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Emoji elicitation: An accessible visual method for focus groups

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss how we used emojis – now ubiquitous in everyday digital communication – as an elicitation tool within semi-structured focus group interviews with young women. We reflect on the affordances and limitations we encountered in using emoji elicitation. We find that emoji elicitation offers most of the established benefits of other forms of visual elicitation (including photography and drawing) but with additional key advantages of speed, low costs and accessibility – for both participants and researchers. Emoji elicitation effectively produced more equitable research relations and facilitated nuanced and meaningful discussions about sensitive topics and complex emotions, about the present, past and future. We critically reflect on the limitations of emoji elicitation for certain groups compared to other creative methods, before concluding that it offers significant potential advantages for social researchers across academic disciplines. Overall, this paper extends knowledges about the use and affordances of visual elicitation methods by demonstrating the value of emoji elicitation as a pragmatic and powerful research tool in qualitative social research.

Keywords

focus groups, elicitation, visual elicitation, emojis, creative methods

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Introduction

With the rise of personal digital devices, the use of emojis has become commonplace and emojis now form a central part of young people's everyday digital vernacular (Shah and Tewari, 2021). With around 3941 directly accessible emojis (Emoji Counts, v17.0, no date), they offer a complex and widespread visual language. Emojis perform important social functions in digital communication (Gibson, 2024) and support users' emotional expression (Alshenqeeti and Hamza, 2016; Bai et al., 2019; Gullberg, 2016). However, emojis rarely act as fixed and literal symbols; rather they are an often ambiguous and culturally contextualised mode of communication (Gibson, 2024; Miller et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2022). Whilst the epistemic and ethical affordances of visual elicitation methods in social research are well established (Collier, 1957; Pauwels and Mannay, 2020; Rose, 2022), there is a paucity of literature on the use of emojis as an elicitation tool. This is surprising given emojis' social ubiquity. We argue that since emojis provide a visual emotional and experiential library that most people are familiar with and can access quickly, they are able to offer many of the benefits commonly ascribed to other established visual elicitation methods, including drawing and photography, but with improved accessibility and speed.

The paper presents a novel approach to visual elicitation in qualitative research: emoji elicitation. We developed this method for use in focus groups in a wider mixed-methods study called 'L-earning: rethinking young women's working lives'. In this paper we discuss how participants – 83 women aged 14–23-years-old – engaged with emoji elicitation across 16 focus groups. Focus groups took place in a diverse range of schools, colleges and universities across England and were designed to generate knowledge about young women's experiences of undertaking paid work alongside education – or what we call Earning while Learning (hereafter EwL). We found that emoji elicitation allowed participants to talk about experiences and imaginaries of work in ways that were variously literal, playful, hopeful and pessimistic. We outline these findings and consider potential future applications of emoji elicitation.

We begin by reviewing the established knowledge about visual elicitation methods and emojis, situating emoji elicitation as a potentially powerful method to stimulate meaningful talk. We then describe the design of the emoji elicitation method and how it was deployed within focus groups, before discussing three specific affordances of the method that emerged in our study. Firstly, we outline the practical advantages of emoji elicitation for both participants and researchers, including the ease of set-up, accessibility, speed and cost. Secondly, we show that emoji elicitation produced a particular relational space – one that quickly entrenched a relaxed and safe atmosphere – explaining how this supported deep and nuanced discussion in a short research encounter. Thirdly, we discuss the sort of data that was generated by emoji elicitation. We highlight the ways in which emoji elicitation enabled insights into participants' working presents, pasts and imagined futures, surfacing complex and sometimes contradictory feelings about paid work that might have been harder to identify with standard interview questions alone. To conclude, we reflect on some potential limitations of emoji elicitation and identify further potential uses and implications of the method.

Literature review: visual elicitation methods and emojis

Whilst visual research methods have a long history (Collier, 1957, 1967), they have proliferated in the social sciences in recent decades (Pink, 2012; Puwar, 2009; Rose, 2014). These methods have been shown to centre young people's existing everyday expressive repertoires (Thomson, 2008) and to generate richer insights into people's everyday lives (Gauntlett, 2007; Thomson and Hall, 2008). Visual elicitation, and in particular photo elicitation – whereby participants take photographs related to the research topic and discuss them in interviews or focus groups – has gained particular traction (Harper, 2002; Rose, 2022), with multiple benefits ascribed to this approach, including avoiding 'clichés' and 'ready-made answers' (Bagnoli, 2009: 566). Creative and visual elicitation methods have been advocated as effective and ethical ways to generate knowledge about children and young people's lives.

Whilst visual elicitation methods have many advantages, they also have limitations. For example, they do not offer an easy resolution to power imbalances in research (Allan, 2012; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016; Teti, 2019). Asking participants to create an image – especially using art forms like drawing and painting which are perceived to require a high level of skill – can itself be seen as intimidating and potentially exclusionary (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Rose, 2022). Even using familiar visual methods does not guarantee ethical research relations (Wood, 2015: 136). For instance, participants may feel concerned about generating an image that pleases the researcher (Rose, 2022). Lyon and Carabelli (2016) also argue that some visual methods may seem childish to older young people, and be perceived as patronising. Claims that visual methods provide an easy way of accessing 'youth voice' have been countered by the assertion that this is heavily contingent on how the methods are enacted and the specific social relations of the space in which they are used (Lomax, 2012). Whilst acknowledging that visual methods do not *necessarily* produce ethical relations with participants, we nevertheless thought that the position of emojis in people's everyday lives offered some interesting methodological possibilities. Specifically, we hoped that the emoji method would help interactions to go beyond what would ordinarily be produced through traditional focus group interviews alone.

