

# Visual Images as a Data Capture Instrument: Understanding the True Meaning

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*Pictures provide a richness to the data set that compliments the textual findings of interviews, observation or other methods of data capture. However, on the negative side, pictures as signs are icons which are themselves prone to deception. False signs occur when the inter-relationship between language and extra linguistic signs deceive others and oneself. Visual representations tend to be more invasive, are arduous for participants to conduct and may tend to skew findings when the content provided by participants is determined by photo choice. Within the context of reliability and validity this paper explores the pitfalls of using visual representation alone and proposes guidelines for using visual representation in the research process, particularly as a source of validation or triangulation in autodiving interviews.*

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## 1. Introduction

Photographs have been used as a means of data capture for many years. Their use in recording observable phenomenon in anthropology is well documented and the benefits derived from their use means they also provide a valuable tool for researchers across many disciplines (Basil 2011; Belk 2013; Loeffler 2004; Stanczak 2007). Indeed, photographs have been used as visual projective techniques in a variety of disciplines, including marketing (Basil 2011; Soley 2006), tourism (Jenkins 1999; Loeffler 2004; Tonge, Moore, Ryan & Beckley 2013) and education (Kaplan & Howes 2004; Loeffler 2005).

Many studies reinforce the advantages of the visual format in that it can capture a truthful representation of the item under study. Visuals provide richness to the data set that compliments the understanding of interviews, observation or other textual methods of data capture (Belk 2013; Koenigstorfer & Groeppel-Klein 2010). They assist the researcher to reveal hidden constructs that otherwise may not be uncovered and are an excellent tool for driving interviews, revealing sensitive stories and documenting incidents.

However, for decades, photographers have argued over the accuracy of visual representation (Goldstein 2007). As artists, photographers have unique control over what is captured and represented to an audience, where the audience then interprets the image according to their own reference sets and ascribes meaning to it. The debate surrounding visual accuracy comes when a picture or visual image is manipulated, incomplete, distorted, adjusted or presented

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without context, thereby providing a meaning that misleads or deceives the viewer either intentionally or unintentionally. Following on from this, within a semiotic perspective, pictures as signs are icons which are themselves prone to deception. (An icon is a sign that conveys meaning because of its close resemblance to the object.) False signs occur when the inter-relationship between language and extra linguistic signs deceive others and oneself (Peirce 1955). For example, 'deception' may include where people mistake appearance for reality. Visual representations also tend to be more invasive, are arduous for participants to conduct and may tend to skew findings when the content provided by participants is discriminated by photo choice. Therefore using visual representations requires extra care by the researcher in ethical constraints and can cause reluctance with participant recruitment.

This paper explores the pitfalls of using visual representation in isolation as a data capture method and proposes guidelines for using visual representation in the research process. It further develops the argument evident in the literature, that visual presentations have strengths and weaknesses in the research process (Basil 2011), and expands on the aspects to be mindful of when employing the technique in consumer research. In particular this paper explores the weaknesses of using visual representation, in contrast to previous research where the strength of the technique is highlighted (Belk 2013; Basil 2011). A case analysis approach is used whereby the data collected with reference to consumer behaviour and the use of face makeup in the consumption of everyday appearance is explored and analysed using a semiotic framework.

The paper begins with a review of the use of photographs in consumer research and follows with a discussion of the use of visual imagery in semiotics and the potential for photos to be interpreted as false signs. A case study is then presented to demonstrate and provide understanding of the dangers the researcher needs to be cognisant of when using visual images in their research, and concludes with recommendations of how best to use this medium to best effect in consumer research.

## 2. Literature Review

Consumer researchers have used photographs to investigate attachment to '*favourite things*' (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), '*Thanksgiving rituals*' (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) and '*home and interior design*' (Firth 1995). Firth's (1995) study used respondent generated photographs to examine place attachment. Combined with in-depth interviews or used as part of Repertory Grid Technique (Kelly 1963) this is a free sorting process where respondents are asked to explain choices made between objects (photographs) in order to draw out information particular on difficult to articulate issues, all provide context and greater understanding in interpretation of the images captured. Similarly, photo elicitation, autodiving and videography are all means by which visual documentation aims to deliver rich insights into the area under study. The very act of framing the photograph or visual presentation, assists participants to see their everyday experiences in new ways (Dennis, Gaulocher, Carpiano and Brown 2009). To understand everyday shopping behaviour, Underhill's company 'Envirosell' analyses photography and video recordings (Underhill, 2011). In addition, Basil (2011) reviewed the use of photography and video in observational research, outlining some of the the strengths and weaknesses when using each within a marketing research context.

