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# Methodological considerations for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in visual research: a practical guide to using collages

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## ABSTRACT



Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a leading qualitative method in UK psychology and is increasingly adopted by researchers across disciplines worldwide. This paper offers a practical guide for conducting multimodal IPA research by integrating visual methods, specifically the collage technique from a consumer study, as an example. Grounded in Gadamer's hermeneutics, it addresses key paradigmatic and ethical considerations and chiefly responds to calls for more robust, evidence-based IPA research. We highlight how visual methods, such as idiographic collages, enable richer and more layered accounts of lived experience than traditional interviews alone. Drawing on insights from fields like marketing, law, and ethics, the paper also advances methodological thinking in psychology and related disciplines. We conclude that multimodal IPA research using visual methods, such as collage, can balance the demands placed on researchers with the depth, richness, and surprising insights this approach can yield.

## KEYWORDS

Collage construction; Gadamer; hermeneutics; multimodal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); projective techniques; visual research

## Introduction

Thirty years ago, Smith (1996) introduced interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a novel approach to qualitative data analysis in health psychology. Today, IPA is one of the most established qualitative methods in UK psychology and is increasingly adopted by researchers worldwide (Eatough and Smith 2017). While primarily rooted in psychology (Smith and Eatough 2012), its applicability extends across various academic disciplines (Smith 2017). This versatility has led to its application in diverse fields, including advertising (Phillips, McQuarrie, and Griffin 2014), branding (Hand et al. 2021), business (Dias and Teixeira 2017), computing (Ghaffari and Lagzian 2018), consumer behaviour (Ritch 2019), education (Noon 2018), entrepreneurship (Ng et al. 2021), human resources (Berber and Acar 2020), leadership (Lewis 2015), management (Groenewald and Odendaal 2021), marketing

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(Larsson and Viitaoja 2017), music (Renfrew 2016), organizational studies (Agarwal and Sandiford 2021), policing (Turner and Jenkins 2019), recruitment (Priyadarshini, Kumar, and Jha 2017), as well as tourism and hospitality (Deale and Crawford 2018). This underscores IPA's capacity as a valuable and widely applicable approach in the social sciences, including marketing.

As scholars have noted, IPA is more than a method for qualitative data analysis – it represents a research stance (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006) or a framework (Clarke and Braun 2013) for exploring individuals' lived experiences and sense of self (Smith 2004, 2019). This paper employs IPA in this broader sense, facilitating a critical discussion of IPA as both a research design methodology and a qualitative data analysis method. This nexus animates researchers to create evolving and more ambitious designs. As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, 52) note, 'most studies have adopted straightforward designs: recruiting small, homogeneous groups of participants, and collecting data from them once [predominantly using semi-structured interviews (Eatough and Smith 2017)]. It is possible to be more adventurous, but of course, this does make more demands on the analyst.' In this statement, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) allude to the potential for expansive IPA approaches, simultaneously acknowledging that their application will demand more of the researcher and may require greater consideration, effort, and skill. Examples of 'bolder designs' include *multiperspectival* (Larkin, Shaw, and Flowers 2019), *longitudinal* (Farr and Nizza 2019), and *multimethodological* (Spiers and Riley 2019) IPA research, along with *multimodal* approaches that combine, for instance, verbal (e.g. interviews) and non-verbal (e.g. visual) expressions of lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). This paper contributes to the latter research stream.

While IPA's broad application extends its scope, it also introduces variability in usage, emphasizing its methodological fluidity and exacerbating potential challenges to its stability, thus affecting its reliability and rigour. For example, Giorgi (2010, 6) argues: 'It seems to me that many of the practices being advocated by those recommending IPA are not scientifically sound.' This paper directly engages with this critique by offering a practical guide to conducting multimodal IPA research incorporating visual methods, using the collage technique as an example. This provides the means to undertake the structured inquiry that Giorgi's use of 'scientifically sound' invites. In doing so, we chiefly respond to Day, Larkin, and Shaw's (2024) recent call to explore the benefits of idiographic collages for articulating lived experiences, thereby advancing widely applicable methodological thinking and practice. More specifically, this study pursues three research objectives to:

- (1) Discuss methodological challenges in visual (IPA) research, using the collage technique as an example.

- (2) Present a systematic approach to conducting visual (IPA) research, using the collage technique as an example.
- (3) Evaluate the benefits of collages and visual methods in multimodal (IPA) research.

The rest of this paper is organized around these three objectives. First, we introduce the collage construction task and discuss the methodological challenges in visual (IPA) research. Next, we provide a practical guide for conducting multimodal IPA research, using the collage technique as an example. We then present a worked example to show its application. Afterwards, we assess the benefits of collages and visual methods in multimodal (IPA) research. Finally, we conclude this paper and provide recommendations for future research.

## Methodological considerations

### *Collage construction technique*

The collage technique involves participants creating a collage on a specific topic. For instance, Chaplin and John (2005) wanted to know how products and brands support children's identity construction. As part of the research process, the authors asked children from different age groups (early childhood to late adolescence) to create a *Who am I?* collage, in which they described themselves using images and text. One reason for using this method was its high accessibility to participants of all ages (John and Chaplin 2019). A collage (from the French *coller*, meaning *to glue*) is a two- or three-dimensional artefact made by arranging and attaching materials like photographs, paper, or fabric to a physical or digital surface (Bloom 2011; Scotti and Chilton 2018). Collages are regularly used in psychological (e.g. McCloskey and Wier 2020) and anthropological research (e.g. Højring and Bech-Danielsen 2022) and are also gaining popularity in market research (e.g. Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003; Bröckerhoff and Seregina 2022; Dakoumi Hamrouni and Touzi 2011; Dekel-Dachs and Moorlock 2024; Koll, von Wallpach, and Kreuzer 2010; Plakoyiannaki and Stavradi 2018; Shin Rohani, Aung, and Rohani 2014).

In contrast, visual IPA research using collages remains very limited. A Scopus database search yielded only two studies. Birnie (2019) combined collages and interviews to explore the lived experiences of coaches, though no clear protocol for collage use was provided. On the other hand, Day, Larkin, and Shaw (2024) took a different approach, asking participants to provide and comment on personal photographs, which the research team then used to create thematic collages reflecting participants' lived experiences. A more common approach in visual IPA research is using drawings (e.g. Attard et al. 2017; Boden and Eatough 2014; Kirkham, Smith, and Havsteen-

Franklin 2015; Shinebourne and Smith 2011a). However, as Boden, Larkin, and Iyer (2019, 219) note, ‘there has been relatively little exploration of what drawings can add to IPA methodology specifically.’ Our paper addresses these gaps but focuses on collages rather than drawings or other visual methods. This seems appropriate as in market research, both collage and drawing techniques are considered projective methods (Relja, Ward, and Zhao 2024), allowing participants to transfer unconscious cognitions (e.g. thoughts, beliefs, motives) and affects (e.g. emotions, desires) to external entities such as a blank canvas or sheet of paper (Boddy 2005; Donoghue 2000; Kalter 2016; Lindzey 1959; Mesías and Escribano 2018). Furthermore, we propose that the methodological guide presented here is adaptable beyond collages, extending to other visual methods such as drawings (Kirkham, Smith, and Havsteen-Franklin 2015) and photo elicitation (Burton, Hughes, and Dempsey 2017), making it a versatile and flexible approach.

### ***Theoretical pluralism***

IPA is founded on three distinct principles: phenomenology, idiography and hermeneutics (Shinebourne 2011). Phenomenology and idiography reflect IPA’s commitment to studying specific experiences as lived – or encountered – by particular individuals (Boden, Larkin, and Iyer 2019). In contrast, hermeneutics refers fundamentally to researchers’ interpretations expressed in analytical comments and tentative truth claims (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). However, it does not commit to a specific phenomenological or hermeneutic school but allows the integration of different traditions (e.g. Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty) to study *the things themselves* (Eatough and Smith 2008; Smith and Osborn 2003). By building theory inductively through the analysis of individual cases followed by a cross-case analysis, IPA promotes ‘theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 51).

Previous research highlights the importance of researchers disclosing their theoretical stance and its implications for research design, as these choices shape data analysis and findings (Brocki and Wearden 2006; Smith 2004). This study adopts Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach, alongside Husserl’s phenomenology and IPA’s idiography, extending recent IPA collage work that utilizes Gadamer’s perspective (Day, Larkin, and Shaw 2024) and critically examines theoretical decisions. Gadamer’s ideas suggest that a visual (e.g. artwork, photograph) ‘has something to say to us ... either through the question it awakens, or the question it answers’ (Gadamer and Dutt 2001, 69–70). He further notes that a visual ‘says something to each person as if it were said especially to him [*sic*]’ (Gadamer 1976, 100), underscoring both its personal (idiographic) and phenomenological nature (Davey 2011). This back-and-forth movement aligns with the hermeneutic circle, where meaning emerges

through the interaction of prior understanding and interpretation of part and whole (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018).

Extending current IPA research, which introduced the notion of double (Smith and Osborn 2003) or triple hermeneutics (Kirkham, Smith, and Havsteen-Franklin 2015; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009), we propose a quadruple hermeneutic process: (1) individuals interpret the experience visually; (2) they then reflect on and articulate their experiences; (3) researchers subsequently interpret the participants' understandings; and, finally, (4) readers analyse researchers' interpretations of both participants' reflections and visual expressions. However, as Gadamer (1989, 268–69) states, 'meanings represent a fluid multiplicity of possibilities . . . but within this multiplicity of what can be thought – i.e., of what a reader can find meaningful and hence expect to find – not everything is possible.' This sets idiographic boundaries, ensuring that meaning is shaped by participants rather than fully imposed by researchers, thereby limiting interpretative agency (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The polysemous nature of visuals – captured in the popular adage 'A picture is worth a thousand words' – reinforces the need to prioritize participants' inner lifeworlds over external sign systems (Gadamer 1976). Rather than imposing meanings, interpretation must remain grounded in the personal and contextual significance that participants ascribe to their visual representations. Put differently, visual IPA research must embody what takes hold of participants (Davey 2013). However, this does not imply that participants' lived experiences or researchers' interpretations of them can only be communicated through traditional written methods. Alternative formats, such as arts-based approaches exemplified in Day, Larkin, and Shaw's (2024) visual IPA study, are also feasible.

