of descriptors (e.g. movement, chaos, calm, concealment, hope) and interpretive statements that functioned as a youth-led coding layer. Second, the research team conducted an initial round of open coding across the full corpus to organise recurring concepts and language (Rabinovich and Kacen, 2013), staying close to participants' terms. Third, themes were developed by grouping codes into broader analytic categories (de Farias et al., 2021) and then refining them into a coherent thematic structure, guided by the research questions. Fourth, this draft thematic map was shared back with youth researchers for confirmation, renaming and refinement, ensuring that themes reflected participants' meanings rather than being imposed externally.

We framed analytic rigour in terms of trustworthiness rather than inter-coder agreement alone. Consistency checks were carried out through team discussion of a subset of materials and through maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and theme revisions. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across multiple forms of data (images, captions, Jamboard reflections, retreat dialogue, blogs), attention to divergent or 'negative' instances that complicated early interpretations, and participant validation (member reflection) where participants reviewed short summaries of themes and offered clarifications or additions. This approach aligns with participatory qualitative research where reliability is achieved through transparency, reflexivity and collaborative sense-making rather than solely statistical measures of coder agreement (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020).

Theoretical concepts were used as interpretive lenses after themes were generated, rather than as pre-set coding categories. Constructivism informed how we understood blur as participant-authored meaning produced through lived experience and interpretation; chaos and optics/bokeh were used more selectively where participants explicitly described movement, instability, concealment or atmosphere. The final themes are presented with direct quotations and image-based examples to show how interpretations were grounded in participants' own words and artefacts (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

Findings and discussion

The research was framed by three key questions: (1) What do blurred images represent to young people with ACEs? (2) How do young people with ACEs perceive and utilise blurriness in their visual expressions? (3) How do blurred images unfold in meaning to facilitate understanding for both the creator and viewer? These questions are systematically addressed by employing Constructivist Theory, Chaos Theory and the Bokeh Model, which provide a multi-faceted interpretation of the participants' experiences.

Figure 2. Reference shared by young participants during the activity.

How the participatory method shapes what we can claim

The themes below are grounded in multimodal participant materials: photographs, zines that combined images with short written reflections, collaborative Jamboard discussions and retreat dialogue. The participatory design matters analytically because participants did not only 'provide data'; they actively proposed concepts, generated interpretive keywords and offered definitions for blur. Importantly, several meaningful contributions come from participants who did not attend the retreat but produced zines independently, showing that meaning-making occurred both through collective dialogue and through self-directed creative practice.

The representation of blurred images for young people with ACEs

Participants repeatedly framed blur as a way of representing emotional complexity – uncertainty, instability, disorientation and ambivalence – without requiring a single coherent narrative. Under a constructivist lens, blur does not 'stand for' one thing; it becomes a flexible symbol, shaped by the participant's memory, relationships and digital visual culture.

A striking feature of the dataset is that participants resisted fixed technical definitions of blur and instead proposed reclaiming it as an emotional language. One participant observed: 'The blurriness we discussed doesn't seem to have a definition … It could be interesting to create our own definition of blurriness (maybe the outcome of research?)' (P3, Writers' Retreat discussion). This moment captures a key constructivist mechanism: participants actively build the categories through which