Whilst emojis are now a widespread visual language (Chen et al., 2024; Danesi, 2016; Shah and Tewari, 2021), there is, to date, only a small body of academic literature documenting their use in qualitative research (Cabraal and Gawne, 2024; Fane et al., 2018; Mackenzie et al., 2018; Massey, 2022). A striking feature of this literature is the focus on using emojis in research with children and young people. For example, Massey (2022) proposes that emojis represent a 'familiar' communicative language for respondents to his survey of eight and 9-year-old pupils. Similarly, Fane et al. (2018) argue that using printed emojis allowed their team to engage with children's everyday life-worlds, since these increasingly include digital technologies. These authors propose that using emojis – an everyday digital vernacular for children and young people – is 'a tool to position young children as the "knowers" and "framers" of knowledge within childhood research' (Fane et al., 2018: 2). They found that some facial emojis were understood to represent different emotions by their participants, and they discuss the complex conversations that

the emojis stimulated in focus groups. Other evidence about emojis suggests that they are differently understood by different groups of people (Cabraal and Gawne, 2024; Dainas and Herring, 2021) and highlights that they can have fluid and multiple meanings (Santos et al., 2022). These complexities may mean that emojis offer a nuanced and fluid way to stimulate talk in research. Fane et al. (2018) conclude that using emojis to elicit conversations in qualitative research is a powerful way to stimulate children's voices about the complexities of their lives and an approach which can challenge hierarchical research relations.

Drawing on existing literatures, we suggest that emoji elicitation is a way to activate a widespread and popular visual language in research, harnessing many of the established affordances of other visual elicitation methods, to stimulate different sorts of talk in focus groups. Whilst the small body of literature on emojis in research points to their specific affordances in studies involving children, there is no reason that these benefits should be limited to children, given the ubiquity of emojis in online communication across age groups (Chen et al., 2024), notwithstanding some age and gender variation in emoji use (Chen et al., 2024; Herring and Dainas, 2020). In reflecting on our experiences of emoji elicitation, this paper extends existing knowledges about visual elicitation and builds on the small but important body of literature about emoji elicitation. In the next section, we introduce the wider study and explain how we incorporated emoji elicitation methods in our focus group design, before going on to discuss the benefits and limitations of using the method in our study.

Arriving at emojis: designing methods to research young women's working lives

Our research study examines young women's earliest experiences of paid work and how these contribute to later working inequalities. It is a mixed method study, involving analysis of national survey data, interviews with young women workers and focus groups with young women still in education. From the early planning stages of the study, we wanted to design methods that would generate deep and nuanced conversations with young women about their early experiences of work, enabling us to get beneath dominant discourses about work. In policy and media debates, and some academic literature, students' paid work is presented narrowly; for example, as a hinderance to educational attainment, as purely instrumental or as meaningful only when cultivating future employability. As we argue elsewhere (Zhong et al., 2025), these accounts also commonly rely on over-simplified ideas of linear transitions from education to work; overlooking the messiness of the working life course and ignoring evidence of gendered patterning from an early age, including occupational segregation and a gender wage gap (Besen-Cassino, 2008, 2018; Patterson and Forbes, 2012). By contrast, our study aimed to produce more complex and nuanced accounts of women's early experiences of work, considering how these might form part of their gendered conditioning as workers. The focus groups aimed to enable conversations among diverse young women about their experiences of EwL, including their working conditions, thoughts and feelings about work and future working imaginaries. We wanted to enable young women to reflect on the many and varied ways their early working experiences held meaning and value

for them. Making space for the mundane, pleasurable, frustrating and harmful aspects of their working lives was thus a priority.

The focus groups took place in schools, colleges and universities, sometimes scheduled between classes, which meant start and end times were tightly defined. As such, any creative method we used had to be accessible and fast. It would also ideally provide an engaging ice-breaker activity, initiating focus groups with a relaxed and egalitarian atmosphere, perhaps countering the other experiences our participants might have in the educational settings hosting the research. Given the time constraints, we hoped that using a familiar everyday vernacular associated with fun and playfulness would be easily understood and would help establish rapport and connection within the group, going some way to reducing any power imbalances between participants and researchers.

We knew that the method we selected had to be suitable for young women aged 14–23, from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds. There is established evidence that emojis are used by almost all people engaging in online communication (Chen et al., 2024), with young people using emojis very frequently (Danesi, 2016; Shah and Tewari, 2021) and young women especially comfortable interpreting emojis (Herring and Dainas, 2020). As such we were confident that most participants would be familiar with emojis even if they did not use them regularly.

