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VISUAL RESEARCH

This chapter provides information on:

- what is visual research?
- ways of using visual materials
- the key concepts in visual research
- how to analyze visual data
- how to write about and evaluate visual data and visual research.

WHAT IS VISUAL RESEARCH?

The most usual and common way to understand ‘data’, ‘analysis’ and ‘results’ in any qualitative research in business studies is through textual materials. The interviews become transcribed into texts, and figures, numbers and signs in qualitative research refer to the analyses most often loaded with interpretations. Ethnographic memos of space become textual materials. Indeed, ethnographies most often ‘translate the visual into words’ (Pink, 2007: 119).

Increasingly, the visual materials have become part of the research, as data and as cultural representations, and visibility as an approach has become a framework to be used in business studies. Organizations and businesses use images, logos, videos and design, to display and to communicate, to make a distinction and stand out. For that reason visual materials have become one of the hot topics of business research. But how do you understand and analyze the visual materials in business research? This chapter will introduce and explore the use of visual materials, images and technologies in business studies.

Visual materials refer to data that are not in the traditional written or spoken form. Visual materials include pictures, hypermedia, videos, motion pictures, www-pictures, pictures and paintings available in books, advertisements, CD-ROMs, digitalized form, either two- or three-dimensional, etc. Visual material can be constructed of other types of artefacts such as packages, visual images of advertisements and so on. They also include – apart from existing data – new data and new types of data gathered within the project: videos, hypermedia, pictures, illustrations and images.

Visual methods are as varied as verbal ones. Visual research can and often does involve the use of other methods and methodologies, such as ethnography, discourse analysis, narrative analysis and semiotics, to mention a few. Visual and verbal methods are thus often complementary, not oppositional. Visual research is often representational by approach, multiplying layered representations of experience. Visual research can also be realist by approach (such as using photographs as sources of knowledge within text, as information sources or videos as documentary material), but also, and increasingly so, reflexive and culturally laden by approach, such as using hypermedia as representation, and referential relations between signs as in semiotics (Hall, 1997).

To give you a quick example of the relevance of visual materials, think about how photographs articulate and give possibilities for a multitude of interpretations in research settings. Therefore, the old saying, ‘one photo is worth a thousand words’ holds very much true in qualitative research. In cultural history and art history research, pictures and images, drawings and paintings have been key research material (Hall, 1997; Pink, 2007). Pictures give both historical and present testimony to micro-history and local habits, clothing, housing, and other similar issues. They also mediate the cultural images, meanings and open up re-interpretations to several issues. In business studies and even in social sciences – apart from cultural studies – however, visual materials are not so common in research and their systematic use, in particular, has remained rather limited.

With the growth of ethnography and widening uses of ethnographic materials, such as ethnography as fiction and emphasis on subjectivity in the production of knowledge, the use of visual materials such as photography, art, video and hypermedia, have become more common. The visual materials should thus not only be understood as realist ‘data’ but also increasingly they are understood as cultural texts and representations of layered and laden knowledge and meanings. The multitude of research on advertisements is a good example of the many and diverse uses of both visual materials and visual methods in the analysis.

WAYS OF USING VISUAL MATERIALS

Visual materials can be used in research in several ways, depending on the research question and the theoretical frame of reference adopted. The ways of using visual

materials in research and the methods available for visual analysis range from content analysis to cultural analysis and semiotic analysis as well as their different versions. The differences and overlapping between different methods relate to the differences in understanding the images and the visual material in research. Visual materials can be analyzed independently but also in relation to language and in interaction with theories. Ways of using visual materials in research range from cultural studies and media studies to visual anthropology, to visual semiotics and to ethnomethodology. These different genres of research where visual materials have differing but equally powerful roles would all require separate descriptions. This chapter gives an overview of the varieties and a general idea of the uses of visual materials and ways for visual analysis.

Even if there are various ways of doing analysis on visual materials, there are usually two primary perspectives for understanding the use of the visual materials in qualitative research projects. This division is based on different research philosophies, and is useful for understanding the variety in the uses of visual materials. The division also follows the earlier sketched idea that the method of analysis is dependent on the research question and its commitments.

First, visual materials such as 'reflections and records of reality' can be used as documentary evidence. The analysis aims to extract this type of documentary information. In this orientation visual materials are gathered and analyzed as facts or records, in much the same way as interviews, documents, and other types of qualitative data can be taken as factual evidence. As one example of this, you can use content analysis to investigate pictures. This is the way that some conversation analysts, for instance, use video materials in their research (Erickson, 2011; Luff and Heath, 2012). The classification can take place with the help of the research question, for example, with relatively traditional picture analysis that focuses on rather neutral classifications that express the state-of-the-art as it is. Such classifications can tell about the persons and their positions in the visual material, the number of them, and any other classifying categories. Moving from analyzing pictures separately, some visual methodologists, such as Banks (2001) argue that the photograph's content may trigger the exploration of relationships between visual objects and possible narratives. There are different ways of organizing and systematizing this type of analysis, ranging from simple classificatory devices to cultural and intertextual analysis and to software programmes for those qualitative researchers who want to analyze video, auditory, and still image data.