This perspective indirectly challenges Smith's (2007, 5) critique of Gadamerian hermeneutics, which offers only faint praise:

Gadamer is . . . sceptical of the possibility of recreating the intention of the author because of the historical gap. Thus, interpretation is a dialogue between past and present . . . . The aim should not be to relive the past but rather learn anew from it in the light of the present. I think Gadamer is astute, for example, when thinking about the response to a piece of art or a literary text . . . . However, when it comes to the analysis of texts derived from participants in current human science research projects, to me Schleiermacher [and his 'parallel concern with language and with the author'] suddenly sounds contemporary.

As Smith (2007) rightly states, for Gadamer, understanding the meaning of the text takes precedence, while grasping the author's meaning comes second. However, this does not diminish the latter's importance, particularly in contexts where researchers aim to understand another's lived experience with a specific phenomenon. Here, it is the participant-produced multimodal texts that carry meaning. Furthermore, if we accept that we are thrown into a pre-existing world full of meaning, then the words and images used in visual

research carry their own historical horizons (Heidegger 1962; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 2022). They all must merge with the interpreter's horizon to foster understanding. Meaning emerges in this in-between space of fusing horizons (Gadamer 1989). As outlined above, the first fusion occurs at the first hermeneutic level during the participants' engagement with the collage-creation task, and the second occurs in subsequent reflection. Therefore, at the third hermeneutic level, the interpreter's role is to uncover *the truth* or *the phenomenon* in the Heideggerian sense, fusing their own horizon with those of the multimodal texts. Gadamer (1994, 36) encapsulates this idea by stating: 'Heidegger taught us . . . that truth must be won as if it were a robbery . . . from the concealment and hiddenness of things. Concealment and hiddenness – both belong together. Things hold themselves from themselves in concealment.'

We concur with Frith et al. (2005), who advocate for integrating verbal and visual data rather than separating them, as the former can serve as a meaning anchor. Detaching the visual from the verbal narrative risks losing the participant's horizon, essentially ' . . . the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (Gadamer 1989, 302). What remains are the horizon of the visual, such as the collage, and that of the researcher. We argue that visual research should be accompanied by discussions of the tensions arising from the underlying theoretical perspectives researchers adopt.

A key quality marker in qualitative research generally (Yardley 2015) and specifically in IPA studies (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022) is maintaining a rigorous and transparent analytic process. Visual studies require the explicit documentation of each step, from generating raw data to reporting findings. Next, ethical considerations in visual IPA research are explored, which are closely tied to data generation. A new methodological guide is then presented in the following section to support the development of a clear audit trail.

## **Ethics**

Scholars highlight the unique ethical challenges of visual research (e.g. Clark 2020; Mason 2002; Temple and McVittie 2005), many of which this section discusses in the four ethical themes presented next. While existing literature offers valuable insights, ethical decisions remain context-dependent, requiring researchers to take personal responsibility for each project and align their choices with professional guidelines, ethics committees, and legal frameworks (Pink 2021). This paper does not provide definitive recommendations or legal advice but aims to raise awareness and encourage researchers to reflect on key considerations across four themes that influence ethical decision-making in visual research (Clark 2020; Wiles, Clark, and Prosser 2011). Table 1 summarizes these issues.

First, researchers must navigate complex legal issues such as intellectual property and ownership rights (Rowe 2011). Key questions include, for example, *who owns the visuals before, during, and after research?* This is particularly relevant in collaborative projects where participants contribute images that researchers later modify and publish, as seen in Day, Larkin, and Shaw (2024). Researchers may also want to verify whether the visuals contain copyrighted material, privacy-sensitive content, or depictions of illegal or inappropriate activities that could violate legal standards. Some argue that visual research is more complex than traditional language-based research due to concerns over anonymity (e.g. Wiles 2013), as protecting participants' identities may risk ethical violations (Rose 2016). Nonetheless, as shown in Table 1, using existing or creating new visual material presents its own set of challenges, not only in terms of anonymity but also on multiple other levels (Rose 2023).

Table 2 compares copyright considerations from traditional and visual IPA studies to inform researchers about the UK context. Because the law depends on jurisdiction (e.g. UK versus US) and context (e.g. a specific case), this treatment is neither comprehensive nor provides legal advice. We aim to demonstrate that, although visual research presents additional legal challenges, traditional IPA research is not without legal risks. However, we may feel more familiar with its legal frameworks – or at least believe this to be so. To avoid copyright infringement or breaches of publishing, employment, or funding agreements, researchers must uphold research integrity and ethics, including adherence to legal standards. When necessary, researchers may engage in personal and professional development activities to enhance their knowledge, skills, and behaviours (Vitae 2025).

Second, ethical requirements vary across *countries* (e.g. the Institutional Review Board in the United States), *institutions* (e.g. university ethics handbooks), *professional associations* (e.g. the Market Research Society), and *funding bodies* (e.g. the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council), potentially leading to inconsistent or inconclusive guidance. Researchers must carefully assess and reconcile these conditions.

Third, visual research raises distinct challenges regarding informed consent and participant privacy. Key questions include (Wiles, Clark, and Prosser 2011): (a) Is informed consent always 'appropriate' (e.g. in justified covert research)?; (b) What does 'informed' truly mean in a visual context?; (c) Who 'can' (and should) consent (e.g. research involving vulnerable participants and gatekeepers)?; (d) Is it possible to obtain consent from and for 'all' entities depicted in visuals?; (e) What ethical considerations arise when 'participants produce their own visuals', both for creators and in relation to those depicted? and (f) 'What' are participants actually consenting to?

Additionally, researchers must consider anonymity and confidentiality (Reavey and Johnson 2008), including issues such as (a) removing directly or indirectly identifiable details from visuals, which, in extreme cases, may

**Table 1.** Ethical considerations when doing visual IPA research.

Theme	Description	Example factors to consider	Annotated examples of key resources (in alphabetical order by authors' names)
Legal	Legal frameworks apply within the specific research context, but boundaries become increasingly unclear in international and multidisciplinary works, particularly complicating ownership and the right to (re)produce images.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Intellectual property laws (e.g. copyrights)</li><li>• Ownership</li><li>• Personality and privacy rights</li><li>• Moral rights</li><li>• Licenses, including Creative Commons (CC)</li><li>• General Data Protection Regulations (GDPRs)</li><li>• Data Protection Acts</li><li>• Use of private or confidential information</li><li>• Defamation laws</li><li>• UK Obscene Publications Act</li><li>• Child protection and safeguarding laws</li><li>• Publishing contracts</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (CDPA 1988)   <i>This UK law specifies, for example, which works (e.g. journal articles, collages) qualify for copyright, the rights conferred (e.g. authorship and ownership), and the duration of those rights.</i></li><li>• Christie (2023)   <i>A collection of recent UK, US, European, and international intellectual property laws without annotations.</i></li><li>• Guillemin and Gillam (2004)   <i>In this article, the authors explore the role of reflexivity in ethical research, including how personal values influence the research process. Further guidance on reflexive research can be found, for example, in Chamberlain (2015) and Finlay (2012).</i></li></ul>
	Conflicting socio-cultural norms may further blur the lines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hansen and Colucci (2020)   <i>This article examines current guidelines related to visual research and offers suggestions for establishing ethical standards for visual research within psychology, which are currently lacking.</i></li><li>• International Visual Sociology Association (2009)   <i>This document outlines the principles and ethical standards for visual researchers across various fields. Essentially, it provides broad guidance based on general principles (e.g. integrity) and ethical standards (e.g. confidentiality and informed consent). Principles are also published by other professional bodies, including the Market Research Society (2023) and the British Psychological Society (2021).</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hansen and Colucci (2020)   <i>This article examines current guidelines related to visual research and offers suggestions for establishing ethical standards for visual research within psychology, which are currently lacking.</i></li><li>• International Visual Sociology Association (2009)   <i>This document outlines the principles and ethical standards for visual researchers across various fields. Essentially, it provides broad guidance based on general principles (e.g. integrity) and ethical standards (e.g. confidentiality and informed consent). Principles are also published by other professional bodies, including the Market Research Society (2023) and the British Psychological Society (2021).</i></li></ul>
Regulatory	Institutional and disciplinary guidelines and regulations that apply within the specific research context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Institutional Review Boards</li><li>• University Ethics Committees</li><li>• Professional codes and guidelines</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rose (2023)   <i>This book introduces diverse approaches to conducting and analysing visual research, with Chapter 4 offering a focused discussion on visual research ethics.</i></li></ul>
Critical	Key principles of ethical research include informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, ensuring participants' rights and privacy are respected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Informed consent (six challenges)</li><li>• Anonymity</li><li>• Confidentiality</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rowe (2020)   <i>This chapter examines key legal aspects of visual research from a predominantly US perspective, addressing issues such as copyright, licensing, moral rights, and challenges related to publishing processes.</i></li></ul>
Personal	Visual researchers should recognize their own moral perspectives and consider how these influence their research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Moral positions</li><li>• Values</li><li>• Virtues (e.g. integrity, truthfulness)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Torremans (2019)   <i>This book provides an introduction to UK intellectual property law and situates it in the broader socioeconomic, European and global context.</i></li><li>• Wiles (2013)   <i>This book explores ethical issues in qualitative research. It discusses common challenges faced by researchers from various disciplines. It encompasses both traditional and modern research methods, including visual and online techniques, and offers practical guidance (see also Iphofen and Tolch 2018).</i></li><li>• Wiles, Clark, and Prosser (2011)   <i>This book section explores the four themes adapted here for ethical visual IPA research (legal, regulatory, critical, and personal) in greater detail. Clark (2020) provides a recent update, reviewing how these issues have been addressed in recent years, identifying the challenges that persist, and highlighting the new ones that have emerged.</i></li></ul>

Note(s). Based on Clark (2020); Rowe (2011, 2020); Wiles, Clark, and Prosser (2011).