Visual imagery adds an element of realism not found in other forms of visual representation (Hine 1980). Beger and Mohr (1982) claim the camera and positivism emerged together and share similar aligned beliefs in that the truth can be discerned empirically from objective facts

that have been observed, systematically recorded and documented to provide understanding of certain social processes (Stanczak 2007). Consequently many consider photographs to be inherently honest; although, the photographer may not be. The photo captures a moment in time that is then used to illustrate a concept and allows the researcher to marry the concept with a real live event (Dennis et al 2009; Margolis and Pauwels 2011; Tonge et al 2013; Stanczak 2007).

### 2.1 The Truth? - Visual Representation From A Semiotic Standpoint

Semiotics has often been linked with visual representations as a framework for understanding meaning and interpreting the message portrayed by these images as 'signs'. Of particular relevance to visual representation is the category identified by Peirce (1955) of *icon*. The icon is a form of sign that conveys meaning because of its close resemblance to the object. For example, a painting or picture depicts an actual likeness to the object (Hawkes, 1977; Gottdeiner, 1995). In his writings, Peirce (1955, p105) elaborates on the different types of icons and describes how they can be broken down into *hypoicons*. Hypoicons can be divided into images, diagrams or metaphors depending on their characteristics. Images are 'first firstnesses' (Peirce, 1955, p105) and have simple qualities. Diagrams have a dyadic relationship by joining two parts together and finally those that represent the character of the representamen "by representing a parallelism in something else, are metaphors" (Peirce, 1955, p 105). Hypoicons include any material image such as a painting or photograph as it stands, with no reference or legend to describe it.

According to Gottdeiner (1995), icons' meanings are only weakly set by social customs and codes. Icons are important because to communicate any idea either directly or indirectly, necessitates the presence of an icon for the process to take place (Peirce, 1955). Consequently any image that has no reference or legend is subject to multiple interpretations.

Peirce also discusses the possibility of false signs, a concept that is very relevant when considering visual imagery. False signs occur when the inter-relationship between language and extra linguistic signs deceive others and oneself. Merrell purports that these include "language and extralinguistic signs collaborated interdependently and interrelatedly to bring about the act of deception" (Merrell, 2000, p. 112). 'Deception' may include where people mistake appearance for reality. Such a situation may occur when women wear make-up and believe that their 'made-up' face is actually their true identity. In contrast to the self-deception brought about in this non verbal or extra linguistic manner is 'self-deceit'. This is usually linguistically based, for example, telling yourself a lie and actually believing it. As Merrell purports, "deception and self deception emerge from the most basic of signs, signs of feeling, imaging, sensing and awaring, that eventually create the idea and the expression of something that is not as if it were" (Merrell, 2000, p 115). Understanding the possibilities of encountering these false signs is important as it has significant ramifications in the analysis of visual data (Den Tandt, Gorus, Lennon and Reumkens 2009).

### 3. The Methodology – Case Description

The following case study demonstrates how visual images are used as part of the data to understand consumer behaviour. In particular this case focuses on women and their use of face make-up in the consumption of everyday appearance. Understanding consumer behaviour is important as it is imperative for marketers in the development of new products and the design of marketing campaigns and pictures form an important tool to lend context to

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consumer research in this area. The following case demonstrates how visual data is instrumental in providing meaning to consumer research and how if used in isolation it can distort findings and deliver inaccurate results.

In a study that explored why women wear makeup, women were asked to take photographs of themselves in varying locations. The study was seeking to explore how women consume appearance in everyday life and captured images of women in four different settings (Ogilvie 2005). The study provided insights into how women perceive themselves and use different facial representations to ascribe their identity. It also provided insights into the use of the visual medium as a autodriver for respondent interviews.

Respondents were provided with a disposable camera and asked to take four face and shoulder photographs during the following consumer behaviour activities:

- A night out or special occasion.
- Work or normal daily activity throughout the week.
- Relaxing at home on day off.
- Shopping (Groceries).

All respondents were also asked to find a newspaper/magazine clipping of someone, who they perceived to be 'different' from themselves and someone they considered to be similar or the same as themselves. The purpose of this was so that attributes of self-identity could be further explored through understanding these differences and similarities (Woodward 1997). Using the repertory grid technique a range of the photographs were then sorted.

