



# Visual ethnography: Achieving rigorous and authentic interpretations



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## ABSTRACT

Visual methods have a long history in ethnographic research and ethnographic methods are increasingly used to gain a depth of insight and understanding not achievable with traditional marketing research approaches. As a rigorous and valid research method, visual ethnography enables documentation of marketing and consumption as social and cultural phenomenon. Visual text collected through the process of cultural immersion serves as an effective and credible research tool in the quest to collect and analyze empirical evidence as well as disseminate research findings. As a case application, this paper builds on the ethnographic investigation of Schembri (2009).

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## 1. Introduction

Visual ethnography is an appropriate and credible methodology in the quest to achieve rigorous and authentic interpretations in marketing and consumer research. As pioneers of visual anthropology, Margaret Mead, in conjunction with co-author Gregory Bateson, bravely put visual technology to work as early as 1942 in a photographic analysis of the Balinese character (see Mead & Bateson, 1942). Within the Balinese culture Mead and Bateson were studying and documenting native culture, whereas contemporary marketing and consumer researchers study consumer culture.

As a social and cultural phenomenon, consumption is complex and messy and accordingly, many social scientists have started to shift the way social life is studied and consequently understood. As the “cultural turn” (Rose, 2001, p. 5) this paradigmatic shift includes an uptake of visual methods as an effective means to study the construction of social life through social practice. The premise of this form of social study is that different groups in society will make sense of the world in different ways and that these varying meaning structures direct the way people behave.

Demonstrating the value and meaning of the Nutella brand and building on the earlier work of Muniz, Albert, and O’Guinn (2001), Cova and Pace (2006) for example, show how Nutella as an object of consumption holds a particular meaning within the online Nutella world as understood and shared by the members of that online

community. The depth of detail is in part achieved by using visual documentation with Cova and Pace (2006) incorporating real pictures of real people consuming Nutella. From another analytical perspective, Grow (2006) uses visual methods to study the mediated construction of community life within the world of Nike women’s advertising. Using a semiotic analysis of 27 Nike print campaigns that were implemented across a 10-year period, Grow (2006) shows how the advertising creatives effectively reflect the cultural and social experience of women in an authentic manner where storytelling is the bind. Another study analyzing visual text but using a hermeneutic approach and contextualized in 50 years of James Bond films, Cooper, Schembri, and Miller (2010) uncover a range of brand narratives that reflect the cultural and social experience of luxury as depicted on the big screen. Analyzing visual text in these various ways, consumer experience and (brand) consumption is demonstrated as central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies. Accordingly, Rose (2001) argues that researchers increasingly regard cultural constructions as the primary analytical focus. Visual text therefore, is a window on the world of consumer experience.

### 1.1. Describing reality and consumer experience

Assuming the interpretive focus of ethnography and the descriptive outcome of ethnographic research, Bryman (2001) considers ethnography as a creative process in experiencing, interpreting, and representing culture and society. The subjectivity of experience and the multiplicity of reality are implicitly fundamental assumptions. More specifically, ethnography as an interpretive methodology assumes that reality is socially constructed alongside a non-dualistic ontology, where person

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and world are considered inseparable. This underlying philosophy directs how to conduct (visual) ethnographic research in that the researcher aims to come as close as possible to the phenomenon under investigation, through the member's eyes and in this case, visually recorded.

Ethnography is the study of culture and ethnographic descriptions are creative endeavors that allow researchers a window to the world of a particular culture. Ethnographic knowledge is typically achieved via fieldwork involving participant observation and *in situ* interviews. Combining these traditional fieldwork techniques, with the addition of visual technology, generates ethnographic knowledge in the form of visual text. World renowned anthropologist and strong advocate for visual research methods Sarah Pink (2009, p. 97) asserts, “[T]he use of visual and digital methods and media in ethnographic research is now common practice.” Evidence to this effect in the field of consumer research is provided by Peñaloza (1998) employing visual and material cultural approaches in attending to the design, architecture and accoutrements of the market spectacle in relation to cultural meaning. Also presenting a visual ethnography, Schembri (2009) demonstrates the use of visual text as a credible research method within marketing and consumer research where the validity of a collaborative and reflexive approach is shown to maintain integrity throughout the research process.