**Table 2.** Comparison of copyright considerations in traditional and visual IPA studies.

Aspect	Traditional IPA study	Visual IPA study
Scenario	Sam conducts ten semi-structured interviews with their study participants, which are purposefully transcribed. Participant quotes are used to illustrate lived experiences and themes.	Jordan conducts ten semi-structured interviews with their study participants, which are purposefully transcribed. Participant quotes are used to illustrate lived experiences and themes. As part of the research process, Jordan asks their study participants to create a collage, using images from a stock photo website that has permission (licence) from photographers to grant licences to its users, who can use the images for free for commercial and non-commercial purposes in their original or modified form without the need to attribute the author. Jordan intends to publish the ten collages generated during their visual IPA research.
Target output	Journal article	Journal article
Nature of the work <sup>a</sup>	1. Literary work (text) 2. Published edition (typographical arrangement)	1. Literary work (text) 2. Artistic work (collage) <sup>d</sup> 3. Published edition (typographical arrangement)
Authorship	Creator of the work 1. Literary work: the researcher <sup>c</sup> 2. Published edition: the publisher	Creator of the work 1. Literary work: the researcher <sup>c</sup> 2. Artistic work: the participant 3. Published edition: the publisher
First copyright ownership <sup>b</sup>	The respective author. However, it might be the employer if the work has been created in the course of employment and no contrary agreement exists.	Similar to traditional IPA studies: the respective authors, potentially employers. However, photographers uploading their artistic works (photographs) to the stock photo website remain the copyright owners, as they have only granted permission to use the artefact they have created, but they have not transferred/assigned the copyrights to the website or its users.
Duration	1. Literary work: Until the end of the 70th year after the author's death (with some exceptions). 2. Published edition: Until the end of the 25th year after its first publication.	1. Literary work: Until the end of the 70th year after the author's death (with some exceptions). 2. Artistic work: same as for literary work. 3. Published edition: Until the end of the 25th year after its first publication.
Moral rights	While copyrights can be negotiated for commercial exploitation, the 'moral rights', that is, the connection between the author and their work, 'survive' (Torremans 2019, 238). These include, for example, 'the right to be identified' through attribution (paternity right) and the 'right to object to derogatory treatment of the work' (integrity right) (Torremans 2019, 238). However, authors can consent to surrender any or all of their moral rights in written and signed form. Likewise, authors can waive their rights. Either of these options might apply in the visual IPA study scenario.	
Implication(s)	IPA researchers must verify who owns the copyright in the literary works and whether they are authorized to license or transfer that copyright to the publisher when signing the publishing agreement.	Similar to traditional IPA studies. However, if participants have not transferred/assigned their copyright to the visual IPA researcher and waived all moral rights, the researcher cannot confirm to publishers that they are the legal copyright owner and, therefore, are not eligible to transfer/assign it to the publisher.

*Note(s).* Based on CDPA 1988; Llewelyn and Aplin (2023); Torremans (2019).

<sup>a</sup>For illustrative purposes and to simplify the legal complexity, this comparison assumes the originality criterion and other requirements (e.g. fixation) are met in both scenarios.

<sup>b</sup>This serves as the starting point for future copyright assignments.

<sup>c</sup>Unless transferred/assigned or licensed to the publisher.

<sup>d</sup>Collages can be considered 'derivative' works because they are based on other copyrighted works, such as photographs. While collages are protected by copyright under the UK CDPA 1988, s 4(1a), the original works, such as photographs, also have copyright, and their creators hold exclusive rights under CDPA 1988, s 16(1), including the right to adapt them (letter e). Permission, such as a licence, must be obtained to avoid infringing their copyrights. Theoretically, research participants can be both the authors of photographs (original artistic works) and collages (derivative artistic works), which means they would need to transfer and assign copyrights or grant licences to the researcher for both works.

undermine the intrinsic value of visual data (Wiles, Clark, and Prosser 2011); (b) managing sensitive data in settings like focus groups, where participants might share information outside the research context; (c) implementing secure data storage and access protocols; and (d) agreeing rights, timings and modes of disposal.

Finally, visual researchers must critically reflect on their moral principles, such as the ethics of care, as well as on values like integrity, professionalism, and trust (Wiles, Clark, and Prosser 2011). This includes questioning how their methodological choices affect participants and the overall ethical integrity of their work.

Once these critical issues have been navigated and resolved, attention can turn to implementing the visual research. The following section outlines the process of conducting a visual IPA research study using the collage technique as an example.

### **A route map to visual IPA research**

This section provides an overview of a novel approach to visual IPA research, drawing on established IPA literature (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022) and insights from a range of existing collage construction processes (Dekel-Dachs and Moorlock 2024; Herz 2010; Van Schalkwyk 2010) to advance methodological understanding. It outlines the key principles of data generation and analysis through various stages, while the subsequent section presents a worked example with detailed step-by-step guidance. We outline the six stages of the visual IPA approach: (1) Creation, (2) Reflection, (3) Transcription, (4) Transposition, (5) Interpretation, and (6) Narration. Table 3 summarizes the process.

To provide a more straightforward presentation and discussion of this novel six-stage approach, we avoid detailed consideration of sampling strategies and instead reference existing literature. For example, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) offer guidance on sample sizes (e.g. 8–12 for IPA publications from doctoral or postdoctoral researchers) and emphasize the purposefully homogeneous nature of participant samples in IPA research. However, published works may include larger participant numbers (e.g. 30; Vermorgen et al. (2020) and samples with greater heterogeneity in features (Brocki and Wearden 2006; Fox, Larkin, and Leung 2010; Hewitt, Tomlin, and Waite 2021; Krzeczowska et al. 2019).

During the annual ‘Qualitative Methods in Psychology’ (QMIP) conference 2021, Professor Jonathan A. Smith (personal communication, 16th July 2021) encouraged the audience not to focus solely on absolute participant numbers, but to consider the study’s design and scale. For example, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) illustrate that interviewing four participants twice yields eight interviews that must be analysed in depth using IPA. Furthermore, the authors

Table 3. Process guide for visual IPA research.

Stage	Description	Hermeneutic level and focus	Illustrative research question <sup>a</sup>	Considerations include . . .
1. Creation	Participants create a collage to express their lived experiences with the phenomenon of interest visually.	First: Participants' pre-reflective, pre-linguistic and embodied lived experiences expressed in collages.	<i>How do individuals visually express their experience of X?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop a detailed briefing outlining the task, materials, and timeline.</li><li>• Choose artefact mode (digital or print), considering its impact on the research process.</li><li>• Ensure legal and ethical compliance; obtain ethics approval.</li></ul>
2. Reflection	Participants reflect on their collages, articulating the meaning of their lived experiences represented.	Second: Participants' interpretations of lived experiences are conveyed through collages.	<i>How do individuals make sense of their collage and its parts?</i> <i>How did individuals go about producing their collage?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Select appropriate modalities, considering their overall influence on the research.</li><li>• Assess participants' time commitment and involvement to balance power dynamics and ensure rich data.</li></ul>
3. Transcription	Researcher transcribes participants' collages, translating them into wireframes to preserve their original meaning.			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify themes (meaning units) or construct them based on their reflections.</li></ul>
4. Transposition	Researcher transposes collage transcripts and participant reflections into a story grid.			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collate all multimodal data into one story grid.</li><li>• Present data extracts sequentially rather than grouping them thematically.</li></ul>

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Stage	Description		Hermeneutic level and focus	Illustrative research question <sup>a</sup>	Considerations include ...
5. Interpretation	Researcher applies interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to make sense of participants' lived experiences.		Third: Researcher's interpretations of participants' lived experiences represented in multimodal data sets.	<i>How can individuals' experience with X be described analytically?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Reflect on the hermeneutic approach (e.g. empathic vs. suspicious interpretation).</li><li>● Choose the method for reading the visual (e.g. phenomenological analysis).</li><li>● Establish the sequence for interpreting visuals from multiple participants.</li><li>● Assess alignment with your theoretical framework.</li></ul>
6. Narration	Researcher constructs a narrative of participants' lived experiences.		Third: Researcher's narrative of participants' lived experiences to varying audiences, which the reader of the study (e.g. journal article) then interprets at the fourth hermeneutic level.	<i>How do individuals experience X?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Provide an overview of group experiential themes (GETs) (e.g. table or visual representation).</li><li>● Define each GET.</li><li>● Strike a balance between phenomenological account (quotes) and analytical comment (interpretation).</li></ul>

Note(s). This process applies to various forms of visual research, including drawings and can accommodate varied analytic approaches.

<sup>a</sup>These illustrative questions are based on Kirkham, Smith, and Havsteen-Franklin (2015); Roberts and Woods (2018); Herz and Brunk (2017); Boden and Eatough (2014).

highlight that ‘in effect, it is more problematic to try to meet IPA’s commitments with a sample which is “too large”, than with one that is “too small”’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 51). Therefore, designing multimodal IPA research with smaller samples can yield a richer, larger data corpus than a single-method design with the same number of participants (Boden, Larkin, and Iyer 2019).

Ultimately, however, research aims and questions, as well as underlying philosophical, theoretical, and methodological lenses, will shape the overall research design, including analytical focus. What is described in the following sections can be considered a ‘prototypical’ route map to conducting multimodal IPA research using collage (visual), narrative (written), and interview (spoken) data as examples. While we acknowledge that in larger and more complex designs, analysis can quickly transition from personal to group themes (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009), we contend that our method provides a more systematic and transparent process for this shift.

### **Creation**

Participants must create a collage or any other visual artefact at the outset. Overall, this stage aligns with the first hermeneutic level, where participants pre-reflectively and pre-linguistically engage with their lived experiences in an embodied way by arranging visual elements on the canvas (Roberts and Woods 2018). This requires a toolkit with a clear brief and, if needed, materials to complete the task. Herz (2010) highlights key factors for a successful process, which we expand upon, recognizing their interplay with ethical considerations. First, participants must understand the collage topic, which can be open-ended (e.g. ‘Visualize your experience with X.’) or more focused (e.g. ‘Visualize the positive aspects of your experience with X.’). Second, researchers may define how the canvas is used – whether participants have complete creative freedom (open format) or must partition it into predefined sections (closed format) to explore specific themes, such as ‘actual self’ and ‘ideal self’ (Higgins 1987). Third, participants need clarity on the study setting, including where (e.g. at home versus in a lab) and when (e.g. before an interview) they will create their collage, and how to submit it. Fourth, researchers should specify the level of creative input allowed. Can participants actively generate elements (e.g. taking photos, drawing, writing), or must they rely solely on external materials (e.g. cutting words or images from magazines)? Lastly, researchers must determine the input materials, including whether participants select stimuli freely (e.g. from magazines) or work with a curated set of images and words, as well as the support materials, such as the type and size of the canvas and other tools, including scissors, pens, and glue. These decisions should also be tailored to the chosen medium (e.g. physical versus digital collage).