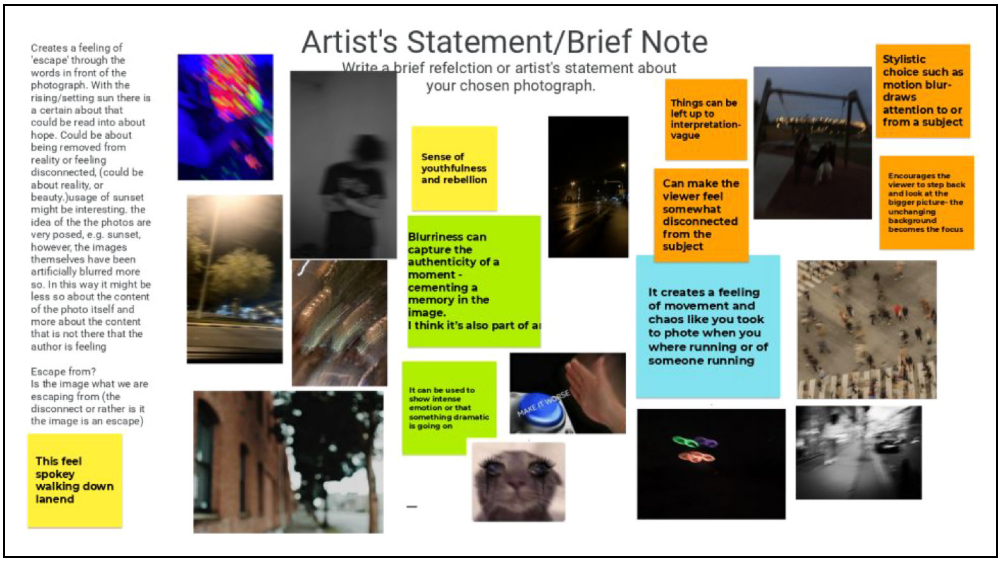

Figure 3. Jamboard screenshot showing young participants' reflections on their photographs, including keywords, insights and visual interpretations of blurriness.

their images can be understood. Rather than treating blur as photographic failure, they treat it as a negotiable aesthetic that can hold emotional truth.

Figure 2, a reference image shared by participants, functions as a collective prompt: blur is approached as an intentional style and a mood-device rather than an error to correct. The 'definition' becomes something the group can co-author.

Blur was also used to hold contradictory affect – particularly the coexistence of escape and hope. One participant wrote on Jamboard:

> Blurred photos create a feeling of 'escape' through the words in front of the photograph. With the rising/setting sun there is a certain amount that could be read into about hope. (P1, Jamboard)

This reflection is important because it shows blur doing double work: it signals distance from the present (escape) while simultaneously permitting interpretive openings (hope). In other words, blur becomes a technique for not being pinned down – emotionally or narratively – while still being communicative (Figure 3).

Several participants described blur as closely linked to the sensation of movement and disorder. One participant reflected during the retreat: 'Blurriness creates a feeling of movement and chaos, like you took the photo when you were running or of someone running' (P6, Writers' Retreat discussion). Here, chaos is most useful not as a grand theory imposed from outside, but as participant vocabulary for lived instability – where the image captures the feeling of a moment slipping out of control.

The referenced blur style in Figure 4 illustrates how motion blur and defocus can evoke urgency and volatility. Participants connect this visual instability to emotional instability, describing blur as an aesthetic analogue to a 'running' (P3, Writers' Retreat; Jamboard) body and a restless mind.

