



Visual research in LIS: Complementary and alternative methods



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A B S T R A C T

Although visual methods are emerging as a valuable and versatile tool in qualitative social studies research, confusion around terminology, options, and best practices persists. Consequently, LIS scholars who wish to employ innovative visual approaches in their research face barriers to discovering and deciding which visual options best suit their goals. Based on a review of the literature, this article identifies and describes the scope of participatory and non-participatory visual methods currently in use in the social sciences, with particular attention paid to LIS contexts. While visual methods bring clear benefits to qualitative research in terms of data quality, modes of expression, and alternate perspectives, challenges remain, including logistic issues of implementing visual study designs and ethical considerations.

1. Introduction

Metaphorically “linking the human eye with the acquisition of knowledge is a practice as old as, if not older than, the philosophy of Plato” (Wilder, 2009, p. 167) due in large part to the amount of information we process visually. When the first camera was introduced to the public in 1839 by the British Royal Society, researchers were quick to appreciate its scientific advantages, which primarily included the ability to reliably capture and preserve objective, factual data (Wilder, 2009).

Since that time, the use of imagery in research has straddled the line between data and decoration. While the reliability of quantitative data provided by scientific imaging has proven revolutionary in fields such as engineering and medicine (for example, satellite imagery or CAT scans), its adoption in qualitative social scientific disciplines, including library and information science (LIS), has been slower and less dramatic due to the often exploratory, highly social, subjective, and contextual nature of the data they represent. Consequently, images that support or represent textual or numerical information (such as charts, graphs), and which are designed to narrow or hone our understanding of the topic under study are still privileged. Visual methods that introduce degrees of variability and uncertainty to text-based inquiry and reporting remain less frequently employed, despite complex, unique, valuable features and emic perspectives (Julien, Given, & Opryshko, 2013) that can be captured in no other way.

Proliferation of personal electronic communication devices, however, increasingly means that citizens and researchers in both developing countries and in the western world not only have access to still image and video camera technology but also to the knowledge of how

to use it. It should come as no surprise then, that LIS, which is itself interdisciplinary, should “continue to pursue research methodologies that are themselves adaptive and open to the continuing evolution of human culture” (Horn, 1998, p. 611).

This literature review offers a better understanding of what constitutes visual methods, how visual data are being applied in interdisciplinary social scientific research, and insight into its potential for use in LIS contexts. As a primer, it maps the range of terminology associated with visual methods, and contemporary usage of this methodology as viewed primarily through serial publications. It is most likely to appeal to researchers who are new to or curious about visual methods.

2. Why visual methods?

Visual research is broadly understood to include collecting, producing, organizing, and interpreting imagery in all its various forms for research purposes (Prosser, 2007). Imagery can originate from a multitude of sources, including photographs, film, and other forms of visual art such as drawings or sculpture. Beyond a basic definition of what visual means, however, there is little consensus among researchers about what the options are, or when, how, or why to use them.

Hartel and Thomson (2011) point out terminological inconsistencies, indicating that visual methods, visual research, and visual approaches are essentially the same thing, and can be both methodology, thus “steer[ing] an entire research design”, and “one data-gathering technique [or method] within a multi-method study” (p. 2215). Complicating matters, multiple varieties of visual methods can be combined within a single study, and subsequently given independent

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names to describe the use of a particular group of techniques.

Further, Julien, Given, and Opryshko (2013) suggest that “few scholars publish meta-level discussions of their methodological approaches, which could guide new research practices within the field” (p. 257). This is particularly so with visual research, where the current depth of methodological description is best described as inconsistent.

Finally, the metaphor of the camera as eye is as much about “the way knowledge is gathered with photography, and the way that knowledge is valued” (Wilder, 2009, p. 166) as it is about the science behind mechanical reproduction. The viewpoint from which the camera collects its images is central to our growing understanding of when, where, and why visual methods are useful and appropriate in qualitative research in all disciplines, including LIS.

Consequently, LIS researchers who wish to employ innovative visual approaches face additional obstacles when discovering visual research options and deciding which ones best suit their goals. There is a need to understand the breadth of terminology attached to different visual methods of data collection, best practices for executing the different methods, as well as the subtleties of how methodology influences the data itself, the interpretation, and the diffusion of research results. The following guiding points served as the basis for the search:

- What is the variety of available visual methods currently in use in social science disciplines? How are they named? How are they defined?
- Who has used visual methods, in what contexts, for what purpose?
- What are the advantages, limitations, and ethical considerations associated with pursuing visual research?