Researchers should also consider strategies to enhance the inclusivity of their studies (e.g. Nind 2021). Contexts, materials, and tools may require adjustments to help participants with disabilities maintain their independence throughout the process (Carpendale 2004). Strategies might include adaptations that do not rely on technology, as well as assistive technologies for participants with physical or motor disabilities, visual impairments, communication challenges, or multiple disabilities, as described by Coleman and Cramer (2015) and Bouck (2017).

### **Reflection**

Once the collage or visual artefact is created, participants are invited to reflect on their choices, advancing the research to the second hermeneutic level. Some scholars caution that such reflections may lead to retrospective rationalization (Roberts and Woods 2018), while others argue they help reduce interpretation bias and ensure accurate understanding (Herz and Diamantopoulos 2013). In line with Gadamer's (1976) view that visuals communicate to each individual as if they were explicitly directed at them, and IPA's idiographic focus on the 'insider's perspective' (Smith 1996), it is crucial to capture what resonates with participants who have lived the experience (Davey 2013) before the researcher engages in interpretation. Therefore, the participants' perspectives on their visual output, through which they make sense of their experiences, must be gathered at this point.

These participant reflections must be integrated into the research design and can take various forms, combining multiple data generation methods and modalities, such as visual, verbal, and written (Hamilton 2016; Herz and Brunk 2017). For instance, the collage or drawing task can be completed on the day of an interview or in advance (Dekel-Dachs and Moorlock 2024; Herz and Diamantopoulos 2013; Kirkham, Smith, and Havsteen-Franklin 2015), blending visual and verbal data. In this case, a separate participant reflection may not be necessary as both methods are integrated within a single event. In other instances, when participants are asked to create their collages at home before the interview, they may also be asked to submit written or audio-recorded reflections, with clear guidelines on length (such as word count or duration) to manage expectations. This approach may be suitable to accommodate individual circumstances (e.g. participant availabilities), preferences (e.g. natural settings), and logistics (e.g. interview duration), while maintaining rich and detailed content data, because the procedure helps to capture participants' immediate lived experiences with the process of creating a collage and how the phenomenon was visually perceived. Both the collage and the written or audio-recorded reflection can be explored in more detail during the actual interview. Additionally, researchers could use a 'think-aloud' technique, prompting participants to articulate their thoughts as they create the collage

(Roberts and Woods 2018). However, this approach may place extra cognitive and affective demands on participants, requiring them to manage two tasks simultaneously, which could introduce ethical concerns, especially if time constraints are imposed (Roberts and Woods 2018).

### ***Transcription***

This subsection focuses on transcribing visual data, loosely adapting Van Schalkwyk's (2010) approach. We refer to established IPA principles for transcribing verbal data (e.g. audio-recorded interviews) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). Visuals (e.g. collages, drawings) are transcribed by creating, what we call, a wireframe – a simplified version of the visual artefact that maps core elements by tracing their locations using shapes such as boxes (for graphic elements) or ellipses (for standalone text). Each shape is numbered to facilitate cross-referencing within and across datasets (see Figure 1, explained in the next section using a sample case). This can be achieved using standard software (e.g. Microsoft PowerPoint) or specialised software (e.g. Adobe Illustrator), as well as devices such as Apple Pens and iPads, to trace visual elements.

### ***Transposition***

At this fourth stage, all data is organized into a table with three columns (see the first three columns in Table 6, which are explained in the next section using a sample case): (a) the visual element's reference number, (b) its denotation – the literal meaning of what is depicted, and (c) the participant's commentary on each visual element. We adopt Van Schalkwyk's (2010) language and call this table a 'story grid' as it consolidates the participant's lived experiences or stories. This table (story grid) can be created using any standard software, such as Microsoft Word (as in our case), Microsoft Excel, Google Docs, or Google Sheets, depending on the researcher's preference.

To identify the source of each data point, we recommend using labels, such as COL (collage), INT (reflective interview), or WRI (written reflection), combined with line numbers (e.g. INT210-215). This process enhances transparency and supports the hermeneutic reading in the subsequent stages by integrating visual, written, and verbal data (parts) into a single multimodal data set (whole).

Using the visual elements as the principal anchors, at this transpositional stage, we recommend maintaining the chronological and sequential order of the quotes as they appear in the research process and original text when they are associated with a specific visual element. For example, the visual IPA researcher might begin with the transposition of the written narratives as they are temporally closest to the collage



## Interpretation

With all data reorganized, interpretation begins by following the seven analytic steps of IPA research (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022), starting at the individual case level. This advances the study to the third hermeneutic level, where researchers make sense of participants' lived experiences. The first step involves familiarizing oneself with each case by thoroughly reviewing and re-reviewing all available data. Next, researchers annotate exploratory comments. We recommend adding a fourth column to the story grid labelled 'exploratory notes', where researchers can document their analysis (see the fourth column in Table 7). Notes can be descriptive (e.g. paraphrases), linguistic (e.g. metaphors), or conceptual (e.g. interrogations of data) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Researchers may also want to seek a 'visual gem' (Boden, Larkin, and Iyer 2019):

So the gem is the thing that stands out when you're reading a transcript [or visual], it's the extract that demands attention and prompts further analytic work. Proportionately, gems, almost by definition, are in the minority, so there may be, in a particular transcript, just one gem, but its value is much greater than the part of the transcript that it represents. And what do these gems do? They offer analytic leverage, they shine light on the phenomenon, on the transcript and on the corpus as a whole. (Smith 2011, 7)

To facilitate the uncovering of meaning, Boden and Eatough (2014) introduced two frameworks, one for analysing drawings and the other for analysing their production, which have been adopted in subsequent IPA studies (e.g. Attard et al. 2017; Day, Larkin, and Shaw 2024; Nizza, Smith, and Kirkham 2018). These frameworks can be used to facilitate the exploratory noting of the visual elements.

In the third step, researchers construct experiential statements after adding notes to the story grid, summarizing key insights (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). These are recorded in a new column called 'experiential statements'. As illustrated in the next section, the story grid (see Table 7) now consists of five columns: (i) the visual's identifier (e.g. COL1); (ii) the visual's denotation; (iii) the participant's commentary with source reference to respective data sets (e.g. NAR23-34; INT210-215); (iv) exploratory notes; and (v) experiential statements. The story grid, therefore, provides an audit trail that can be read inductively (from left to right) or broken down from the more abstract level (experiential statements) back to participants' visually expressed lived experiences.

Step four involves identifying connections across experiential statements. This can be done digitally or physically, by cutting and grouping experiential statements using techniques such as abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, or numeration (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). A recent example of the scattering and clustering of experiential statements can be found in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022, 92–93). As illustrated by Smith and Nizza (2022, 45), clusters can be shown in tabular form, which is the

approach we chose for our sample case presented in the next section (see [Table 8](#)).

In step five, ‘each of our clusters of experiential statements is given a title to describe its characteristics. These clusters hereby become that participant’s Personal Experiential Themes [short: PETs]’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 94). As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022, 94; emphasis original) further explained, PETs are . . .

*Personal* because they are at the level of the person . . . . *Experiential* because they relate directly to the participant’s experiences . . . or their experience of sense-making. *Themes* because they are now no longer tied to specific and local instances within the transcript (as statements are). Instead, they reflect analytic entities present within the transcript as a whole.

PETs are organized in a new table (for demonstration see Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 95–97), listing the PETs, their sub-themes, and experiential statements, with cross-reference to their sources. We illustrate this in [Table 9](#) using our sample case, which is explained in the next section. [Table 9](#) shows three (A, B, C) PETs (in bold and uppercase letters) with respective sub-themes (in bold), illustrative quotes (in italics), and source information referring to all three data sets (COL, NAR, INT).

Step six repeats all prior steps for the following individual case until all cases have been analysed. IPA researchers should carefully reflect on and justify their analytic sequence, as it may shape the study’s tone and influence its outcomes despite all efforts to bracket (i.e. set aside) researchers’ pre-understandings (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). This process creates a single standard IPA table for each participant, including their PETs and references to multimodal data (see [Table 9](#)).

Finally, step seven involves a cross-case analysis of PETs, developing group experiential themes (GETs), and following established procedures (see e.g. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 100–04).

## **Narration**

In the final stage of the visual IPA approach, researchers must carefully weave together text and visual materials in a nuanced, context-sensitive manner (Rowe 2011). This requires balancing analytical depth (interpretations), phenomenological richness (quotes and extracts), and transparent, persuasive data presentation (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022), while also addressing ethical considerations such as anonymity and power dynamics. To ensure transparency and ground the analysis in participants’ lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022), every extract should be labelled with the participant’s pseudonym, data source, and visual element reference number (e.g.

‘Peter, COL5’ for the fifth element in Peter’s collage or ‘Peter, INT324’ for line 324 in Peter’s interview transcript).

We embrace the theoretical and methodological flexibility that IPA research offers (Dennison 2019). Therefore, instead of prescribing how to present findings, we encourage multimodal IPA researchers to select a format that best suits their research approach, philosophical beliefs, and, most importantly, research questions. For example, Shinebourne and Smith’s (2011b) IPA study examined the lived experiences and meaning-making of alcohol or drug consumers in long-term recovery by combining interviews with a drawing method. Three themes emerged: the first discusses ‘participants’ images of recovery and of life in recovery. The second theme presents images of self and perceptions of self. In the third theme, the focus is on the experience and the elements of drawing’ (Shinebourne and Smith 2011b, 285). Conversely, Day, Larkin, and Shaw (2024) designed an arts-based IPA study using participants’ photographs to create a collage, through which they narrated their findings. Herz and Brunk (2017), on the other hand, displayed key brand memory domains identified in their marketing study in a table, accompanied by textual descriptions and visual examples (snippets) from their collage.