The camera was then returned to the researcher the photos developed and a time set up with the respondent for an in-depth interview to discuss them. Interviews were conducted with participants in a setting that was convenient and conducive for candid and open exchange. The interviews were forty-five minutes to three hours in duration with an average time of one and a half hours per interview. There were 31 female participants. Within the interviews, the photographs were then used as a prompt to guide the conversation as well as to draw out key information from the respondent as they endeavoured to interpret the image (Harper 1998; Heisley and Levy 1991; Margolis and Pauwels 2011; Ryan and Ogilvie 2001; Tonge et al 2013). Using this technique the following key issues were addressed during the interview:

- A definition of the photographed events.
- The difference in make-up routines for each event and the reasons for those differences.
- The respondent's feelings, attitudes and perceptions for each of the occasions and reasons why they felt like that.
- The emotions respondents remembered feeling at the time of each picture.
- Documentation of individuals 'make-up histories' and how they had changed over time
- The motivations behind the make-up for each occasion. Were there any underlying reasons for their choice of facial adornment? What guided their decisions?
- To identify which look they liked the best/least and reasons why?
- To explore the rationale for respondents choice in people perceived as different to and the same as themselves.
- To establish what make-up signified to the individual.

#### 4. The Findings

Findings revealed that women were critical of themselves if their make-up outcome was not congruent with the appearance they perceive reflected who they are. For example, one respondent discussed how she had photographed herself going out somewhere special and had dressed up and applied foundation to her skin. On looking at the photos, she felt that her skin did not look 'natural' and that her image was not a true reflection of herself because of all the 'white stuff' on her face. She didn't 'see' herself as that person presented in the photograph. The picture not presenting her 'true self'.

*I am sort of not keen on it either, its too, I don't know, it makes you look white or something doesn't it, usually I don't wear any base make-up, like look at the difference you know. (Female 41)*

**Figure 1: Respondent did not recognise image (on right) as 'self'**



Another respondent discussed how she would transform herself daily and rationalised why she felt this to be important.

*Yes the puffy face, the hair that looked like I had been pulled through the sheets backwards, and I think that is when I probably began to realise that even if I was staying at home, which I did for a long time, I still needed to do that for myself so that when I did duck down the shop, when someone did pop in, I had that little confidence boost of knowing that I didn't look as haggard as I felt inside. (Female 37)*

In this situation, the photos were presenting a facade of normality and control when in reality the respondent was far removed from this state of control and confidence. Taken in isolation without an added context, reality could be easily misinterpreted. The photo was depicting the ideal... but not, perhaps the reality. The findings revealed, that the transformation that women believed make-up brought to their faces was considered essential for many to function normally and undergo their daily activities. One respondent highlights the importance of full make-up and in particular eyeliner as follows:

*My eyes look sick without it on... I just don't think they look as bright or something. (Female 25)*

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For this respondent, the desired facial appearance needed to conform to a set look of 'all' or 'nothing', as she felt naked without her make-up shield. This is the shield depicted in the photographs ... so uncovering this shield relies on the skill of an interviewer, using the photographs as artefacts. Moreover, the transformation was visual and dramatic as illustrated below.

**Figure 2: Respondent is transformed with make-up**



**Figure 3: Transformation through make-up**



Once a respondent becomes confident with the transformation that the cosmetics create they tend to stick to them until the next transformation phase. This may come quickly or not at all.

*I have always worn these colours, and because they suit me' (Female, 37)*

Similarly, just as women can achieve a transformation of self through the use of make-up, they can also reach the same result by wearing less or no make-up. Whenever the facial appearance is in contrast to the norm for that person, either with or without make-up, a new identity can be created when their appearance is altered in this manner. As such the images captured by photographs don't reflect the whole context. They provide only a snapshot of something which we interpret according to our own beliefs, values and understandings. With no describing narrative they are hypopicons prone to misleading the audience. For example, in exploring the identity of two very different people above. One worked as a chicken farmer and the other as a corporate executive. The photos give no context to who they are, how they live their lives or what they might be feeling. It is only through further narrative and context that this is revealed.

Figure 4: Chicken Farmer /Corporate Executive



#### 4.1 The Whole Truth? - False Signs

Within this study false signs, where extra linguistic signs deceive others and oneself, were very evident. This deception includes instances where people may mistake appearance for reality, what Peirce terms 'deception'. Many women perceived that their face without make-up was a false sign, as it did not represent them as they perceived themselves to look. To them, the real image of themselves was one with make-up upon their face.

*I don't know why but I just feel as though I am not, I don't look very good without it, I don't look good at all. ... ..I don't look attractive without make-up on at all, in my opinion anyway, I think putting on make-up makes me feel more attractive, enhances anything I have got, I am not very good on this, because I am not very strong on how I feel I look. (Female 58)*

Furthermore, some women would prefer to miss an event rather than present the non-self as this would not be congruent with how they feel about their appearance. In this way, to present without make-up was like a false icon as the visual representation was not true to the image they perceived to be the real self.

The issue of false signs is an interesting one as far as make-up goes because of the issue of 'what is the true self'? One respondent spoke of how she would never go out any more without make-up and how she perceived her true self to be one with make-up. However the conundrum comes when one questions what is the true self? Is it the image used daily with make-up on? The one she accepts as being a true representation of herself? Or is the true self still underneath? The majority of women in this study believed the true self to be the one not necessarily depicted in the photos.