The study was granted ethical approval from the University of Leeds Ethics Committee in April 2023. However, we viewed ethics as not just an initial step of approval but as an ongoing, situated practice. Given our research focus on intersecting inequalities – primarily those of gender and age, but also race, class and disability – questions of power were central considerations in designing our methods. Discussions of experiences at work cannot be considered an especially sensitive topic, more than any other topics relating to social life and experiences. However, sensitive issues can come up in any social research – often unexpectedly (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). As such, we were conscious that workplaces are sites of contention and inequality and that focus groups exploring more general experiences of work might generate talk about sensitive issues, such as sexual harassment in the workplace (Brunner and Dever, 2014; Cooper et al., 2024; Good and Cooper, 2016; Green, 2023), gendered discrimination (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Ford et al., 2021) and about emotional and affective labour within hospitality and service sector jobs predominantly occupied by young women (Coffey et al., 2018; Farrugia et al., 2023; Hill and Bradley, 2010). With this in mind, we wanted to use methods that would enable discussions of negative, even potentially troubling, experiences of work in an insightful, ethical and sensitive way. Focus groups have been found to have ethical affordances in exploring sensitive issues with marginalised groups (Peek and Fothergill, 2009) and visual elicitation methods can support people to verbalise complex and powerful emotional experiences (Notermans and Kommers, 2013). We nevertheless considered the risk that using emojis, which are typically a 'light' mode of communication – which may be seen as 'trivial' and 'frivolous' (Sobande, 2019: 3) – to access more negative, troubling and anxious feelings and experiences around work could be perceived as insensitive. However, in their work on using cartoons as a method, Figoureux and Van Gorp (2021) argue that using less realistic images in research felt more detatched from participants' personal lives, enabling sensitive topics to be navigated more comfortably. Like cartoons, emojis offered

a way to explore potentially difficult experiences, providing participants with a degree of distance from distressing memories and emotions.

Focus groups were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, they allowed for shared meaning making amongst a group of young people with relatively limited working experience. Secondly, we believed that one-to-one interviews between adults and young people were potentially more power-laden than a collective space including multiple young people. Thirdly, in practical terms, we were relying on gatekeeper institutions, such as schools and colleges, to facilitate access to participants in this phase of the study. We concluded it would be unethical to make excessive demands on staff time to arrange a high number of individual interviews. Participants were made aware that there are limits on anonymity within focus groups, due to the risk of other participants sharing information discussed. However, ground rules were outlined at the start of each session with participants asked not to disclose any information shared. We worked with institutional gatekeepers in hosting schools, college and universities to ensure the research team were familiar with their safeguarding procedures and support systems in case the discussion strayed into any especially distressing topics or disclosure of harm.

As a research team of six women with extensive experience of EwL, we had significant lived experience of the topic of the study. However, the focus groups included culturally and geographically diverse young women who were much younger than the facilitating researchers, so there were also likely to be some significant differences. Given the 'multifaceted nature of identities, lifestyles and perspectives' (Mannay, 2010: 92), we abstained from any simplistic understanding of the research team in terms of a binary positionality of insider/outsider. However, we were conscious of the risk that facilitation by older researchers might potentially constrain young women's open discussion of thoughts and feelings about work, and thus sought methods that could quickly stimulate relaxed conversation. We also worked with an advisory group of young women who were of a similar age to our participants, and included women of diverse ethnicities and social class locations. This group trialled and provided feedback on the focus group activities – including the emoji method – before the research went ahead, and later contributed to analysis of data from across the project.

We designed the focus groups to incorporate the emoji elicitation at two points. At the start of the focus group, participants were asked to 'Think about the last time you were at work or were earning and pick three emojis that reflect this'. Participants were asked to select the emojis on their smartphone or other device, and to share them with the group, describing and discussing their choices. The first emoji elicitation task was followed by around 40–60 min of semi-structured interview questions, including prompts about current and past work experiences, ways of finding work, current working priorities and dealing with problems in the workplace. At the end of the discussion, we returned to the emoji elicitation method again, asking participants, 'If we were to meet again in 15 or 20 years, think about how you'd like your working life to be. Now pick three new emojis to reflect this'. After again giving participants the chance to share their selected emojis and to explain their choices, we followed up with a prompt as to whether they felt this image of their desired working future was realistic, allowing for them to express their hopes, fears and uncertainties about their futures.

We believed that the emoji elicitation tasks would offer a wide range of possible answers and produce a high level of expressive nuance in our focus groups. Unicode v17.0 (current as of October 2025) contains 3941 directly accessible emojis (Emoji Counts, v17.0, no date). This allows for over 10 billion potential combinations of three emojis. Participants are more likely to select frequently used emojis, but even assuming selections are restricted to the top 100 emojis (which account for an 82% share (Daniel, 2021)) there are over 160,000 possible combinations of three symbols. In common with other visual modes of digital expression such as memes and GIFs, emojis can be repurposed to (re)signify different things within different communities, generations and cultural groups and have generational, classed, racialised and gendered semantics (Herring and Dainas, 2020; Kanai, 2016; Sobande, 2019). While the fluidity of emoji meaning presents possible challenges for researchers seeking to 'objectively' interpret and analyse their meaning, the fact that emojis do not have a unified or fixed set of meanings is beneficial to an elicitation method focusing on participants' own interpretation and explanations of their choices. As detailed below, the emoji elicitation method produced rich discussion in our focus groups, that may have been hard to access otherwise.