The story grid presented in this section offers a useful starting point for tabular, textual, visual, or multimodal presentation, as it integrates lived experiences and analytical commentary within a single framework. We also acknowledge that many publishers impose strict word limits, requiring a careful balance between breadth and depth. By including collage transcriptions in an appendix or supplementary material, multimodal text can be presented more conventionally through cross-referenced codes (e.g. COL1, INT210–115). Where space allows (e.g. in theses or dissertations), we recommend first introducing each participant and their collages before presenting the group experiential themes. This approach aligns with IPA’s idiographic commitment and helps readers build rapport with participants. Furthermore, it allows participants to describe their visual experiences of the phenomenon in their own words. Table 10 demonstrates this with the sample case shown in the next section.

### **An illustration**

This section illustrates key aspects of the proposed visual IPA process using excerpts from an unpublished study completed by the first author and approved by the University of Gloucestershire’s Business School. The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of consumers with consumption objects. Sixteen participants were recruited for the study. Data were generated using three qualitative methods: collage creation (COL), written narrative (NAR), and reflective interview (INT), yielding three distinct data sets per participant. As indicated below, participants were first asked to create a ‘Who am I?’ collage,

which is a modification of the ‘Who am I?’ test used in (child) psychology to measure a person’s self-concept (Chaplin and John 2005). The self-concept comprises a person’s descriptions and evaluations of themselves, influencing their identity development over time (VandenBos 2015). It can include objects, such as brands (John and Chaplin 2019) and possessions, which ‘... are prominently viewed as a part of self and are generally mentioned just after personal characteristics such as age and gender’ (Belk 1989, 129). Once completed, participants were tasked to write a written reflection (NAR) and were invited to an interview (INT) to explore their experiences in more depth.

Damian’s (pseudonym) case is presented here as an example to demonstrate the six stages of the visual IPA approach outlined in earlier sections. By presenting Damian’s single case, we aim to provide readers with a clear understanding of the process, which – consistent with IPA’s standard approach – can then be applied to other cases before conducting cross-case analysis to identify group experiential themes (GETs).

### **Creation**

All individuals who agreed to participate in the study received a detailed participant information sheet outlining the core aspects of the research, including an agreement which granted the researchers the right to use participants’ collages, written reflections, and interview transcripts without restriction, including for commercial purposes, and without additional permission. Table 4 illustrates different factors researchers should consider when preparing their participant information sheets, consent forms, and debrief sheets, without claiming to be exhaustive or providing legal advice.

After giving written, informed consent, each participant received a collage toolkit. It provided guidance regarding canvas size (A2), acceptable formats (digital or analogue), and software (any). Those working in analogue were advised to send a scanned version of their collage. Furthermore, it contained instructions concerning the sourcing and requirements for photographs (via [www.unsplash.com](https://www.unsplash.com)) and other visual stimuli. Participants were asked to use only Unsplash, a website that provides a variety of images free for both personal and commercial use without the need to credit photographers. This approach was undertaken to prevent copyright problems and guarantee the images could be freely reproduced for publication and presentation. Participants were also reminded not to use personal or private photographs to protect their anonymity.

### **Reflection**

The collage toolkit introduced above included a briefing on the written narrative, asking participants to reflect on the content and the process of creating their

Table 4. Ethical considerations when drafting agreements with participants.

Theme	Considerations	Sample text
Legal	Type of agreement:	'transfer and assignment of copyrights' or 'licence'
	Parties:	'researcher' and 'participant'
	Scope:	'sole and exclusive'
	Restriction:	'unlimited'
	Fee(s):	'free of charge'
	Changeability:	'irrevocable'
	Permission(s):	a) 'to copy, modify, publish, distribute, publicly display, sell, and license the work' b) 'to transfer and assign the copyrights'
	Purpose:	'for commercial and non-commercial purposes'
	Duration:	'during full term of copyright and all extensions thereof'
	Geography:	'worldwide'
Regulatory	Channel(s):	'any' (present and future)
	Format or medium:	'any' (present and future)
	Attribution:	'the participant waives their right to be identified as author of this work'
	Integrity:	'the participant waives their right to object to derogatory treatment of this work'
	Illustrative statement for participant information sheet and consent form:	
		<i>In consideration for participating in this research project, the participant irrevocably transfers and assigns to the researcher, for the full duration of copyright and any extensions, all exclusive rights in the copyright, worldwide, in their work(s) produced during the research project. The participant grants to the researcher the sole and exclusive authority to copy, modify, publish, distribute, publicly display, sell, and license the work(s), as well as to transfer and assign the copyright, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes, through any present and future channel, format, or medium. The participant waives their moral rights, including their right to be identified as the author and their right to object to derogatory treatment of their work(s).</i>
	Tensions might surface, for example, when participants do not waive their rights to be identified as authors, as this could compromise anonymity. However, professional bodies, including the Market Research Society (2023), might explicitly permit the disclosure of personal information about participants – including photographs – if they have given informed consent. Researchers also need to check, in addition to relevant laws, their employer's regulations, guidelines, and employment contracts to establish who owns the copyrights to the works created during their employment.	
	Beyond the previously mentioned concerns about anonymity and confidentiality, researchers should consider simplifying legal clauses. Using plain language in addition to legal jargon can improve the clarity of informed consent, helping participants fully understand what they are agreeing to and why.	
	Sample statement in easy language:	
	<i>In exchange for your participation in this research project, you give all rights to your work(s) created during the research project to the researcher. The researcher can copy, change, publish, sell, display publicly, share, and license the work(s) in any way they want, for as long as copyright lasts and beyond. You also give up all your moral rights, such as being named as the author or objecting to how the work is used or changed.</i>	

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Theme	Considerations	Sample text
Personal	The sample statement above has been drafted in an attempt to give the researcher maximum flexibility through the widest coverage. <sup>a</sup> However, we acknowledge that this shifts the power balance, and some researchers might feel that participants are being 'exploited'. We recommend being transparent with participants and recognizing the importance and benefits of their contribution(s). Explain why the legal aspects are necessary, especially regarding the publication process, which makes knowledge available to others and, therefore, helps to understand and address the research problem 'more fully'. Researchers could also consider more advanced participatory research approaches, making participants to co-authors. This, then, changes not only our understanding of research participants and their roles in knowledge construction but also influences the production and dissemination of knowledge, as well as legal parameters.	

Note(s). <sup>a</sup>The guidance given in this table and throughout the entire article is neither comprehensive nor should it be taken as legal advice. Researchers must always modify their approach according to their local (and other relevant) laws to suit their specific circumstances.

collages, particularly on how they represent their sense of self. Participants were encouraged to comment on the elements they used, the meanings these elements carried, and any thoughts or emotions that emerged during the creative process. A suggested word count of approximately 300 words and tips on making notes during and after collage construction were provided. Once completed, the written narratives were submitted alongside the collages, enabling the researcher to engage with the materials before the reflective, in-depth interviews scheduled at times and locations most convenient for participants.

As discussed, in-depth interviews are the most established method for generating rich, phenomenological accounts of lived experience in IPA research (Smith and Nizza 2022). A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to guide the conversations (see Table 5 for example). Its questions (e.g. future self; Shinebourne 2010), themes (e.g. identity; Smith 1995), sequencing (e.g. present, past, future; Fleuridas, Nelson, and Rosenthal 1986), and the overall structure (e.g. from easy to tough questions; Rubin and Rubin 2012) draw on established frameworks for designing qualitative interviews.

Essentially, the schedule was designed to explore participants' lived experiences with consumption objects as reflected in their self-concepts. The initial part of the interview focused on participants' lived experiences of the collage-making and narrative-writing process, offering a concrete, accessible entry point. This helped participants ease into the interview before transitioning to more abstract, identity-related questions, which could be perceived as more challenging (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). After that, the interview moved back to the topic of the collage, asking participants to group sections of their collages into themes (meaning units) and assign a title to their work. These questions were placed at the end because discussing identity-related topics could have (re)shaped their previous understandings.

### ***Transcription***

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and purposefully in line with recommended practice (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The transcription followed a modified version of the conventions proposed initially by Poland (1995). Participants were allowed to review their transcripts for accuracy and to withdraw any content they did not wish to be published or disseminated (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). This process was not intended as a form of triangulation or member checking (Hagens, Dobrow, and Chafe 2009; Thomas 2017), as these practices are not aligned with our interpretivist paradigm. Instead, this step aimed to 'validate the transcripts, to preserve research ethics, and to empower the interviewees by allowing them control of what was written' (Mero-Jaffe 2011, 231). In contrast, the written narratives submitted by participants did not require transcription (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

**Table 5.** Interview schedule to explore the lived experiences with consumption objects.

---

**1. INTRODUCTION****2. ASKING EASY QUESTIONS**

2.1 Your first two tasks in the research process were to create a collage and to write a narrative. How did you find that?

*Possible prompts: e.g. fun, challenging ...*

2.2 Can you talk me through the process of creating your collage?

*Possible prompts: e.g. How did you manage the research process? How did you proceed? Time allocation?*

2.3 What can you tell me about your collage?

*Possible prompts: e.g. Which objects did you choose and why? What is the style, tone, colour, and content of the collage? Follow up on participant's written narrative.*

**3. ASKING TOUGH QUESTIONS**

3.1 Can you tell me something about you as a person?

*Possible prompts: e.g. Characteristics, including attitudes, motives, behavioural tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses.*

3.2 What would your partner (or best friend) tell me about you? How would they describe you?

*Possible prompts: e.g. Characteristics, including attitudes, motives, behavioural tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses.*

3.3 Thinking about yourself in the past: What (personality) characteristics other than the ones you have today did you consider important?