A second, more usual way for using visual material in qualitative research is to understand and use it as a construction and a way of constructing meanings and understandings, including processes of construction, as in ethnomethodology. This more reflexive approach to visual materials seeks to develop and use the full and layered potential of the visual materials in qualitative research. Visual materials can be used in research to analyze the cultural meanings and layers, and the subjective and reflexive readings of culture. This type of research is often called 'cultural studies'

or, more precisely, 'visually-oriented cultural studies'. As an example, semiotics and, more specifically, semiotically inspired consumer studies use photographs, art and videos for this purpose. Here, it is relevant to understand the social and cultural settings of visual materials and to study how the analysis of visual images in semiotics and in structuralism takes place, for example. For an overview of current work to show the wide range of contemporary research that uses video materials, see for example, Pink (2007) and Erickson (2011).

In practice the difference in the ways to use visual materials is not straightforward, nor rigid. Thus the boundary in the ways to use visual materials is blurred and changing rapidly. For that reason, the recipe book approach to using the visual materials in the business research is not possible, as 'there can be no blueprint for how to do fieldwork' (McGuigan, 1997: 32). The research questions and research design are the key elements in thinking how and in what ways the visual materials can be used.

THE USE OF VISUAL MATERIALS IN BUSINESS RESEARCH

In anthropology, in media studies and in cultural studies, photographs and pictures of social settings and cultures have been an important part of the research, either as part of the culture described or as research materials in their own right. Similarly, the use of new visual methodology, such as visual ethnographies in the analysis of business cultures, and the analysis of media images and pictures in advertisements, as well as visual images in job advertisements and annual reports, for example, could have a new role in business research. The analysis of visual materials can provide a new way of looking at the economy, business life, working life and consumer cultures (for the visual analysis of working life, see, e.g. Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2004).

Studying the visual environment of the corporate headquarters, or the symbolic meanings produced by the new designs of consumer products are just some examples of how visual materials can offer fresh and exciting perspectives to business research. An equally interesting new field for business research is the analysis of spaces and places which embody cultural and shared values and assumptions, commercial values and industrial tacit knowledge. Here, interesting and new connections and interdisciplinary research emerge. In visual research, methodologies and theories are easily interwoven and may guide the research in particular ways. Researchers should therefore be knowledgeable of the ways in which to incorporate visual materials and methods into an established methodology of business studies.

Business researchers can use visual materials in a number of ways, which should be determined in relation to the research objectives and questions. For example, you can use visual materials as your main data or as supportive data, which leads to a different type of analysis. Using visual materials as additional data or as materials for culturally-oriented business research is a new field worth exploring in research.

Also software packages specifically designed for the transcription, management and analysis of video materials have been developed and used in research.

Examples of such analysis can be found in numerous articles (e.g. in Erickson, 2011). Dempster and Woods (2011) analyze the visual material concerning the economic crisis of 2009 with the help of such software. The authors describe several styles of transcription used in the process of making sense of the visual data and the selection and coding of analytically interesting segments of the media files in their data. They worked with coded video materials and media data to develop a coherent narrative. The narrative in the ways media constructed the economic crisis was one of their points of interest, and for that purpose, the software package was one possible way to organize the video material. In their paper, Dempster and Woods (2011) describe their collaborative process, as facilitated by the software, and how that affected the analysis of the data. Finally, the authors describe the results of their analysis in terms of the multi-layered narrative of the data, and discuss the limitations of using the software in the analysis.

The visual materials do not require the use of media software. Business corporate offices and headquarter designs can be analyzed through photographs and pictures. How you analyze that material depends on your research question, but such visual material can tell you about the nature of the business activities and indicate a high or low degree of bureaucracy, for instance. As an example, Larsen and Schultz's (1992) famous study of a Danish bureaucracy addresses the various ways in which material artefacts, such as office furnishings, reflect clearly the asymmetrical organizational power relations. Similarly, Ewenstein and Whyte (2009) analyze through visual data how buildings' visual representations are used, and how these are meaningful to different stakeholders, eliciting their distinct contributions. Hancock and Tyler (2000), Linstead and Höpfl (2000), and Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan (2000) have analyzed images and visual materials in differing contexts when showing how the management of both environmental and embodied aesthetics can be understood to operate as a mechanism of employee control.