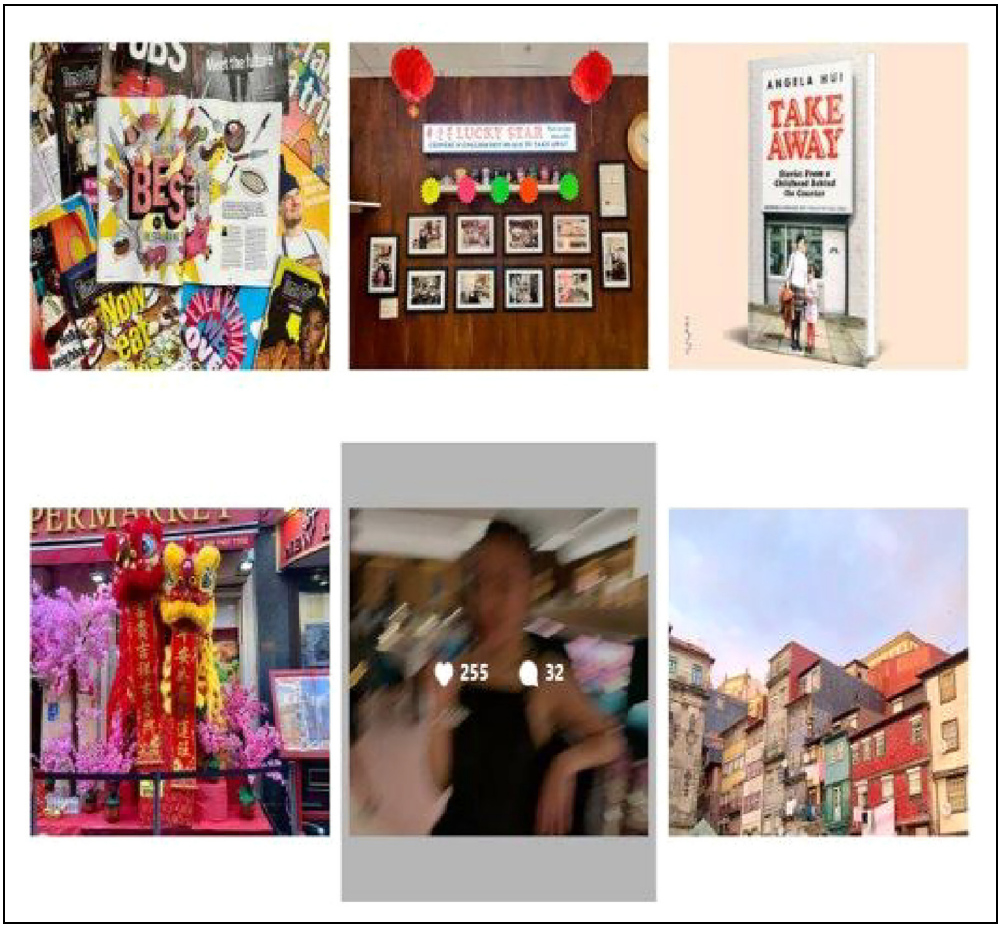

Figure 4. Reference shared by young person during the activity.

Together, these materials suggest that blurred images represent a confluence of emotional ambiguity and youth-authored meaning. Participants do not treat blur as absence; they treat it as a different way of seeing – one capable of holding uncertainty, contradiction and emergence.

Blur as visual language in participant photographs and zines: intimacy, harm, memory and calm

While much of the collective interpretive work occurred during the Writers Retreat, equally meaningful insights came from participants who created zines using their own photographs. These zines provide a slightly different analytic window: rather than meaning emerging through group talk, it emerges through the pairing of image and text – through creative sequencing, captioning and self-curation.

Blur as intimacy without legibility. One image shows four friends lying on the floor; faces and bodies are blurred by movement. The caption reads: 'My friends are honestly my family and I really love

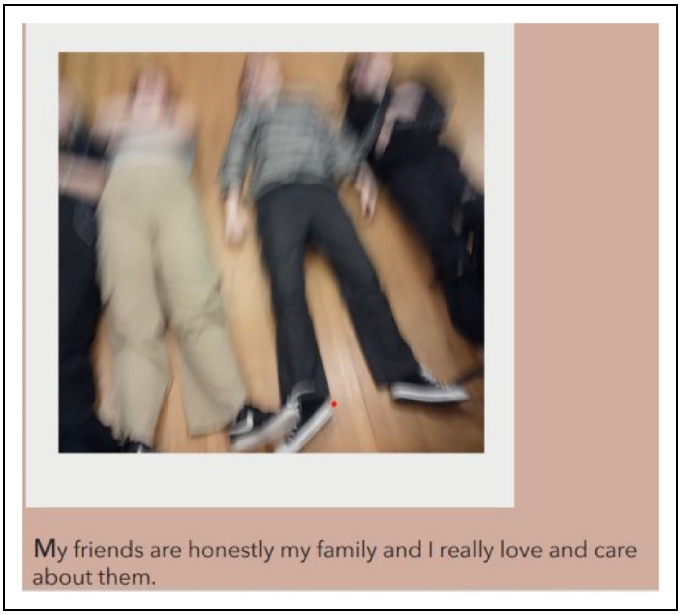

Figure 5. 'My friends are honestly my family and I really love and care about them'. Participant photograph showing how blurriness reinforces emotional closeness without requiring visual clarity (shared with participant consent).

and care about them' (P3, zine caption). When participants revisited this zine, they emphasised that blur did not reduce emotional impact. Instead, blur heightened closeness: what matters is not identifiable detail but embodied togetherness (Writers' Retreat discussion).

Figure 5 shows how blur can produce intimacy without requiring recognisable faces. It shifts attention from identity to affect – love, safety, belonging.

Blur as aesthetic filter for harm and difficult memory. Another photograph shows ballet shoes in soft focus paired with a raw letter to a former teacher: 'You ruined a fuc**g good 4 year old' (P8, zine text/letter). Here, blur operates as an aesthetic buffer: the confrontation is direct in text, but the image holds the memory at a slight distance. The softness does not weaken the confrontation; it stages the memory as painful and complex – something that cannot be re-presented cleanly (Figure 6).

Blur here can be read as an ethics of approach: the participant can name harm while avoiding full visual exposure. The soft focus mirrors how childhood harm can be vividly felt yet not cleanly retrievable.