*Possible prompts: e.g. What characteristics were important to you? Have they changed looking back e.g. 5–10 years?*

3.4 Thinking about yourself in the future: What (personality) characteristics will you have?

*Possible prompts: e.g. What characteristics are important to you? Will they change looking ahead e.g. 5–10 years?*

3.5 How might the question 'Who am I?' have affected your decisions which objects to include in your collage?

*Possible prompts: e.g. self-expressive, sense of belonging, attachment ...*

3.6 What name/title would you give your collage? What are the main themes (meaning units) in your collage?

*Possible prompts: e.g. can you group parts of your collage and give them meaning?*

**4. TONING DOWN**

4.1 How do you feel?

*Possible prompts: e.g. happy, sad, confused, stressed ...*

4.2 Do you have any questions?

4.3 Is there anything that I should have asked you but didn't?

**5. CLOSING THE INTERVIEW**

*Debriefing*

---

Collages were transcribed after the withdrawal period had ended. The transcription process began by creating a blank A2-sized digital canvas using software such as Adobe InDesign or Microsoft PowerPoint. Onto this, all visual elements from the original collage were transferred using geometric shapes – grey-shaded rectangles for images and white ovals for text. Each shape was then labelled systematically using Arabic numerals for images and Latin letters for text. This enabled consistent referencing of specific collage elements throughout the study. The referencing format combined the abbreviation 'COL' with the corresponding image number and text letter. For instance, COL1L refers to the first image and the twelfth textual element in Damian's collage and transcript, as shown in [Figure 1](#). It denotes the background image of a green hedge that covers most of the canvas, along with the associated text: 'never take a risk without a hedge', which is examined in more detail below.

## ***Transposition***

The fourth stage of the visual IPA process entailed transposing materials from all three data sets (COL, NAR, INT) into a single story grid for each participant. Table 6 illustrates an abbreviated form of Damian's story grid.

## ***Interpretation***

While all seven IPA steps are addressed, this paper focuses on the first five as applied to Damian's single case; steps six and seven follow standard procedures outlined elsewhere (e.g. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). A sequence for analysing the 16 cases was defined inductively: all collages were laid out and ordered based on 'striking elements' – visual features that immediately stood out (Roberts and Woods 2018, 632). We acknowledge that this initial sense-making may have influenced our pre-understanding of the data.

### ***Step one: reading and re-reading***

We began by immersing ourselves in Damian's case through repeated readings of his collage, narrative, and interview transcript. In doing so, we engaged in a hermeneutic dialogue (Boden and Eatough 2014) between data sets, gradually shaping our understandings, in line with Gadamer's (1989) hermeneutics. We also revisited the audio recordings to enhance recall and remain attuned to the participant's voice (Smith and Nizza 2022). Emerging pre-understandings were documented as reflexive field notes, intended to be bracketed and revisited later (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

### ***Step two: exploratory noting***

Using Damian's story grid, we recorded three types of exploratory notes in Column 4 of Table 7, formatted as follows (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 2022): Descriptive notes (plain text) captured literal meanings and paraphrases. Linguistic notes (underlined) focused on metaphors and stylistic devices that helped express experience and bridge description and interpretation. Finally, conceptual notes (italicized) offered interpretive questions and theoretical reflections, for instance, identifying that happiness depends on both internal (planning) and external (chance) factors. In this hermeneutic process, the data prompted questions that we (tentatively) answered from our own horizons (e.g. consumer theories, such as 'locus of control' in the example above).

### ***Step three: constructing experiential statements***

In Column 5 of Table 7, we synthesized the notes into experiential statements – concise formulations capturing psychological meaning. This step marked the

Table 6. Damian's (abbreviated) story grid.

Element(s)	Denotation(s)	Participant's quote(s)
COL1L	Colour photograph of a green hedge covering most of the A2 canvas. The sentence 'Never take a risk without a hedge.' is subtly placed on the centre-right of the collage	<p>Happiness arises when opportunity meets good preparation. Never take a risk without a hedge. (Damian, NA29-31)</p> <p>'Never take a risk without a hedge.' Because I come from very weak economic circumstances by nature, that was always a crucial point. Even as a child, I started earning money alongside school and built on that – and both in my self-employment and in employed positions, I've always paid close attention – or rather, in everything I do, I make sure I can't suffer a total loss. That's something – I NEVER want to go back to those difficult financial circumstances I was born into. (Damian, INT1559-1573)</p> <p>Interviewer: How would you describe the term 'hedge', as you used it? Damian: For example, as [professional and personal] 'support network' (Damian, INT1589-1593) [Continues to describe an incidence where he supported one of his colleagues; Damian, INT1593-1633]</p> <p>Being able to do that [providing support] is something that, by implication, means I have security from ALL these people. If something happens to me, if I'm missing something – I don't just help the colleague . . . —but by implication, I also know: The colleague covers for me if I'm off for a week, without needing to call in sick. That's not to be underestimated when living with a chronic, severe underlying illness – or even multiple conditions – since I'm frequently off work, which means I'd have to apply for sick pay quite often. But through this – through the security I built during the healthy, good times, I'm now in a paid full-time position, which I fulfil part-time. (Damian, INT1641-1659)</p> <p>The hedge is the safety net that lies beneath everything. (Damian, INT1725-1726)</p>

(Continued)

Table 6. (Continued).

Element(s)	Denotation(s)	Participant's quote(s)
COLX	The phrase 'Happy about every single day' is surrounded by four interconnected colour photographs: cannabis (COL27), raspberries (COL28), computer hardware (COL29), and a hospital vital signs monitor (COL30).	One day, on [date reference], everything changed. Since then, I haven't lived a self-determined life like healthy people do. By now, it's harder for the people around me [to cope with it] than it is for me. No one notices when my energy runs out – until I collapse or suddenly need a break. Day in, day out, I give my all and cherish every day that passes. Always positive, always optimistic. (Damian, NAR32-39) Text in the bottom centre: 'Happy about every single day' – that's this awareness, hm, which I also tried to somehow include or convey in writing [COLX]—but I'm NOT succeeding. The people in my CLOSEST circle KNOW – that I live each day as if it were my last. And that it's not just some empty phrase, but the reality I live in. And yeah, that means I'm just genuinely grateful for every single day that passes, in the truest sense of the word, because I don't know if it'll all be over tomorrow. So – what does that describe? Yeah, a whole bunch of medical details. (Damian, INT1279-1294) The term RTX down there won't mean anything to you – I also have NO IDEA what that [photograph] is that I copied in. While scrolling through the photos [on Unsplash], I came across RTX at some point. The chemotherapy I'm receiving is abbreviated as RTX. (Damian, INT1295-1300) In many of the health books I've been given over the last few years by well-meaning people in my circle, it's recommended to eat raspberries – even in many TV shows and so on – raspberries are always the key component for autoimmune diseases, tumours, and other conditions, and that's why I eat a lot of raspberries, no matter the cost. And – especially on my business trips, whenever I land somewhere, I usually buy two packs, like two of these containers of raspberries for dinner. Yeah, and otherwise, what keeps me going during the day is everything that's available in terms of medical solutions ... (Damian, INT1306-1322) I PERMANENTLY take four medications or, in a broader sense, medications that are classified as controlled substances – that's why this image with the cannabis – which, in case of doubt, save me in the next hour, just keep me going. They really mobilize the last reserves. It's really quite fascinating. (Damian, INT1322-1331)
COL29	Partial photograph of branded computer hardware, shows a cropped brand name with the visible letters 'RTX'.	
COL28	Colour photograph of raspberries in blue baskets, arranged in a 3 × 2 grid.	
COL27	Colour photograph of a cannabis plant.	

Table 7. Interpretation of Damian's (abbreviated) story grid.

Element(s)	Denotation(s)	Participant's quote(s)	Exploratory notes	Experiential statements
COL1L	Colour photograph of a green hedge covering most of the A2 canvas. The sentence 'Never take a risk without a hedge.' is subtly placed on the centre-right of the collage	Happiness arises when opportunity meets good preparation. Never take a risk without a hedge. (NAR29-31; also COL10; INT968-989)  'Never take a risk without a hedge.' Because I come from very weak economic circumstances by nature, that was always a crucial point. Even as a child, I started earning money alongside school and built on that – and both in my self-employment and in employed positions, I've always paid close attention – or rather, in everything I do, I make sure I can't suffer a total loss. That's something – I NEVER want to go back to those difficult financial circumstances I was born into. (INT1559-1573)  Interviewer: How would you describe the term 'hedge', as you used it? Damian: For example, as [professional and personal] 'support network' (INT1589–1593)  [Continues to describe an incidence where he supported one of his colleagues; INT1593–1633]  Being able to do that [providing support] is something that, by implication, means I have security from ALL these people. If something happens to me, if I'm missing something – I don't just help the colleague ... —but by implication, I also know: The colleague covers for me if I'm off for a week, without needing to call in sick. That's not to be underestimated when living with a chronic, severe underlying illness – or even multiple conditions – since I'm frequently off work, which means I'd have to apply for sick pay quite often. But through this – through the security I built during the healthy, good times, I'm now in a paid full-time position, which I fulfil part-time. (INT1641-1659; see also COL2-3; COLA-B)  Network and trust create gravity (COL4C)	<p><i>Locus of control: happiness depends on both internal (planning) and external (chance) factors</i></p> <p>Since early childhood, financial security has been important (crucial): <u>temporality</u>, emphasizes young age <u>The past is a psychological threat and must be avoided: motivational force against regression. Boundary?</u> <u>Defines the circumstances he was born into (framed also as natural or given): asserts agency, control, and self-determination</u></p> <p>Hedge functions as a metaphor for professional and personal support network, <u>offering protection against potential risks and setbacks</u></p>	<p>Happiness requires proactive planning</p> <p>Early hardship is a key motivator in shaping his 'security/secureness' trajectory</p> <p>Support is transferred in a reliable exchange network</p> <p>Support is a shared experience based on trust</p> <p>The healthy Damian cares for the sick – this dual self fosters a sense of self-care and control</p>

(Continued)

Table 7. (Continued).