A collaborative approach to visual research assumes the researcher and member consciously work together to produce visual images that are authentic representations of the research context (Pink, 2007). Collaborative visual documentation combines both researcher and member interpretations, thus representing a negotiated outcome (Pink, 2007). At the extreme as a postmodern twist, collaboration might also entail members' handling the camera and taking the lead as to what is recorded and how. Taking digital photographs and film are tasks that members might identify with. Indeed, some members may be avid photographers or may offer technical hints in other instances. In this way, the visual images and technologies themselves become commodities of exchange and sites of negotiation (Pink, 2007). By the researcher releasing control and allowing members to handle the camera, this visual expression effectively captures the consumer/member view. For example, Schembri's (2009) ethnographic investigation of the experiential meaning of Harley–Davidson involved members voluntarily taking on camera duty. One member in particular filmed a five-day 4000 km (2485 mi) ride of about 30 members travelling from Wollongong NSW to Ayres Rock (Uluru), Northern Territory, for an annual rally. This member also interviewed fellow members about their HOG experience. In this way, collaboration between researcher and participant enhances the validity of ethnographic knowledge.

Participants engaged in the documentation process become partners and collaborators in the negotiation of experiential meaning. Capturing cultural experience with visual text therefore allows a transformative potential (Pink, 2007). Recognizing this transformative potential in employing the visual within ethnographic research highlights the need to take a reflexive approach throughout the research process. A reflexive approach underlines the centrality of the researcher's role as research instrument (Pink, 2007) as the researcher is intimately involved in the production and representation of ethnographic knowledge (Silverman, 2001). In order to arrive at an authentic description reflexive researchers ideally focus on the member's subjective reality in terms of how the member experiences the world, rather than how the researcher sees the phenomenon. This inter-subjectivity then enables a negotiated version of reality, a validated interpretation, and effectively the generation of authentic ethnographic knowledge (Bryman, 2001).

### 1.2. Analyzing visual text

The analytical approach to visual research aims to explore the meaningful links between the research experience of the culture

under investigation and ethnographic knowledge generated, including visual text. Just as there is no set method for organizing ethnographic research in terms of specific evidence collection and analytical processes, visual ethnographers also develop appropriate systematic modes and manners, as the project unfolds. Analysis is concurrent with and drives evidence gathering and although fieldwork ends when the researcher leaves the site, the process of analysis continues until there is no more evidence to consider (Sayre, 2001). Taking a reflexive approach in attending to the analytical process involves organizing fieldnotes, transcribing interviews, and arranging the visual text in a meaningful way.

Researchers repeatedly review the different forms of text, including visual text to identify themes or patterns of behavior (Mead, 1995). Similar to the treatment of written text, visual text is compared, contrasted, and sorted into categories until a particular aspect of the culture is identified. Segmenting and shifting the text around (with video editing software) into relevant and meaningful units that hold a connection with the whole cultural experience is the goal of this analytical process. Sayre (2001, p. 189) explains, “...sorting field notes and transcriptions is like organizing your closet – everything goes into piles of like kind; socks with socks, trousers with trousers, shirts with shirts and so forth...after an initial sorting, each pile can be sorted again; dress socks from athletic socks, jeans from dress slacks, and T-shirts from tailored shirts.” Sorting and resorting text, including visual text, in this way categorizes the evidence according to an organizing system that derives from the evidence itself. While this inductive approach may not be a simple task, a depth of understanding the context is achieved via cultural immersion in order to capture an authentic interpretation. For this reason, the analytical process begins during the early stages of fieldwork and continues beyond exit of the research site. As Wolcott (2009) explains, a more astute place to get going with analysis is in the field with some basic questions that include: “What is going on here?”, “How do things happen as they do?” “What do people in this setting have to know...in order to do what they are doing?” ((Wolcott, 2009, p.37)). Such questions guide the acculturation process and aid the analytical focus. From there, initial categorization begins with the identification of a few broad categories then refined as more specific categories.

What enables researchers to read cultural experience and interpret visual text is the process of cultural immersion, as per authentic ethnographic research. Within this process Sayre (2001) suggests that fieldwork involving visual text provides a means of documentation, description, and disclosure for fieldwork. Still images and/or videography enable recording and documentation of the happenings, events and artifacts (Belk & Kozinets, 2005); the camera is a tool for members to document and describe an experience where images and visual material potentially encourage member disclosure.

Key events, for example, provide a lens through which to view a culture because cultural symbols and language indicate what the culture entails. The use of photographs or film to record these key events, symbols, and use of language therefore achieves a documentation of the cultural experience. Just as anthropologists visually document field finds, marketing and consumer researchers can visually document (consumer) cultural evidence. As well as a tool of documentation, the camera can also facilitate description, in this way making the audience empathize, feel, imagine and recognize human conditions (Belk & Kozinets, 2005). Just as the camera is a valuable tool, visual aspects and material objects within the culture are also valuable tools to elicit disclosure from members. In Peñaloza's (1998) research, she generates insight regarding how the arrangement and position of detailed personal stories of once underdog but now professional athletes transcend physical and mental challenges. These stories in combination with strikingly beautiful images stimulate not just feeling but thinking and action by consumers as they process and relate to these personal stories. In Schembri's (2009) study of the meaning of Harley–Davidson, the prominent cultural object eliciting disclosure is

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