Results: the affordances of emoji elicitation methods

In the 16 focus groups we carried out between January and June 2024, three central affordances of emoji elicitation methods emerged. Whilst in practice the benefits of the method were overlapping and entangled, we will outline each affordance in turn here for clarity, as follows:

1. The practical advantages of emoji elicitation for researchers and participants.
2. The relationalities generated by using emoji elicitation in focus groups.
3. The type of data generated by emoji elicitation.

In the conclusion, we reflect on the potential limitations of the method in the light of our results, and wider applicability of emoji elicitation in social research.

Practical advantages of emoji elicitation for researchers and participants

This section outlines the practical advantages of emoji elicitation as part of the research process, starting with the speed with which it can be carried out, which was a significant advantage to both participants and researchers. To evidence the speed of the method we present timings for emoji elicitation by focus group in Table 1. These timings were constructed by listening back to the focus group recordings and timestamping the start and end of activities or discussions.

As Table 1 shows, explanation of the first emoji elicitation task, including participants' selection of emojis took an average of two minutes (121 seconds). This ranged from a low of just over a minute (69 seconds) to a high of just under three minutes (169 seconds). Neither the age of participants (groups contained 14–16-year-olds, 16–18-year-olds or students 18+) nor the size of the focus group (between two and seven participants) systematically

Table 1. Emoji Elicitation Task Duration.

Focus group site	Age of participants (years)	*N* focus group participants	Task 1		Task 2	
			Explanation & selection (seconds)	Discussion (seconds)	Explanation & selection (seconds)	Discussion (seconds)
Northern Town Faith School	14–16	6	159	309	88	301
Midlands Rural School	14–16	5	69	315	117	280
Northern Coastal State Secondary School	14–16	4	138	335	115	261
Northern City State Secondary School	14–16	6	112	526	110	226
South-East State Secondary School	14–16	6	152	190	107	311
London State Secondary - 6th Form	16–18	6	128	440	133	291
London Further Education College - Selective	16–18	7	128	499	65	264
Northern City Further Education College	16–18	6	83	644	142	350
South-East State Secondary 6th Form	16–18	6	92	442	72	263
North-West Suburban Further Education College	16–18	6	89	432	78	351
London University	18+	7	162	420	142	355
Northern City Post-92 University	18+	3	96	123	104	132
Eastern Campus University	18+	2	76	340	88	243
Northern City Russell Group University B	18+	5	138	340	124	507
Northern City Russell Group University A	18+	5	142	406	143	387
South-East University	18+	4	169	460	120	260
Average duration	**–**	**–**	**121**	**389**	**109**	**299**

impacted the time required for explanation and selection. In other words, the task was repeatedly explained to and completed by focus groups of up to seven people within three minutes. Near the end of the focus groups, we asked participants to select a second set of emojis. This time explanation and selection was slightly quicker (109 seconds on average), again with no notable variation by age group or focus group size. The slightly shorter time taken to complete the second task may be because participants were now familiar with the structure of the task, or it may reflect the different questions asked (the first task asked them to represent their most recent experiences of work, while the second asked them to imagine their work future). In both cases, however, the time involved in explaining and in participants executing the method was extremely brief, especially in comparison to using other visual elicitation methods such as photography, painting or drawing. The speed with which emoji elicitation was completed also suggests that it was an accessible technique, which did not cause significant difficulty for any participants, across a wide range of contexts and demographics.

The discussion of participants' emoji choices after each selection took longer, lasting an average of around six and a half minutes (389 seconds) for the first task and just under five minutes (299 seconds) for the second. There was more variation here, with one group's discussion extending over 10 minutes and another finishing after two minutes. The duration of these discussions was, however, more a product of constraints around the total time available for different focus groups and the facilitators' choice to move onto new topics, than the minimum or maximum necessary. And (as we discuss later, in the section 'Arriving at emojis: designing methods to research young women's working lives') we found that, despite being relatively brief, discussion was nuanced and insightful, providing an opportunity for participants to talk about sensitive topics.

The speed with which emoji elicitation can be undertaken means it can accommodate the needs of busy participants and (where relevant) host institutions. Given the focus of the research, on participants' paid work and educational commitments, we were especially keen to avoid increasing demands on their time. Being able to produce powerful insights quickly meant we were able to include participants in the research in one short session, which did not impinge significantly on their other commitments, nor require them to prepare or carry out activities in advance of the session. The speed of emoji elicitation was especially beneficial in undertaking research in schools and colleges, where we were often only granted access to participants for 60 minutes, to avoid timetable disruption. Obtaining research access to schools can be difficult (Cuthbert et al., 2022) and is often contingent on researchers' ability to negotiate with gatekeepers and conform to the temporalities of the school day, so methods that enabled meaningful data to be generated rapidly were essential. The focus of our project created particular constraints, but participant time and demand constraints are an important methodological and ethical consideration in many settings and with many groups. As such, methods that generate powerful insights into participants' lives quickly and easily have widespread application and value. We return to this in the conclusion.

In the invitation to attend the focus group, we asked participants to bring a smartphone, tablet or laptop and informed them that we could alternatively provide one if needed. We hoped that this message would avoid anyone feeling excluded from taking part if they did not own a suitable digital device. However, nobody requested to borrow a device or asked to withdraw from the research because of this request. Furthermore, conversations with

gatekeepers (teachers, lecturers and tutors) confirmed that students typically brought smartphones to school, college or university with them daily. Thus, we have no evidence that the request to bring a device to complete the emoji tasks presented a barrier to participation.