Element(s)	Denotation(s)	Participant's quote(s)	Exploratory notes	Experiential statements
COLX	The phrase 'Happy about every single day' is surrounded by four interconnected colour photographs: cannabis (COL27), raspberries (COL28), computer hardware (COL29), and a hospital vital signs monitor (COL30).	<p>The hedge is the safety net that lies beneath everything. (INT1725-1726)</p> <p>One day, on [date reference], everything changed. Since then, I haven't lived a self-determined life like healthy people do. By now, it's harder for the people around me [to cope with it] than it is for me. No one notices when my energy runs out – until I collapse or suddenly need a break. Day in, day out, I give my all and cherish every day that passes. Always positive, always optimistic. (NAR32-39)</p> <p>Text in the bottom centre: 'Happy about every single day' – that's this awareness, hm, which I also tried to somehow include or convey in writing [COLX]—but I'm NOT succeeding. The people in my CLOSEST circle KNOW – that I live each day as if it were my last. And that it's not just some empty phrase, but the reality I live in. And yeah, that means I'm just genuinely grateful for every single day that passes, in the truest sense of the word, because I don't know if it'll all be over tomorrow. So – what does that describe? Yeah, a whole bunch of medical details. (INT1279-1294)</p>	<p>Safety net ... lies beneath everything: <u>the hedge embodies a general awareness of personal vulnerability while simultaneously signifying a proactive (coping?) strategy of protection</u></p> <p>Remembers date when his life changed: <u>Impact Loss of agency: life is now controlled by illness</u> <u>Compares himself with 'healthy people' and (close?) 'people around him': experiences empathy for others but also sense of isolation?</u> <u>No one notices ... until: illness is a mostly private experience (invisible struggle until it is externalized)</u> <u>Tension between control (give my all) and the uncontrollability of his condition (collapse, need breaks)</u> <u>Life is precious, faced with optimism and positivity</u> <u>Finds it difficult to articulate his experience</u> <u>Insiders know, outsiders don't</u> <u>genuinely grateful: subtle acceptance as form of coping and exerting control despite external challenges</u> <u>every single day that passes: emphasis on time</u> <u>I don't know if it'll all be over tomorrow: awareness of his own vulnerability – and mortality</u></p>	<p>Creates a safety net to cushion negative impact</p> <p>Experiences loss of agency due to an uncontrollable external event</p> <p>Struggles to control what is uncontrollable</p>
COL29	Partial photograph of branded computer hardware, shows a cropped brand name with the visible letters 'RTX'.	<p>The term RTX down there won't mean anything to you – I also have NO IDEA what that [photograph] is that I copied in. While scrolling through the photos [on Unsplash], I came across RTX at some point. The chemotherapy I'm receiving is abbreviated as RTX. (INT1295-1300)</p>	<p>Reference to chemotherapy: indicates challenges he might be facing, including the physical, emotional, and mental demands associated with chemotherapy. Photograph embodies internalized medical jargon: <u>a way of coping with the treatment or managing its weight?</u> <u>I'm receiving; but didn't choose? External locus of control?</u></p>	<p>Chemotherapy is to be endured – it is incomprehensible to those outside it</p>

(Continued)

Table 7. (Continued).

Element(s)	Denotation(s)	Participant's quote(s)	Exploratory notes	Experiential statements
COL28	Colour photograph of raspberries in blue baskets, arranged in a 3 × 2 grid.	In the many health books I've been given over the last few years by well-meaning people in my circle, it's recommended to eat raspberries – even in many TV shows and so on – raspberries are always the key component for autoimmune diseases, tumours, and other conditions, and that's why I eat a lot of raspberries, no matter the cost. And – especially on my business trips, whenever I land somewhere, I usually buy two packs, like two of these containers of raspberries for dinner. Yeah, and otherwise, what keeps me going during the day is everything that's available in terms of medical solutions ... (INT1306-1322)	Has been given health books: books are gifts to support active health management <u>Given by well-meaning people: suggests social support but may also imply a lack of agency (if unsolicited) or feelings of overwhelmingness (by influx of advice).</u> <u>no matter the cost: Prioritizes health benefits provided by raspberries – they are a priceless component of his active health management: agency keeps me going: source of energy</u>	Actively manages his health by consuming products, including gifts  Consumption fosters a sense of agency, supplying both psychological and physical resilience
COL27	Colour photograph of a cannabis plant.	I PERMANENTLY take four medications or, in a broader sense, medications that are classified as controlled substances – that's why this image with the cannabis – which, in case of doubt, save me in the next hour, just keep me going. They really mobilize the last reserves. It's really quite fascinating. (INT1322-1331; see also COL21P)	Emphasis on <u>ongoing treatment: central in his life</u> <u>Controlled substances: represents the seriousness of treatment and regulated access to drugs</u> Meds mobilize ( <i>give control?</i> ) in an otherwise uncertain (uncontrollable) situation: <i>highlights fragility</i> Expresses curiosity (fascination) toward the medical mechanisms at play in his treatment.	Consumption of regulated drugs is central part of his life – it helps to control an uncontrollable situation  Consumption provides epistemic benefits

shift from description toward interpretation by linking lived experience to psychological theory (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

#### ***Steps four and five: Identifying connections and forming personal experiential themes (PETs)***

Next, we clustered experiential statements (see Table 8) into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) using abstraction, subsumption, and contextualization (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 2022). For instance, abstraction led to the theme ‘Why do consumers respond the way they do: to develop resilience’, while subsumption supported ‘How consumers respond: need for control and security’. Table 9 presents the resulting PETs for Damian.

#### ***Step six: moving to the next case***

We treated each participant as a single case and repeated the process illustrated for Damian’s case for the remaining 15 cases.

#### ***Step seven: cross-case analysis and group experiential themes (GETs)***

In the final step, we compared PETs across all 16 participants to identify Group Experiential Themes (GETs). All individual PET tables were spread out to facilitate a hermeneutic dialogue with the data, allowing us to observe patterns, divergences, and silences across the group.

### ***Narration***

The write-up of this multimodal IPA study, which incorporates visual methods such as collage, adheres to established principles of traditional IPA research (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022), which we do not reiterate here. Instead, we briefly demonstrate how visual, textual, and verbal data can be combined to construct a rich and unfolding narrative (Nizza, Farr, and Smith 2021).

Given the layered hermeneutic engagement discussed earlier, we view participants not only as ‘insiders’ of the phenomenon under investigation but also as co-creators of meaning. Accordingly, we recommend that visual IPA studies allocate sufficient space to participants’ voices, represented through verbatim extracts from all three data sets. This may include a concise pen portrait or participant profile, along with the participant’s explanation of the collage, the length of which can be adapted to suit specific publication guidelines. Table 10 illustrates a sample write-up of Damian’s case.

### ***Evaluation***

This section presents participant feedback from the unpublished IPA study, which utilized a ‘Who am I?’ collage to explore the lived experiences of 16 consumers with their consumption objects. The results presented here align

**Table 8.** Clustering of Damian’s experiential statements.

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A
Early hardship is a key motivator in shaping his ‘security/secureness’ trajectory
Experiences loss of agency due to an uncontrollable external event
Struggles to control what is uncontrollable
Chemotherapy is to be endured – it is incomprehensible to those outside it
B
Happiness requires proactive planning
The healthy Damian cares for the sick – this dual self fosters self-care and control
Creates a safety net to cushion negative impact
Acknowledges mortality and loss of future self – subtle acceptance as a coping mechanism (control)
Consumption of regulated drugs is central part of his life – it helps to control an uncontrollable situation
C
Support is transferred in a reliable exchange network
Support is a shared experience based on trust
Actively manages his health by consuming products, including gifts
Consumption fosters a sense of agency, supplying both psychological and physical resilience
Consumption provides epistemic benefits

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with insights from existing visual research conducted using predominantly collage construction.

Many participants found the collage-making process empowering (Scotti and Chilton 2018), enabling deeper self-reflection and exploration of their identity. Several noted that it helped them to articulate and contextualize aspects of themselves they had not fully recognized before (Gerstenblatt 2013).

I’ve really enjoyed and learned about myself. This has allowed me to share things about myself that I don’t have actually vocalised before. (Briana, INT1066-1073)

The creative act of selecting and arranging images gave participants a sense of agency (Roberts and Woods 2018), allowing them to craft their narrative actively. This embodied process was engaging and evoked emotional responses (Bond, Ramsey, and Boddy 2011), often revealing parts of their identity they had not consciously intended.

The interesting thing is, when I did my collage, for example, sport was not in it and I was not even thinking about sport, and I recognized my life completely changed . . . (Tobias, INT487-497)

Several participants noted that the interview process influenced their responses, suggesting that the collaborative, contextual nature of the research shaped their experience (Bagnoli 2009). Additionally, some highlighted the therapeutic value of the process (Scotti and Chilton 2018), raising the question of whether collage-making alone would have the same effect or if the reflective interview played a crucial role.