Women were astute at recognising false signs and had the ability to view icons in a realistic and critical way. Respondents perceived that the mass media was filled with false signs; numerous pictures did not reflect authenticity. Study participants were aware that images in beauty magazines were false icons and, whilst they would conform to society's appearance code themselves, deep down some had desires to rebel against this by not selecting these images when asked to choose a picture that was similar to or different from themselves.

*I have got this photo from Marie Claire Magazine and there were lots of pictures to choose of beautiful white women and I know that they are air brushing it but they have immaculate*

*beautiful make-up and I just didn't want to pick somebody like that, because that's what society says is the way it should be, and the way we should be. I wanted to pick people that are more natural... (Female 34)*

## 5. Summary and Conclusions

Anecdotes presented in this paper highlight the depth and richness of the data obtained from visual images and the photoelicitation process. There are, however, a number of limitations with the technique, particularly if using the photographs in insolation. At times, the process of taking the actual photograph was itself a limitation of the technique. The photos required respondents to travel and take photos that were time consuming. In some cases the respondents had the camera for several weeks before taking their photos. The time factor was also important for respondents who did not always have a special event to attend and would hold onto the camera for prolonged periods until such an occasion arose. In some cases six months elapsed before cameras were returned and interviews completed. This time factor has been mentioned in other photoelicitation studies (Tonge et al 2013). Consequently, there is potential for this time lapse to influence fashion trends and hence the relevance of the data collected from respondents who moved with these trends. Some respondents found the process invasive. Respondents were at times self-conscious about taking, discussing and having close up photographs of their face and all its intricacies scrutinised. Indeed one respondent noted:

*"I studied photography at university, ... it was always a good excuse because you are in front, you know, you have got the camera no one else is taking photos of you, cause I really hate having my photo taken. I don't have high thoughts of the way I look or anything like that you know." (f, 34).*

The photograph process also involved ethical considerations. Due to the sensitive nature of taking facial photographs all respondents were asked to sign a consent form acknowledging that, whilst no names would be used, they may be recognised by their photograph in future publications. A procedure often employed in other studies using visual mediums.

When using images as a data capture method the requirements of the pictures will often determine the perspective and the amount of deviation from the truth we are prepared to accept. 'Every image is the result of a large number of technical and aesthetic choices made by the photographer. Each choice introduces subjective elements into the content'(Goldstein, 2007, p 65). It has been well documented in the literature that the transformation from reality to graphic image is an arbitrary process (Eco, 1982; Goldstein, 2007). The photograph itself is a small snapshot of the entire reality of contextual truth. The tone, content, aspect and framing of one photographer will combine to create quite a different effect from that chosen by another (Becker, 1986; Den Tandt et al 2009).

Content, intent and context are key elements that must be considered in the use of any visual data research. Content including the subject, frame, highlights, timing are all important in transferring meaning through the visual medium. The choices the photographer makes in these matters and what he includes or does not include, all influence our understanding of the visual image.

To this end, the photographers intent must be clear if we are seeking to use the medium in an honest and reliable manner. What choices were made in taking the photo? Are they intentional, and do they provide an accurate reflection of the subject under study, or, do they

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mislead and are open to misinterpretation? The relationship between content and intent is important because it is at the heart of the question of honesty. A number of the researchers' studies have required the respondents to add a short (one sentence, explanation of the image (either drawing or photograph) (Fanning, Ogilvie, Ryan, Mizerski, MacCarthy and Cripps 2011; Ogilvie and Ryan 2000). This short but pertinent addition, adds substance to the intent of the photograph. It can add context to the image and thereby provides a road map to understanding and interpreting (more accurately) the image.

### 5.1 Nothing but the Truth? - Conclusion

In conclusion, every image is in some way manipulated and as such no image represents true reality. The subject and content of each photograph or visual representation depends on the intent of its creator. The response it elicits from the viewer will be subject to its content, their perception of the intended message of the creator and the context provided.

Therefore our findings suggest that the use of photographs to enhance the research process is particularly worthwhile when provided with a framework to give the data context. In situations when greater depth of clarity of the respondents meaning is needed, when the demographic being interviewed is slow or limited in their responses and also for enhancing phenomenological analysis, photographs and visual imagery add significant value in enriching the understanding of the subject under study. Furthermore, one of the main ways to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research is through the use of triangulation. Images provide one method of collecting data and therefore a good source of validation or triangulation that can add to the validity process. Consequently, to our mind, the benefits and richness of the data captured by using images where the context is included to explain the content and intent of the images used in the research process, far outweigh any disadvantages.

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