Emoji elicitation also had sizeable practical benefits for the research team, especially in comparison to other modes of visual elicitation. First, it required very little advance preparation. We obtained permission from school or college staff for participants to use their digital devices in the session, and (as noted above) sent notice of the equipment involved to participants. In comparison, most other visual elicitation methods involve considerable planning and preparation, whether in identifying images, obtaining art materials or prepping participants. Second, as emoji elicitation utilised already-existing digital libraries that are freely accessed on phones and tablets, there were no additional costs. Given the quantity of fieldwork required to meet our project's objectives, a low-cost method that required minimal preparation time presented distinct benefits. In the contexts of increased competition for external research funding and reduced time for research in academic workloads, a method that can be successfully executed with limited resources and advance preparation is likely of widespread value. This, combined with the simplicity, speed and accessibility of emoji elicitation, means that it may be an especially valuable tool for doctoral and early career researchers.

The relationalities generated by emoji elicitation

As outlined earlier, we hoped that emoji elicitation would – like visual elicitation more widely – quickly create an intimate and safe space. We were aware that focus groups involve multiple sets of relations, including between researcher and participants, and between participants. To enable positive relations within the focus groups, we began each session by discussing participant information sheets and consent forms, including instigating Chatham House rules.[1] We reassured participants that we would not pass judgement on any experiences and opinions shared, that there were no 'right answers' to our questions and that we would not share their attributable responses with anyone. This conversation created a sense of the expectations involved in the focus groups before the first emoji task.

One aspiration for emoji elicitation was that it would challenge default research hierarchies by centring young people's existing communicative repertoires and knowledges. In planning the method, we thought carefully about how participants across our 14–23-year-old age range, in diverse educational sites, might feel about and use emojis. Some focus groups responded to emojis enthusiastically, for instance:

FACILITATOR: Do you use emojis much?
MAMADOU: Yes.

Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

JADA: I love them.
MAMADOU: All the time.
(Northern City Further Education College Focus Group)

Other participants were less passionate about emojis. For instance, school students Kat and Rosy explained that, unlike many of their classmates, they did not use emojis frequently in everyday communication:

FACILITATOR: Do you guys use emojis a lot, like day-to-day?
PARTICIPANTS: Yeah.
KAT: I don't.
ROSY: What did you ask?
MYA: Do you use emojis a lot?
PENELOPE: Do you message people?
ROSY: No.
FACILITATOR: Do you not? You just mainly use words?
ROSY: Yeah.
(South-East State Secondary School Focus Group)

Despite rarely using emojis in everyday life, Rosy and Kat were still able to complete the emoji tasks quickly and easily. Their successful participation suggests that emojis are now so ubiquitous that even non-habitual emoji users are sufficiently fluent to use them effectively as an elicitation method.

As discussed earlier, research power relations can generate participant concerns about giving the 'correct' answer to interview questions (Barton, 2015). Visual elicitation methods, including emoji elicitation, cannot fully mitigate against these risks. Consequently, we found that some participants sought additional clarification, and a few wondered aloud whether they had 'done it right'. One of these was Ruby, a 15-year-old-school student:

FACILITATOR: Okay, cool. Brilliant. And Ruby?
RUBY: I think I misunderstood the assignment [laughs].
FACILITATOR: The assignment has no right answer, so it's all good.
RUBY: Because I thought it was like what it was. So I put a microphone, then the two masks, then a dancing one.
(Northern Coastal State Secondary School Focus Group) 🎤🎭💃

For Ruby, seeing her peers share more abstract symbols induced concern that she had misinterpreted the task. Whilst the phrase '(mis)understood the assignment' is a common phrase in youth dialect, it may also indicate that despite our best efforts, we were unable to fully overcome the default hierarchical relationalities of the classroom. Nevertheless, Ruby selected three emojis quickly, and after brief reassurance from the facilitator, discussed her chosen images and gave articulate reflections. This interaction – including both Ruby's concerns and her laughter – suggests that participants may wonder whether they have got emoji elicitation 'right', but this should not obstruct their engagement with the method.

The different institutional settings we worked in – schools, colleges and universities – offered different contexts and relational dynamics. In schools and colleges, participants were often socially familiar with one another as they were in the same form group or

course of study, with recruitment often facilitated by a gatekeeper such as a teacher. University participants were recruited from a much larger cohort, typically via a wider call for participants across the institution, so they had usually never met before. The emoji elicitation method worked differently in these different relational contexts. Where participants knew one another, they would often immediately start discussing the tasks, asking each other which emojis they were picking and explaining their choices. For instance, the following conversation took place whilst participants in a school focus group were choosing emojis to imagine the future:

ROSY: Guys, what emojis are you picking?
PENELOPE: It's probably not going to be like this, it's probably going to be [unclear] but it's how I wish it's going to be.
LYRA: I was going to do the love heart.
ROSY: Yeah, that's what I was going to do as well, but I don't know.
MYA: Might do a sugar daddy.
NIA: I'll do a pink one.
PENELOPE: I'm going to do a police officer.
ROSY: I'm going to do a happy face.
MYA: Or wait.
ROSY: Or shall I do a goofy face?
LYRA: I want to do - no, I'll just do that one.
KAT: I don't know whether to do that one or the love heart. It's hard to pick three.
ROSY: Oh mate, I have so many more than three.
PENELOPE: Have you done like loads?
KAT: It's hard to pick them.
ROSY: No, I've just done three.
NIA: There's the love heart and the money.
ROSY: Oh yeah, money.
LYRA: I've done a house.
MYA: I can get rid of this one and I can put a heart.
LYRA: I think the money one wins.
(South-East State Secondary School Focus Group)

By contrast, in focus groups where participants had not previously met, the selection of emojis was usually completed in silence. This was not, however, an obstacle to participants in these groups sharing emojis that reflected complex feelings about and experiences of paid work. In some cases, these participants shared sensitive stories of mental health struggles, sexual harassment or abuse in the workplace:

MATILDA: I put the bomb emoji because I was like, I felt like it was like only this long until I would not be able to do this anymore and explode. And also, the job just wasn't sustainable alongside me studying at the same time. Like something had to give and at the time I was

having to prioritise my work over my studying. So, yes, eventually I gave in, and I gave the job up.

FACILITATOR: Did you explode as part of that?

MATILDA: Yes, I had a bit of a mental breakdown, yes, I would say. I actually got written off the job for anxiety and stress because I couldn't sustain it, it was ridiculous. […] so that's why I left.

(South-East University Focus Group) 😵 🤯 💣

The fact that sensitive and potentially traumatic personal experiences surfaced so quickly in focus groups, even where participants had no previous relationship to one another, demonstrates the effectiveness of emoji elicitation in creating the intimate relational dynamics often ascribed to other forms of visual elicitation. The space created was valuable in terms of research ethics and participant experiences and allowed for powerful insights in terms of the sorts of data produced, as we elaborate further in the next section.

The type of data generated by emoji elicitation

Our aim in using the emoji elicitation method was to generate rich and insightful data about young women's working lives, transcending superficial clichés and common-sense narratives of work, and allowing us access to detailed accounts of everyday experiences and emotions. Reflecting on the data generated by emoji elicitation, we found that it achieved our goals successfully. We outline below the rich discussions generated about work, across different temporalities: (a) deep, nuanced talk about experiences in the present and past, and (b) affective expression about imagined working futures.

Deep, nuanced talk about experiences of work in the present and past. Whilst it was quick, the first emoji elicitation task generated deep and nuanced talk about young women's current working lives in different ways. In a minority of cases, participants chose emojis that offered concrete representations of the sorts of material objects, places and tasks involved in their work. For instance, Sammie (a 15-year-old student at a Northern Coastal State Secondary School) chose a piece of meat to represent her previous job on a butcher's market stall, and Bushra (a 20-year-old student in a Northern Post-92 University) picked a camera to reflect her work as an event photographer.

More often, participants selected more abstract symbols, especially face emojis, to evoke the emotions involved in their experiences of work. Asking participants to select three emojis often enabled talk about emotional ambivalence regarding work, with many selections including multiple, contrasting facial expressions to reflect conflicting feelings (for instance a laughing face and an angry face). Beginning the session with an activity that encouraged complex emotional expression about work established expectations for the rest of the session as a space in which this sort of talk was welcome. Moreover, the ambiguous and semantically fluid nature of many emojis encouraged participants to narrate them in detail, sometimes producing complex explanations of experiences, thoughts and feelings.

Some participants used the three emojis to contrast their publicly performed emotions at work with their real feelings. For instance, Chin described regularly encountering rude customers in her retail job, saying she had chosen a 'sarcastic' smile for when she felt like 'I'm going to kill you':

CHIN: [I picked] the face one, because like especially in fitting rooms, you'll get, if you're working in the fitting room you're just standing there sorting the clothes out that people give back to you. But people are like so, what's the word? Like so expecting, they'll go to me 'Can you get me this in a size?', and I'm like, 'Alright. I'm there to put the clothes away, I'm not like a slave, you know'. People feel entitled, that's the word. But it's not that bad. It's alright but it's just like when people like to think they're sort of above you when you're the same role, it's just annoying.

FACILITATOR: So is the smile like the face you have to put on even if you're not feeling like that?

CHIN: Well like sometimes I can't lie, sometimes I'm like on a TV show, smile and turn around, I'm not laughing, you know?

(Northern City Further Education College Focus Group) 😅🤓😊

Similarly, Esme used multiple emojis to talk about her work as a nanny, reflecting on her recent experience of both the child and the parent 'having a go' at her:

ESME: So I did the one where it's like- You know when you're trying not to cry slash laugh, and it's like- That face. Because the kid and the dad had a go at me this week. Yes. So they were really annoying me. And then I did the praying one because I really wanted to go home, and I was tired, and it was late, and I just wanted to go home. But they didn't want me to go home. And then I did the crying laughing one because the kid was annoying me, but it was annoying so that I could laugh at it, kind of thing. That sounds mean. But like, not to its face. Yes.

(South-East State Secondary School Focus Group) 🥲🙏😂

Whilst Esme's verbal expression of her feelings was limited and possibly minimised – relying on repeated use of the word 'annoying' – the emojis allowed more powerful and complex feelings to emerge, including anger, frustration, humour, sadness and shame. In the context of gendered socialisation patterns which encourage women not to express strong negative emotions (especially at work), a research method which enabled often-suppressed internal reactions to come to the fore was especially valuable.