Blur as anonymity, disconnection and mood. Several images use blur and darkness to create anonymity and atmosphere. A night-time funfair image includes a hand near the camera; faces remain indistinct. The image feels social, yet emotionally distant – suggesting disconnection, ambiguity and a desire to remain unlocatable (Figure 7).

Another shows a rain-covered window at sunset, where light appears as something 'struggling through'. A third includes a garden under a soft red haze with the words: 'This picture reminds me

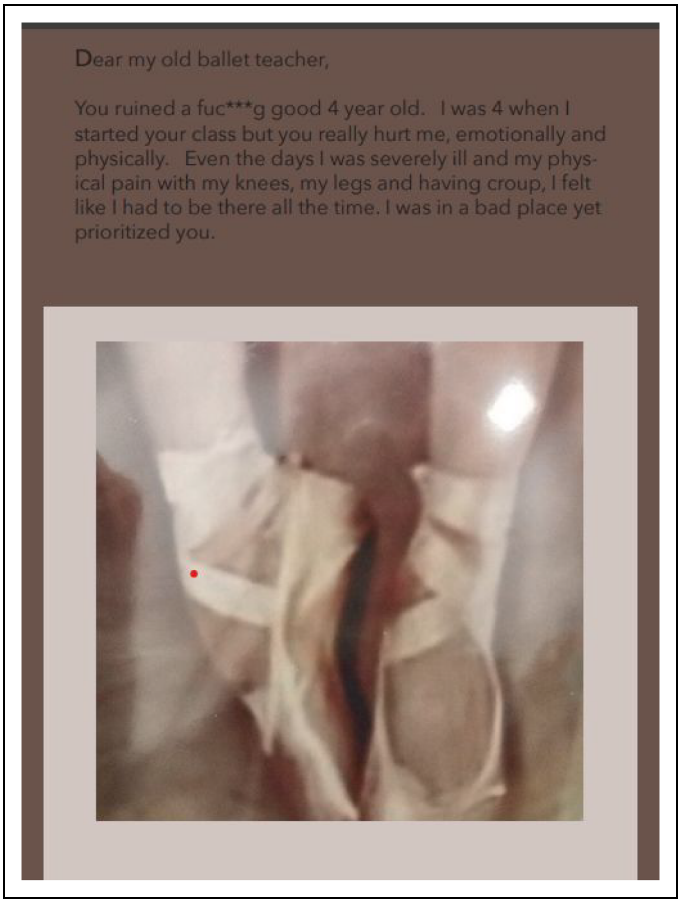

Figure 6. 'Dear my old ballet teacher …'. The image pairs visual blur with emotional confrontation, softening traumatic memory.

of remembering your childhood … happy, joyful but blurred and part cut out. Missing a piece'. Across these images, blur becomes a material metaphor for partial recall – childhood as something sensed, interrupted, and uneven (Figure 8).

These images link blur to fragmentation: not simply forgetting but remembering in incomplete fragments. The participant reflected that 'missing piece' language connects blur to both loss and a refusal of forced coherence (P1, image reflection).

Blur as calm and regulation. Other zines paired blurred night photography with words like 'Calm', 'No sadness', and 'Peaceful'. This matters analytically because it complicates any assumption that blur is only trauma-coded. For some participants, they said that blur signifies safety and stillness. It becomes a mood-setting tool that supports quietness and self-regulation (Ps Writers' Retreat discussion) (Figure 9).

In these cases blur is not chaos; it is containment. The softened image produces a controlled emotional environment, an atmosphere where distress is reduced.

Figure 7. Blurred image from a night-time funfair, suggesting mood, anonymity and disconnection.

Taken together, participant photographs and zines reveal blur as a nuanced emotional grammar: intimacy, confrontation, nostalgia, concealment, calm. Importantly, the same aesthetic property holds different meanings depending on what is being approached, avoided or shared.