The application of visual methods in marketing and consumer research was investigated by Shin Rohani et al. (2014). The number of publications using and taking advantage of the visual materials and analyses has increased and the approaches most often applied have been factual and less constructionist by orientation. New approaches through video, the Internet and neuroscience imaging have however widened the application arena within marketing and consumer research (Dubois, Rucker and Galinsky, 2012; Shin Rohani et al., 2014).

ANALYZING VISUAL MATERIALS

The question of how to make sense of visual materials is closely linked with the question of how to analyze visual materials. It has been argued widely that

meaning-making of the visual is not the same as meaning-making of the language (Monaco, 2009; Davison et al., 2012). The analysis of visual data can be a complicated matter, and figuring out how to relate visual and textual analysis can be even more difficult, if you do not have that type of frame of reference in your research project to begin with.

Factual, cultural and constructionist analyses

In a similar way to texts, visual data are commonly treated and analyzed as a direct representation of reality. Therefore, visual data are considered as testimonial, true and objective materials. Visual content analysis usually takes this approach by isolating frames or images or sequences of scenes (Bell, 2001) and then classifies the materials according to specified dimensions, which can in turn be treated as variables that should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. However, photographs or paintings, for instance, represent both truth and construction of truth at the same time. Let's take an example of how difficult it is visually to distinguish these two: J.M.W. Turner's painting *A disaster at sea* (c. 1835, Tate Gallery, London) relates to a historically accurate event, a wreck of a ship at the French coast near Boulogne in 1833. Yet, the haziness of colours of white, gold and umber and the shadowy figures are constructed in such a way that the shipwreck is not the sole interpretation for the viewer. The cultural layers can be interpreted from paintings as well as from any visual materials.

With photographs, the examples may be closer to everyday experiences and thus easier to understand: they give true evidence of a specific situation, but at the same time they construct reality through the choices that the photographer made when deciding when to take the picture, who to include in it, etc. In addition, photographs as well as paintings are also complexly coded cultural artefacts. Therefore, visual materials can always be analyzed from both viewpoints, both qualitatively and quantitatively (e.g. Harper, 2005; Pink, 2007).

Historically, visual materials have provided a lot of visual information to support the realist idea of traditional ethnography. In this tradition, photographs were considered facts that constituted the truth and gave materials for different kinds of analysis. This is one way that visual materials are still used. New ways of using visual materials are emerging in business research as well: video recordings provide interaction in everyday settings in organizations, and give access to finer details of talk, discussion and bodily gestures, in comparison with devices such as written research notes or interview taping. Analysis of video recordings can even include detailed examination of specific fragments of materials, if that is suitable for your research question.

One way of looking at the materials, in order to learn about them, is to look at the ways the interaction in the conversation, for example, takes place: what is being said, by whom, and in what way.

Besides relying on the positivist and realist epistemologies, you can also analyze visual materials from the point of view of how images in materials produce meanings and subjective imaginings and also shared cultural images among groups of people and communities. On the other hand, there are no specific or rigid rules for the analysis of visual materials. Most researchers develop ad hoc solutions for the purpose of their own study (e.g. Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002: 111; Belova, 2006; Pauwels, 2010).

The uses and ways to deal with visual materials are plenty. Panayiotou (2010) analyzes the visual narratives of several popular films to explore how masculinity is constructed in the cinematic workplace, focusing on the representations of managers and the interplay between the practice of management and the practice of gender. Meier Sörensen (2014) takes the visual artefacts and interprets them through the theoretical understanding of marginal positions. For the analysis of the art, Meier Sörensen offers a method of aesthetic 'juxtaposition' of the visual artefacts. The analysis of the visual and social artefacts in business can consist of materials gathered by participants themselves, as in Brown, Costley and Varey (2010). The variety of materials may also give researchers more possibilities in their interpretations (Shin Rohani, Aung and Rohani, 2014).

The constructive understanding of visual materials can imply, for example, classification through visual readings and relational readings (Keats, 2009; van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). Relational readings can refer both to intratextual and to intertextual readings. Alternatively the classification of the visual material can take place through close reading. Close reading means the cultural interpretation and analysis of the visual material, its reorganization and interpretation through references and intertextualities. The analysis and close reading can concern the composition of the pictures, for example (Swan, 2010).

For video analysis, there is systematic observation software available that can be used to organize and systematize large video corpora, assist in case selection, and facilitate comparability and cross referencing (see, e.g. Snell, 2011). While this software has conventionally been used to produce quantitative results that can be subjected to statistical analyses, it can also assist in complementary qualitative analyses. Even culturally inspired research can use visual materials as 'ordinary' data. This way of using visual materials is often about incorporating a visual dimension into an 'already established methodology based on a "scientific" approach' (Pink, 2007: 5).