The performance of emotional labour – as Chin described above – is a well-documented part of the gendered nature of work, especially in the service industries (Coffey et al., 2018; Farrugia et al., 2023; Green, 2023; Hochschild, 2003), where young women and students make up a significant part of the workforce (Zhong et al., 2025). Reflecting such experiences, many participants' emoji selections expressed the

management of complex and multiple emotions in the workplace. For instance, Ella selected an emoji with a smile and a tear, signalling a performance of composure and friendliness used to mask feelings of stress, upset and exhaustion in her restaurant job.

> ELLA: One's like a sigh. Like a sigh. And then one's like a smile but with like a tear beside it. Trying to like cover up a tear with a smile. And then the tired one because when we're busy…. the Turkish restaurant, like half of it's good, like speaking to people and like getting on with people. But then like it's just stressful when they argue and my managers, and just everyone just annoys me all the time.
>
> (Northern City State Secondary School Focus Group) 😘🥳😈

Emoji elicitation not only surfaced young women's feelings at and about work, revealing how commonplace managing emotional performances was, but also allowed participants to articulate the strain involved in achieving the required emotional displays. For example, Grace (below) describes the frustrations of customer-facing work and the 'deep breath' she had to take to cope with rude customers.

> GRACE: Hi, my name's Grace and I put the like down turned smile face, I don't know how to describe that but that's just because I'm tired and I can't be bothered to continue to stand on my feet all day. I put the swearing things, the mad one because people just irritate me in the shop because they don't look and they ask me for stuff and it's like, it's right there or they just speak to you rudely, 'I want that.' 'Right, okay thanks.' Then the other one's like taking a deep breath because you have to take a deep breath sometimes because people irritate me. Basically.
>
> (Northern Further Education College Focus Group) 😫🤬😤

Notably, the above excerpt starts with Grace introducing herself to the group, because this was the first time she had spoken within the focus group. This extract thus illustrates the speed with which emoji elicitation enabled participants to transition from introducing themselves into rich, topic-relevant talk.

One of the aims of our study was to ask questions about the importance of young women's early experiences of work – experiences that are often disregarded. The sorts of talk generated by emoji elicitation were therefore critical in revealing the extent to which workplace experiences typically identified among older workers were replicated among these young EwL cohorts. Specifically, emoji elicitation revealed emotionally complex and powerful feelings, expectations and dispositions around work. As such, the method demonstrated a potential to explore often-concealed emotional landscapes in ways that could have applications far beyond this research context.

Affective expression about imagined working futures. In the second emoji elicitation activity, we asked participants to select three emojis to represent their desired future working lives. In the ensuing discussion, the facilitator asked them to reflect on how realistic they

thought these desired working futures were. In many cases, participants described very idealised futures, including high incomes, part-time work, travel and work–life balance. For instance, Harley, a 17-year-old college student, envisaged her working future as a primary school teacher as follows:

> HARLEY: I put the little family emoji because I want a good work life balance. I put the little spa emoji because time to be able to relax and like I don't want a job that takes up all my time. Then I put a smiley face because hopefully I'm happy.
>
> (Northern City Further Education College Focus Group) 👪💆😄

Harley's perception of teaching as a low-stress occupation runs counter to empirical evidence on teachers' working lives (Agyapong et al., 2022), but is revealing of the ways that the occupation is understood at the time that young women are making decisions about future careers.

In some cases, participants' emojis represented both potential future careers and imagined states. For instance, two secondary students, Olivia and Ruby, chose emojis that reflected the career they both sought (acting), while including emojis to represent the emotional state they hoped would be produced by this future work (respectively love, which was chosen frequently, and exhaustion, a more unique choice).

> OLIVIA: I picked the acting thing with the two faces because I really want to do acting. And then I picked the smiley face because I want to be happy in my job. And I picked the love heart eyes because I don't want my job in the future to feel like a job. I don't want it to feel like a chore. I want it to feel like just a hobby.
>
> RUBY: I chose a smiley face one as well and the acting masks. Then I chose the exhausted one because I want it to be exhausting; the amount of shows I do, the amount of rehearsal time. And I just want to go home after the final show and sleep.
>
> (Northern Coastal State Secondary School Focus Group)
>
> Olivia:🎭😊😍; Ruby: 😊🎭🤩

Although many of the imagined working futures were very idealised, participants' relationships to these futures were complex and varied. Some participants insisted that their idealised imaginaries were realistic, while others they simply stated that they were not. However, in a significant number of cases young women displayed awareness that their ideal imaginaries were unlikely to be realistic but still wanted to retain the imaginary. This is seen in Olivia and Ruby's reflections on whether their (above) imagined futures in acting are realistic.

> OLIVIA: I'm not too sure. I don't think it is really realistic, but I know that it's not realistic so that's okay. Does that make sense? Like I want it to be real, but I doubt it will probably be real.

RUBY: Like, I didn't want to jinx myself by saying it's not real so I'm just going to say it is real.