The questions you ask . . . they were great and they really helped me to draw out what I needed to say. (Laura, INT1824-1832)

**Table 9.** Table of personal experiential themes (PETs) from Damian’s analysis.

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<p><b>A. WHAT CAUSES CONSUMER RESPONSES: DISTRESS</b></p> <p><b>Emotional distress at lack of control</b></p> <p>Experiences loss of agency due to an uncontrollable external event  <i>On . . . , everything changed. Since then, I haven’t lived a self-determined life</i> (NAR32-34; COLX, COL16, see also: COL34)</p> <p>Struggles to control what is uncontrollable  <i>No one notices when my energy runs out – until I collapse or . . . need a break. Day in, day out, I give my all</i> (NAR36-38; COLX)</p> <p><b>Physical distress and endurance</b></p> <p>Early hardship is a key motivator in shaping his ‘security/secureness’ trajectory  <i>I never want to go back</i> (INT1570-1573; see also COL1L; NAR4-5)</p> <p>Chemotherapy is to be endured – it is incomprehensible to those outside it  <i>The term RTX . . . won’t mean anything to you . . . The chemotherapy I’m receiving is abbreviated as RTX</i> (INT1295-1300; COL29)</p>
<p><b>B. HOW CONSUMERS RESPOND: NEED FOR CONTROL AND SECURITY</b></p> <p><b>Need for control</b></p> <p>The healthy Damian cares for the sick – this dual self fosters sense of self-care and control  <i>through the security I built during the healthy, good times</i> (INT1656-1657)</p> <p>Acknowledges mortality and loss of future self – subtle acceptance as a coping mechanism (control)  <i>I live each day as if it were my last. And that it’s not just some empty phrase, but the reality I live in</i> (INT1286-1288; COLX)</p> <p>Consumption of regulated drugs is central part of his life – it helps to control an uncontrollable situation  <i>Which . . . save me . . . They really mobilize the last reserves</i> (INT1319-1322; COL27)</p> <p><b>Need for security</b></p> <p>Happiness requires proactive planning  <i>Happiness arises when opportunity meets good preparation</i> (NAR29-30; see also COL10L; INT968-989)</p> <p>Creates a safety net to cushion negative impact  <i>the safety net that lies beneath everything</i> (INT1725-1726; COL1L; see also: NAR31)</p>
<p><b>C. WHY DO CONSUMERS RESPOND THE WAY THEY DO: TO DEVELOP RESILIENCE</b></p> <p><b>Psychological resources</b></p> <p>Actively manages his health by consuming products, including gifts  <i>the many health books I’ve been given</i> (INT1306-1309; COL28)</p> <p>Consumption fosters a sense of agency, supplying both psychological and physical resilience  <i>what keeps me going</i> (INT1320; COL28)</p> <p>Consumption provides epistemic benefits  <i>It’s really quite fascinating</i> (INT1330-1331; COL27)</p> <p><b>Social resources</b></p> <p>Support is transferred in a reliable exchange network          Social relationships protect Damian – and Damian protects others  <i>[providing support] . . . means I have security from all these people</i> (INT1645-1649; COL1L; see also COL2A; COL3A; COL3B)</p> <p>Support is a shared experience based on trust  <i>by implication, I also know</i> (INT1648)</p> <p><i>Network and trust create gravity</i> (COL4C)</p>

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However, some participants also faced challenges in visually representing themselves (Shinebourne and Smith 2011a), mainly due to task constraints, such as image sources and the collage topic. The inability to use personal images pushed them to think abstractly and find symbolic representations of their identity. Some found the ‘Who am I?’ question overwhelming, not because of the medium but due to its existential depth. Despite these challenges, most participants viewed the tasks positively, as they encouraged deeper reflection.

**Table 10.** Sample write-up from Damian's case.*Pen portrait*

Damian is a white, 49-year-old male from Germany. During the interview, Damian self-identified as severely disabled (Damian, INT1797-1798) and elaborated on his circumstances, which are also embodied in Damian's collage presented in Figure 1. He works full-time as a key account manager at a company he has been employed with for more than 18 years. Before joining his employer, Damian had run various small businesses in the 1990s. His family biography is rich and eventful, affecting his upbringing and, eventually, his identity. Damian wanted to include his culturally diverse background in his collage, but he did not find images that could tell his story (Damian, INT2253-2257). For example, his father was born in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after his family was exiled due to the upheaval in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Damian himself was born and raised in Germany. He has two brothers and one sister, against which he had to assert himself (Damian, INT891-893). At various points of the interview, he mentioned his low-income family background (e.g. Damian, INT594; INT1565-1578) and that he had worked hard towards his social mobility.

*Collage*

Damian's collage is entitled 'my life'. It visualizes Damian's lived experiences at various stages of his life. For example, the collage references past experiences (e.g. upbringing; COL7E) as well as core values (e.g. perseverance; Damian, COL23V) and traits (e.g. creativity; Damian, COLK25). Interestingly, the trait of 'curiosity' is the only textual element in Damian's collage that has been emphasized using a bold typeface in red font colour (Damian, COLP21). It seems that all other words in Damian's collage have been rendered invisible – along with the meanings they carry. This could indicate Damian's struggle to tell strangers his very intimate story (INT13-21). Towards the end of our interview, Damian admitted that he felt tense; he elaborated: 'This was by far the most personal conversation I ever had in my life with an outsider' (Damian, INT2480-2483). He explained: 'I am doing this [interview] with a degree of honesty that is unusual for me' (Damian, INT908-909). To contextualize Damian's quote, it is helpful to understand the two meaning units he identified in his collage. Embedded – and perhaps deliberately concealed – within the larger image representing where his social self lies, his personal vulnerability, or personal self. As noted earlier, Damian self-identified as severely disabled (Damian, INT1797-1798), though he did not elaborate on his specific health condition. He emphasized: 'Those illnesses are very much mine. [I'm] always trying not to let others participate in them' (Damian, INT1792-1795). He further described his lived experience with illness: 'For me, the worst of this experience is the loss of control, because I cannot win against it' (Damian, INT1454-1456), and framed the loss of self-determination as 'the biggest challenge in [my] life' (Damian, INT1483-1486). By choosing to render the words in his collage invisible and/or illegible, Damian asserts control over the narrative. The imagery remains polysemic and ambiguous, and the words similarly resist clear interpretation. To others, its intimate meaning is obscured – almost camouflaged. However, to Damian, the collage is highly intelligible and deeply meaningful. When we discussed the level of detail in his collage, he reflected: 'I could not have done it [the collage] differently ... No matter what I had left out, it would have always ... felt incomplete to me' (Damian, INT1509-1512).

*Analytic commentary*

Given Damian's life-course approach to the task and the centrality of managing distress in his experiences, it is perhaps understandable that he centres on his capacity to adapt and cope despite adversity, challenges, or trauma. That ability rests on a combination of factors that include the environmental, social, and psychological. The resilience he seeks is a dynamic and interactional process that sees Damian deploy a range of protective mechanisms, such as reducing stress alongside fostering self-efficacy and agency as a means of active coping. The following section explores Damian's lived experiences along three themes that emerged from the combined data set: (1) what causes consumer responses: distress; (2) how consumers respond: need for control and security; and (3) why do consumers respond the way they do: to develop resilience ...

I was not allowed to use pictures of me ... This made me think on a different level using pictures which are not mine ... Actually, it [the collage] turned out to be more detailed. (Jasmin, INT261-266,1080-1085)

At the beginning, I found it difficult, because the everlasting question, that is difficult to explain, is 'who you are'. (Luka, INT16-18)

While participant feedback was largely positive, visual research can be time-consuming (Kalter 2016). Researchers often rely on participants' self-selection, making them active contributors or, more aptly, co-creators of meaning, thereby democratizing research (Reavey 2011). However, a visual approach carries the risk that some may perceive the task as overly simplistic (Van

Schalkwyk 2013) or even mildly offensive. These challenges may act as barriers to participation for both participants and investigators, warranting careful consideration by the researcher.

Because I wanted to do a good job, . . . I did about four hours of work. (Alicia, INT174-178)

[As a graphic designer,] I found it—and this is a joke—a little bit offensive that you asked me to do it [collage] on PowerPoint. (Ruby, INT20-22)

## Conclusion

In this paper, we propose a robust methodological approach for conducting multimodal IPA research incorporating visual methods, using the collage technique as a practical example. We position IPA not merely as a qualitative data analysis method but as a broader research stance (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006) or a framework (Clarke and Braun 2013) for exploring individuals' lived experiences and sense of self (Smith 2004, 2019). Our work responds to Day, Larkin, and Shaw's (2024) recent call to examine the potential of idiographic collages rather than theme-based constructions while also aligning with Giorgi's (2010) appeal for a methodologically 'sound' approach. In doing so, it demonstrates sensitivity to context, a strong commitment to rigour, and transparency in the analytic process – meeting several of Yardley's (2015) quality criteria for qualitative research. In addition, it makes several important contributions (Yardley 2015).

First, the paper advances theoretical understanding by exploring the relevance of Gadamer's (1989) hermeneutics in visual IPA research. We highlight unresolved tensions in IPA theory (Day, Larkin, and Shaw 2024; Smith 2007), arguing that visual research particularly demands a reflective engagement with its philosophical underpinnings. This positioning ensures that paradigmatic concerns are considered and a rigorous foundation is provided for this novel form of qualitative psychological inquiry.

Second, we make a methodological contribution by offering a systematic process for conducting visual IPA research, illustrated via collage. Drawing on established IPA practices (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022) and informed by diverse collage methods (Dekel-Dachs and Moorlock 2024; Herz 2010; Van Schalkwyk 2010), we propose a six-stage process: (1) Creation, (2) Reflection, (3) Transcription, (4) Transposition, (5) Interpretation, and (6) Narration. This approach draws strength from work in other domains, ensuring that transdisciplinary benefits are realized.

Third, we demonstrate the approach's impact on its beneficiaries through empirical insights from individuals who have experienced it. Using Nizza, Farr, and Smith's (2021) quality indicators, we show how multimodal IPA using visual methods enriches traditional interview-based IPA. For example, developing personas, engaging in a holistic discussion

of collages, and presenting GETs together can help build a compelling, layered narrative. Moreover, visual methods help participants articulate their experiences and sometimes facilitate new realizations – what was absent from a collage became a significant insight. Through this process, researchers and participants co-construct meaning, revealing what Gadamer (1994) described as bringing existential meaning (truth) out of hiddenness. Hence, as Kalter (2016) notes, such projective techniques can uncover ‘aha moments’ in qualitative research. Using visual, textual, and verbal data in combination also helps researchers to understand lived experience ‘more fully’ (Boden and Eatough 2014), because they add layers of meaning to the ‘thick descriptions’ obtained in traditional semi-structured interviews (Boden, Larkin, and Iyer 2019). The proposed analytic process – transposing multimodal data into story grids – encourages close reading and rigorous interpretation. Researchers working within alternative theoretical frameworks or designs may adapt this method – for instance, by using collage transcriptions and PETs to construct GET collages from deconstructed data – if this approach aligns with their theoretical or methodological foundations.

In summary, multimodal IPA using visual methods such as collage offers notable advantages over traditional IPA. However, in line with Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), we recognize that multimodal studies increase the demands on researchers, who must pay closer attention to time and reflexivity, as well as the necessary methodological and analytical skills. This is because multimodal research – compared to traditional verbal approaches – can often be more complex and multidimensional. Nevertheless, these demands are balanced by the depth, richness, and insight such an approach can yield.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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