How young people perceive and use blur: authenticity, rebellion and controlled visibility

The second research question concerns blur as both artistic device and emotional tool. Participants described blur as capturing 'authenticity' – not because it is raw in a documentary sense, but because it matches how memory and feeling often operate: uneven, unclear and difficult to stabilise. One participant stated: 'Blurriness captures the authenticity of a moment, cementing a memory in the image'. (P5, Writers' Retreat discussion). Here blur becomes a way of resisting polished perfection and making space for experience as it is lived. Participants also located blur in contemporary youth digital aesthetics. Several described blur as linked to a 'grungy, youth, rebellious' style and as part of platform vernaculars that value mood and imperfection (Writers' Retreat discussion). This situates the study not only within individual psychology but within youth visual culture: blur is a style young people recognise, circulate and use to signal feeling. Blur also served a protective function. One participant reflected: 'Sometimes someone may blur things on purpose … it's a way of showing what I feel without showing everything'. This positions blur not only as an aesthetic choice, but as a practice of controlled visibility: young people share affect and narrative while retaining boundaries around what remains private or too intense to make fully legible. In this study, blur was not imposed as an ethical safeguard by researchers; it emerged as a youth-led strategy of self-representation. This matters for participatory visual methods because it shows how participants can build their own forms of protection into the image itself – through partiality, distance and selective obscuring.

This relates to wider debates in visual research about whether disguising images protects participants or inadvertently erases them by removing recognisability (Gubrium and Harper, 2016; Wiles et al., 2011). Here, participants treated blur as neither erasure nor withdrawal. Instead, blur functioned as an intentional aesthetic of *opacity*: a way of being present in the frame without being fully exposed. In this sense, blur becomes a method of ethical authorship – participants decide what the viewer can access, and what remains held back (Pink, 2020).

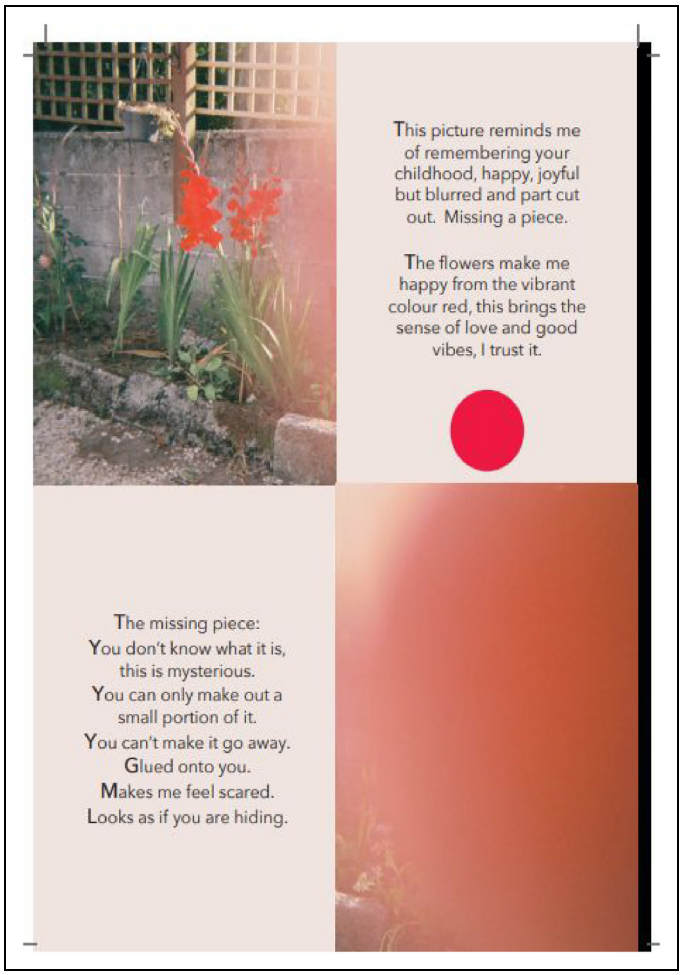

Figure 8. Blurred memory as a metaphor for childhood disorientation and emotional loss.

How meaning unfolds for makers and viewers: interpretation, affect and "feeling something"

The third research question focuses on how blurred images unfold in meaning for both creators and viewers. For makers, blur often worked as a visual proxy for interior states – confusion, vulnerability, emotional overload and ambivalence – especially where words felt inadequate or too direct. One participant captured this succinctly: 'Blurriness helps me show how I feel inside, like everything is a little bit unclear' (P4, participant reflection; Writers Retreat). Rather than treating this as a lack of communication, participants used blur to communicate *through* uncertainty.

Figure 10 illustrates how blur becomes a deliberate skill and expressive technique: the participant frames photographic technique as a way to translate emotion, not simply represent objects.