2.1. Scope of discussion

This study serves as a practical guide to understanding how visual methods are being used in research today as described in contemporary periodical publications. Readers interested in discovering the depth and variety of discussions related to the theoretical underpinnings of visual methods are directed to the following predominantly monograph sources, which can provide more detailed information on the origins and history of visual methods in anthropology and sociology, discussions of ontological constructions of images and interpretative perspectives, as well as more advanced discussions of ethics.

- Widely seen as a pioneer of visual methodology, J. Collier published *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* which was later revised in collaboration with M. Collier (Collier, 1967; Collier & Collier, 1986).
- Similarly, the work of Rouch in pioneering ethnofiction has been instrumental in developing awareness of film as a methodological tool. Primary sources created by Rouch are available in film format (Documentary Education Resources, 2016). There are also a wide variety of secondary sources available about Rouch, who has an impressive body of work (Documentary Educational Resources, 2016; Eaton, 1979; Rouch & Feld, 2003; Stoller, 1992).
- Wagner's edited book *Images of Information: Still Photography in the Social Sciences* includes 16 chapters written by leaders in the field of visual anthropology and visual sociology, including pieces by J. Collier, Harper, and Wagner (Wagner, 1979).
- Harper published a number of pieces discussing visual methods, including a chapter in Denzen and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Harper, 1993).
- More recently, a number of reference books describing how to study and analyze visual artifacts and culture have gained a following, especially among students and researchers new to the field of visual anthropology and visual sociology (Banks, 2001; Banks & Ruby, 2011; Rose, 2012).
- Around the same time frame, Prosser and Loxley (2008) (who are well known for working among populations facing disabilities)

produced a sizeable paper designed to orient new researchers to the use of visual methods of data collection.

- Pauwels (2010, 2015) presents a refined analytical framework from which to examine visual methods.
- The abstract of a panel discussion presented at the 2012 American Society for Information Science & Technology conference discussing examples of visual methodologies in use in LIS research may be of interest (Hartel, Lundh, Sonnenwald, & Foster, 2012).
- Finally, Weber and Mitchell have explored innovative and evolving ways of using emerging technology, artifacts, and artistic formats in connection with the Image and Identity Research Collective (Weber, 1993; Weber & Mitchell, 2016).

Although an entirely comprehensive list of monographic publications is beyond the scope of this paper, these references provide at a minimum a starting point from which to engage further with the literature surrounding visual methods.

3. Literature review

The literature review was conducted during the fall of 2013 for the purposes of supporting a larger study, and updated again in 2016. Databases primarily in the disciplines of LIS, social sciences, and humanities were examined using combinations of keywords (for example, visual*, photo*, imag*, video*, film*, elicitation, graphic, art, sensor*). Based on the assumption that the most relevant and descriptive studies would be the ones where authors themselves elevated the use of visual methodology to include mention in title or abstract, initial searching was generally limited to these fields. Although artistic methods (including drawing, diagramming, sculpture or map-making for example) are mentioned in this review, emphasis is placed on photographic or film-based visual methods.

From there, searching occurred in an iterative process until saturation was reached. As new terminology appeared, new searches were conducted using expanded keywords (for example, photo novel or novella, auto-driving, domestic photography) and alternate fields. Databases, journals, and articles that produced relevant results were examined in more detail, including associated controlled vocabulary tags and citations. Publication histories for authors who established themselves as visual methods experts were also examined more closely, as were selective monograph items.

While this net captures many articles reflecting the use of visual methods, it is also subject to inherent limitations. In applying contemporary language to searches, items may have been excluded from this review because authors either chose to use alternate vocabulary to describe their methodology, or because they did not fully describe or emphasize their methodology despite the fact that elements of visual data collection and analysis were present. Although it may be argued that this is a flaw in the search process, I believe it also points to other important dynamics and challenges worth highlighting that are present in the contemporary estuary of visual methodologies. The presence and absence of specific studies one might expect to see in the following lists highlights the topography and growing pains associated with the slow process of integrating interdisciplinary research methods into LIS research design and reporting, including the consequences of naturally occurring inconsistent terminological usage. As researchers explore, experiment and extend these methodologies, one might expect the vocabulary to normalize over time. This is not always the case. Further contributing to the challenge, pieces may not be recognized or described as methodologically significant when initially published, but may retrospectively be deemed landmark pieces in new or emerging contexts. Reinterpreting a piece as methodologically significant does little in practice to make it easier to find.

One of the most significant findings of this review, therefore, is that there is little “consensus about how [visual] methods should be used” (Cross, Kabel, & Lysack, 2006, p. 184), and even less consensus about

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