(Northern Coastal State Secondary School Focus Group)

As seen here, emoji elicitation created space for young people to present their imaginaries of their futures and explore their relationships to these imaginaries. As such, emoji elicitation proved an effective tool for 'grasping the intangibility of the affective atmospheres of the future' (Mandich et al., 2024: 4).

We have shown that emoji elicitation successfully produced two different types of data in this study. The first elicitation task generated rich insights into often hidden aspects of young women's everyday working lives in the present and past, while data from the second elicitation activity enabled us to map out young women's career aspirations and identify the different affective investments they make in their working futures. The multiple insights generated demonstrate emoji elicitation to be a method that has practical advantages but also powerful epistemic affordances.

Conclusion

This paper has extended knowledges about the use and affordances of visual elicitation methods by demonstrating the value of emoji elicitation as a pragmatic and powerful research tool. The use of emoji elicitation provided a way of quickly generating rich and deep conversations with young women about tacit, multiple and affective dimensions of early working experiences.

We have shown that emojis are highly accessible, and neither digital literacy nor technology ownership were barriers to participation. In our study, all participants across a diverse range of ages and class backgrounds had devices they could use to participate in emoji elicitation and even those who said they did not use emojis frequently completed the tasks easily. The fluidity and ambiguity of emojis as a language, rather than creating a barrier to effective interpretation, meant that participants articulated explicitly what the selected images meant to them. The playfulness of emojis and their familiarity as an everyday vernacular helped establish an intimate and relaxed atmosphere which allowed complex feelings and experiences to arise, surfacing often-hidden dimensions of young women's lives and imagined futures. The fact that our data included talk about mental health problems, abuse at work and sexual harassment suggested that the playfulness and lightness of the method did not present a barrier to difficult conversation, rather it offered a way to surface troubling topics without causing further trauma to participants.

Whilst we found that emoji elicitation had many practical, relational, and epistemological affordances, it nevertheless has important limitations, which should be considered when selecting this method over other forms of visual elicitation for use in focus groups. Firstly, whilst all participants in our study had digital devices they could use, this may not be the case in all settings, for example, in research with young children or those living in poverty. We also acknowledge that some people with disabilities – for instance sight impairments or limited manual dexterity – may not be able to access emoji elicitation in the way it is described here. We are also aware that in countries other than the UK (where this study was conducted) people may not always have the same level of digital

access and familiarity with emojis, so this method may not be suitable. Secondly, we acknowledge that emoji elicitation cannot produce the sort of powerful and personalised visual data created by photographs or drawings generated *by* participants. Participant-created photographs and other visual methods can transmit rich and unique details about participants' lives in ways that three emojis never would. Hurdley (2007), for instance, argues that photographs of participants' mantelpieces offered specific insights, as this space often hosted a curated collection of a personal objects, with powerful cultural significance as a specific sort of representation of participants' lives and identities. Arguably, these more involved and often time-consuming visual elicitation methods allow for a deeper level of reflection than the emoji selection and discussion explored here. In participatory research, arts-based research methods can also be used for extended group work, creating powerful relational connection and a sense of belonging (Nunn, 2022). Whilst we have advocated for emoji elicitation in part because of its speed, this characteristic of the method can therefore also pose some limitations. The more extended temporalities of other visual research methods have been shown to allow for deeper reflection, defamiliarisation and even 'discoveries of the self' (Mannay, 2010: 201) in research. Methods based on participants' own visual creative production offer distinct affordances for participants and researchers compared to selecting emojis, and they may also generate visual outcomes which can be shared with wider audiences to powerfully evoke participants' experiences (Nunn, 2022). We do not, therefore, advocate for emoji elicitation as a substitute for other forms of visual and arts-based methods, which have a valuable, ongoing place in social research. However, our results suggest that the quick and accessible nature of emoji elicitation make it an interesting alternative visual method, well-suited to contexts where more involved visual methods would be impractical, burdensome or potentially exclusionary, and one which, although quick, nevertheless surfaced interesting insights about young women's working lives.

Although our study was with young women, we believe that emoji elicitation could be used in studies with a wider variety of demographic groups and people of all ages. As noted, emoji elicitation uses a language that is now ubiquitous in digital communication, and the method is easy and quick whilst offering many of the affordances of other forms of visual elicitation. The method may therefore be particularly useful for research with other groups who have constraints on their time and where participation needs to be easy and accessible. For example, low paid or precarious workers, working parents or school children. As a low-cost method requiring limited materials, emoji elicitation may also be particularly valuable for researchers who do not have funding for fieldwork costs, including postgraduate students. Indeed, given the widespread use of emojis in people's day-to-day communication, our results suggest that their use in research has been surprisingly underexplored. We hope that this paper goes some way to rectifying that.

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Ethical approval and informed consent

The Business, Environment, Social Sciences (Joint AREA FREC) Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds approved this study on 19 April 2023. Participants gave written consent for review and signature before starting the focus groups, including consent for their anonymised contributions to be published in academic journals.

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Data availability

The anonymised data from this study will be archived at the end of the project with a trusted repository, such as the UK Data Service.

Note

1. In the participant information sheet, Chatham House rules were outlined as follows: 'In order to protect the identity of you and others in the group, we ask that you don't disclose the identities of the other participants in the group. While you may talk to others outside the group about the experience, we ask that you do not attribute anything that was said to individual participants'.

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