For viewers, blurred images invited interpretation rather than delivering a single stable message. Participants repeatedly emphasised that the viewer might not 'understand' blur in a literal way but

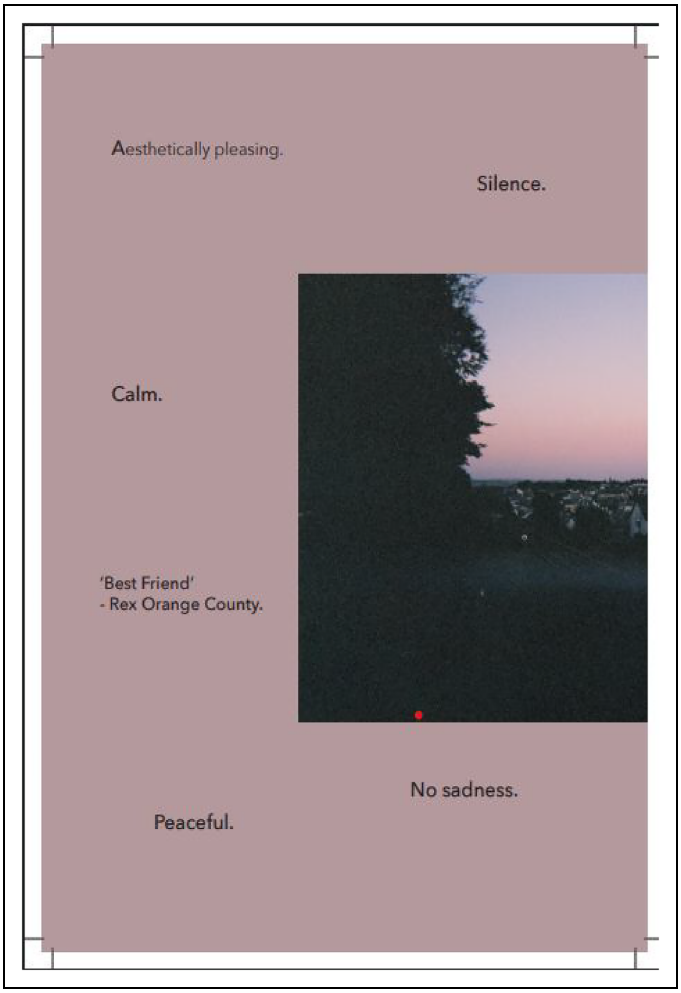

Figure 9. Blurred and dark photography used to evoke stillness, emotional safety and absence of distress.

could still be moved by it. As one participant puts it: 'The viewer might not understand what the blur means, but they'll feel something' (P5, Writers' Retreat discussion). This points to blur as an affective invitation: the image does not resolve meaning, but opens an emotional and interpretive space.

Barthes' distinction between *studium* (the cultural/contextual reading of an image) and *punctum* (the detail or sensation that pierces the viewer) is helpful here (Barthes, 1981). In blurred photographs, punctum is often not a sharp detail but a *quality of atmosphere* – movement, softness, darkness, partial concealment – that 'lands' differently for each viewer. Blur thus creates a relationship between maker and audience that is not based on transparency, but on resonance: meaning emerges in the interaction between what is shown, what is withheld and what the viewer brings.

In moments where participants explicitly linked blur to movement ('running', 'chaos'), chaos theory can be read as a vocabulary for non-linear experience: a small shift – light, motion, a change