In all these studies, visual materials are not used as supportive materials but as the main materials of research in several and very differing ways. The aim with the examples is to show that there is not just one way of using visual materials in research, but plenty. What is common for all of these examples is that the materials, methods and theories used in the studies are intertwined. In business research, the study of visual images is most often related to cultural studies, the use of artefacts as mediating devices in organizations, and to semiotics and aesthetics, but also to critical research. In general, visual culture represents conventions of the social world, such as social hierarchies and organizational positions: the office space and furniture of the

CEO are most often bigger and the room more often has a view, in comparison with the secretary's office space, furniture and working station. In addition to the realist approach, one can also go much further in interpreting and analyzing the picture, product designs and images as cultural constructions and cultural images, as done in some of the more recent examples taken up here.

Analysis in visual anthropology, semiotics and cultural studies

Visual anthropology takes the visual as with complex reflections and treats it in the analysis in a similar complex way: thus the real and the construction tend to be taken into account. What is crucial for the visual anthropological analysis is the contextual information. This can be done through direct analysis, which means the examination of the content of the visual image. The indirect analysis relates the visual image to other types of knowledge and uses the image as a vehicle (Collier, 2001). Several ways of 'looking' at the visual images have been presented, note making, detailing and returning to larger contextualized interpretations are outlined for working with visual images in anthropology. Yet, the steps to be taken relate to the research question.

Cultural studies introduce closely linked questions about the ways the viewer looks and analyzes. The reflective part of the visual analysis becomes important, in addition to context: the aim is not – as often in visual anthropology – the contextualized and detailed narrative but reflexive subject position, the context of viewing, the context of production, and then the conventions become of interest (Lister and Wells, 2001).

Semiotics, 'science of signs', looks at the visual materials through 'hidden cultural meanings' and cultural layering of meanings, that is, by analyzing the representational (denotative) and symbolic (connotative) meanings in the images. One version of semiotics is social semiotics. The various ways of looking at these elements require cultural knowledge and specific interest in using cultural repertoires in visual analysis (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001).

WRITING THE VISUAL MATERIALS INTO RESEARCH

There are many ways of writing pictures and visual images into your research text (Mason, 2005; Mannay, 2010). How to use and dissect the visual imagery into the textual form, and how to use visuals in the research settings, depends on your research question and research design. Rose suggests three ways of using and analyzing photographs and pictures as key visual elements (Rose, 2012: 298).

In photo-documentation, photographs are planned as part of the research design (see Chapter 3), and they are analyzed through a particular visual phenomenon.

Photo-documentation is not widely used in business studies, and in writing, the careful documentation needs to be tied into reflexive discussion, otherwise it risks using photographs that are simply used as illustrations. In photo-elicitation, research participants are asked to take photographs, which are then discussed in an interview with the researcher. Involvement of active picture taking and discussing them into the research settings adds an additional layer to the interviews by and through the discussion of the photographs, but requires good planning and involves not only consent of the participants but also careful documentation of the instructions given (Rose, 2012: 308).

Writing of the photo-elicitation is often introduced as critical visual methodology and critical visual writing (Croghan et al., 2008). In photo-essays, a series of photographs is put together, in order to analyze the situation in question, for example. Photo-essays carry the tradition of the visual anthropology of making films (Banks, 2001), and as such photo-essays are not method, rather a way to open up research findings to a wider audience (Pauwels, 2010).

These three ways of using and writing about photographs cover only a small amount of visual materials and their analysis and have no reference to the theoretical bases of the analysis. Semiology, discourse analysis, feminist theory and cultural studies are prescribed to specific ways of analyzing the visual materials. Here, detailed knowledge of the method is crucial, but usage of visual materials relates first and foremost to the choice of whether the visual materials are used as primary data for research or as observations or visual products (Rose, 2012). Pauwels proposes that working towards a more visual discourse in research implies visual literacy and cultural competence along with the skill to translate scientific insights to verbal-visual constructs (Pauwels, 2010: 561).

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter has proposed ways of dealing with visual materials in business research.

The visual materials can be treated in different ways: from factual orientation to cultural semiotic and constructionist orientation. Choosing your method depends on the research question you wish to answer.

The use of the visual materials in the analysis can range from content analysis with variable approach to cultural close reading, interpretation of contextual matters and semiotic analysis.

FURTHER READING

Rose, G. (2012) *Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. SAGE: London. Rose's book introduces widely the different possibilities and limitations you may face with visual data materials and their use in the research.

EXERCISE 20.1

Choose an advertisement from a magazine

Look at the ad and try to analyze the various elements in the picture. Keep track of the ways you do the classification of the elements in the picture. Do you look for factual issues or culturally signified meanings?

EXERCISE 20.2

Choose an advertisement from a magazine. Alternatively you can look at the video clip of a TV ad

Look at the ad and try to find various types of conventions from the visual image or picture. Conventions are codes that are often a time-bound, socially agreed way of doing something. Conventions are often understood as carriers of traditions. What types of conventions can you spot in the picture or in the video?