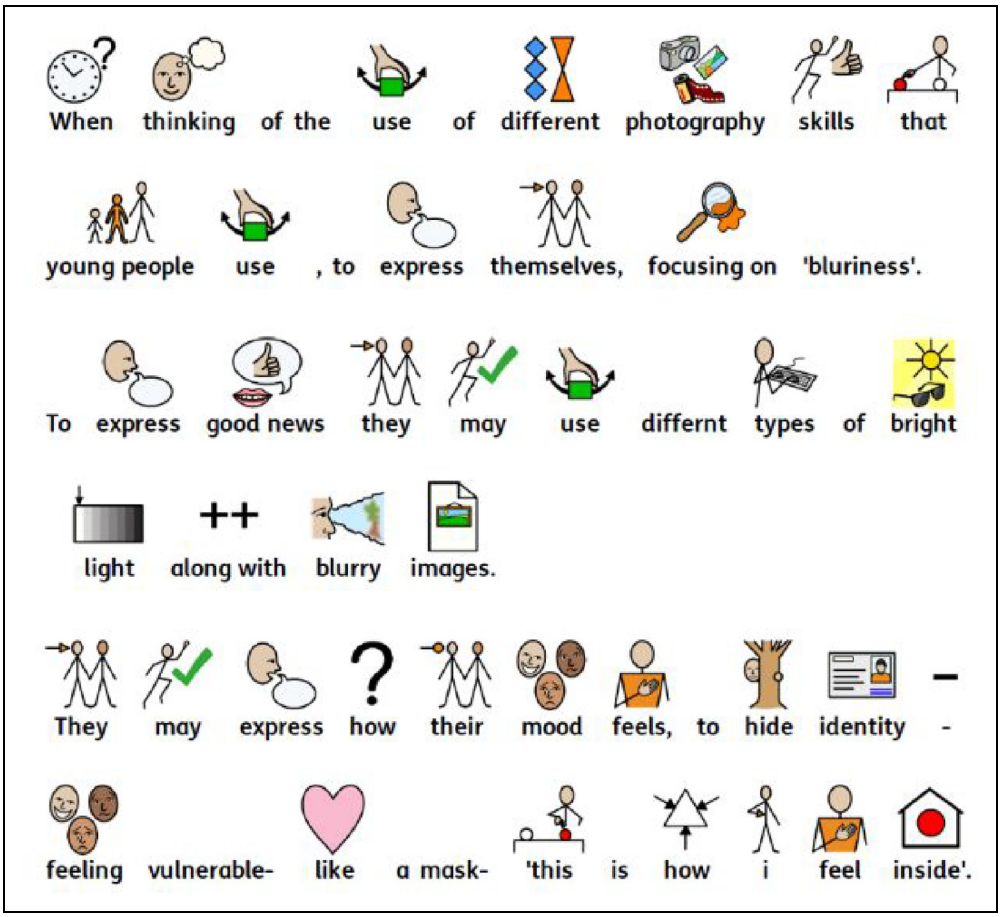

Figure 10. Visual blog by young person on the use of photography skills to express emotions through 'blurriness'.

in mood – alters how the image communicates. However, in this dataset, 'chaos' is most compelling when it remains close to participant language: blur as a felt instability, rather than an external explanatory system.

Redefining blurriness in youth digital culture: faceless accounts, rebellion and platform life

Participants also situated blur within contemporary youth aesthetics online. Blur was discussed as part of a recognisable 'grungy', youth-coded style, and as a strategy used within 'faceless accounts' and partial-anonymity cultures on social media. In these contexts, blur can operate as both style and boundary: it signals authenticity and mood while reducing exposure.

Figure 11 shows the collective labour of definition-making – blur discussed not as error but as a shared youth vernacular tied to anonymity, mood and digital self-expression.

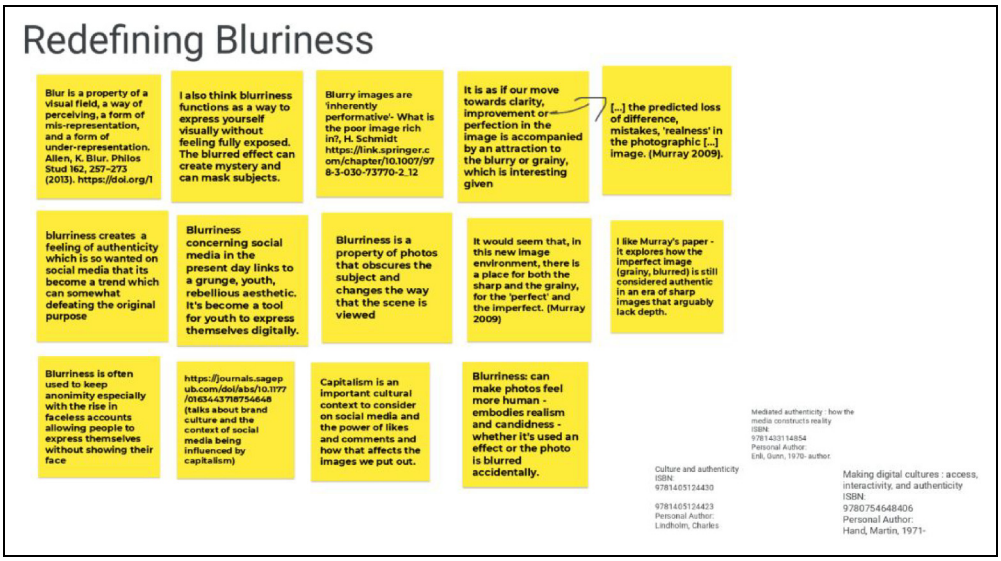

Figure 11. Activity during the writers retreat where young people collaboratively suggested and redefined the concept of blurriness through dialogue, creative expression and reflection.

Some participants also pointed to the social life of images online – how likes, shares and platform trends can shape what becomes legible as 'good' or 'meaningful' blur. These reflections complicate any simple opposition between authenticity and platform culture. Instead, the data suggest that blur becomes meaningful at the intersection of personal experience and circulating aesthetics: young people draw on platform styles while also repurposing them to hold private feelings and memories.

Integrating the themes: what blur makes possible. Across the dataset, blur functions as a flexible emotional and ethical device. It can register instability and uncertainty, but also intimacy, calm and care. It can protect without disappearing. It can hold memory as fragmented – 'missing a piece' – without forcing coherence. Most importantly, blur enabled participants to author their own terms of visibility: to be expressive without being fully exposed. This shifts blur from a deficit model ('not clear enough') to a youth-defined language of partiality, mood and agency.

Implications and transferability

Although the study is small, it offers a clear methodological implication for ACE-informed participatory work: creative methods should allow forms of expression that do not demand full disclosure, linear narration or visual legibility. Opacity can be an ethical resource, not a barrier. For practice, this supports designing youth mental health research and engagement activities that permit partial visibility – where young people can communicate affect and experience while retaining control over what remains private.

For future research, the approach could be extended across different groups, settings and media forms (e.g. short video, sound, collage, platform-native formats) to examine whether blurred/opaque aesthetics similarly support agency and emotional communication. The analytic detail offered

here is intended to support transferability to comparable contexts, enabling readers to judge how the method and findings might travel to other youth-led participatory visual projects.

Conclusion

This study shows how photographic blurriness can become a youth-defined visual language rather than a technical imperfection. For participants, blur enabled expression of experiences that were difficult to render in crisp representation – holding ambiguity, vulnerability, closeness, distance and shifts in mood. Across photographs, zines and collaborative reflections, blurriness supported both emotional communication and boundary-making: it softened painful detail, created atmosphere and allowed participants to control what could be seen and what remained private. In this sense, blur functioned as an aesthetic choice and an ethical practice of self-representation, enabling presence in the frame without full exposure.

Constructivism helps explain why blur becomes meaningful here: interpretation is produced through lived experience, relational context, captions, sequencing and shared discussion rather than fixed in the image itself. Supporting concepts such as chaos (where participants describe movement, volatility or disruption) and optics/bokeh (where soft focus produces mood and directs attention) offer additional vocabularies for understanding how technique and feeling co-produce meaning.

While blurriness operated powerfully within this co-produced research space, its communicability beyond the group remains an open question. Future work could test transferability by sharing selected images – under youth-led consent and framing – with other youth groups or public audiences to examine how blur is received and reinterpreted. The findings also suggest the value of creative, participatory methods that make room for opacity, partial disclosure and youth control over visibility in ACE-informed research.

Acknowledgements

We thank all young people involved in the ATTUNE Project for their creative and emotional contributions. We also acknowledge the visual facilitators, youth workers and partners who supported this research.

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Ethical approval and consent to participate

This study received ethical approval from the West Midlands – Black Country Research Ethics Committee (REC Reference: 23/WM/0105). Informed assent and parental consent were obtained from all participants. For participants under 16, parental consent was secured.

Consent for publication

All photographs and zines included in the study were shared with explicit participant assent and guardian consent for publication and dissemination.

Author contributions

Syeda Sana Batool, Anna Mankee-Williams: Conceptualisation.
Syeda Sana Batool, Grace Bennett, Jack Hanrahan, Syed Ali Jafar Naqvi: Data collection.

Syeda Sana Batool, Jack Hanrahan, Syed Ali Jafar Naqvi: Analysis.
Syeda Sana Batool, Anna Mankee-Williams: Writing – original draft
All authors: Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by the UK Research and Innovation (MRC/AHRC/ESRC) under the *Adolescence, Mental Health and the Developing Mind Programme (ATTUNE Project)*, Grant Number MR/W002183/1.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the sensitive nature of youth experiences of ACEs, data access is restricted to protect participants' confidentiality.

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