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.

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 Peñalozas (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 Peñalozas’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
the bike. Given that Harley ownership enables membership in this (HOG) culture and customization of the (Harley–Davidson) bike is considered evidence of commitment to the culture, the bike can be interpreted as a symbolic artifact demonstrating the enactment of cultural values and the transcendence of both gender and stereotype.

Martin, Schouten, and McAlester (2006) unearth the hyper-masculinity of the Harley subculture through feminist theory and female voices, thus adding a complexity and richness to the understanding of an evolving subculture including motivation and behaviors of women who want to expand the power and reach of their femininity. Dialogue and visual text addressing the different aspects of this cultural artifact therefore generates valuable ethnographic knowledge. Visually capturing member conversations about the central cultural artifacts effectively enables the researcher to discover the essence of the cultural context and the experiential meaning of different phenomenon of interest to researchers and scholars. Notably however, who says what about what, whom, and how, has political implications when a visual account is the ethnographic outcome.

1.3. The political implications of visual ethnographic research

The current approach to the governance of ethical conduct of human research places a strong focus on obtaining voluntary and informed consent from potential participants. As with all forms of investigative field research, the priority responsibility for the researcher is to protect participants from both physical and psychological harm. With visual ethnographic research however, the researcher must be aware that displaying the outcome of the work visually may amplify ethical dilemmas, political dynamics, and sensitive issues. Potential participants within the cultural context under investigation may willingly talk to ethnographic researchers when given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Yet, asking participants to be part of a visual ethnography is equivalent to requesting them to share with the world their insight and perspective. Disclosing a participant’s face and words for all to see and hear can be problematic and/or high risk. Given protection of participants and minimization of (physical/psychological) risk is the utmost importance researchers should consider the consequences of particular persons or statements in the visual documentation resulting from the research process. This political sensitivity reinforces the significance of a reflexive and collaborative approach.

People willing to share their thoughts, comments, and views, help researchers to understand and interpret a phenomenon of interest; willing and articulate participants are a precious find in the quest of visual ethnography. Researchers must therefore be astutely aware of the political dynamics relevant to the cultural context in order to be sensitive to these undercurrents. This consideration and sensitivity includes historically significant political undercurrents, which may or may not be apparent at the time of conducting the study. To acquire this form of knowledge, researchers must immerse themselves into the context and get close to the people within that context. Mutual trust needs to be developed and protected at all times and this can only be done by spending an extended period of time in the field engaging with the people in their cultural environment. Active participation in the culture generates credibility.

In seeking to ensure minimization of risk for participants, continuous efforts towards validating the findings with relevant insiders are essential. Good and valid research is always the goal, so documenting and describing deliberate efforts to achieve a depth of insider knowledge contributes to the rigor of this form of research. Collaborating with participants throughout the research term and across the research site in an effort to ensure authenticity may however unintentionally convey a sense of power. Again, the researcher must be astutely aware of the political dynamics and potential power plays throughout this process. In this way, the visual ethnographer takes on a great challenge; walking a fine line on ethical grounds and sometimes sinking sands on political grounds. Researchers generating ethnographic knowledge through visual methods therefore need to detail the research process clearly and transparently, including articulation of how any issues or concerns were handled.

In the case of Schembri (2009), the informed consent process involved a verbal consent script which informed potential participants of an intention to film group activities, interview members and that all participation within the study was voluntary. Those members choosing not to participate were omitted or edited out. Incorporating a visual component means there can be no promise of anonymity and confidentiality of information, as is the norm with other traditional forms of marketing research. This openness, together with the emphasis on a collaborative approach can translate to a hot bed of politics that may be very difficult to handle at times. Some members for instance, may mistakenly interpret the emphasis on collaboration as a right to approve and direct editing of the visual text. As an active member in the cultural context the researcher must necessarily become very much aware of the political dynamics within the culture. As Schembri (2009) shows in her visual ethnography of Harley–Davidson in Australia, the challenges of visual ethnography are many and varied.

1.4. The Harley–Davidson case application

Acknowledging the process of consumption as basic to social cohesion, Schembri’s (2009) visual ethnographic project comprised more than three years of fieldwork within a local (Australian) HOG (Harley Owners Group) chapter. In visually documenting the experiential meaning of the Harley–Davidson brand the process of cultural immersion involved participant observation and interviews that enabled a depth of insight. This active membership facilitated member disclosure and propensity to discuss issues of interest as (visually) recorded in field interviews. The result was more than 48 h of captured film edited down to a 20 min documentary (http://www.griffith.edu.au/business-commerce/griffith-business-school/departments/department-marketing/staff/dr-sharon-schembri).

The cultural immersion process for Schembri (2009) involved the use of a digital stills camera and hand-held (video) camcorder to visually record monthly club rides, social meetings, and associated consumption activities, such as philanthropic efforts and annual rallies. The open disclosure of the purpose and aims of the research reduced the distance between researcher and members to the extent of establishing a collaborative relationship and site of negotiation. Members facilitated the research process by indicating and explaining what most accurately depicts the meaning of Harley–Davidson. A visual recording of these artifacts and cultural indicators then derives the authenticity of the descriptive outcome. In this way, the researcher collaborates with members while reflexively focusing on the phenomenon as experienced by the members. Reflexive use of visual technology therefore enables an experiential view. Integration of the visual dimension therefore enhances the reflexive process and the descriptive outcome as well as the ethnographic knowledge that results.

The visual (ethnographic) design of Schembri’s (2009) project was particularly suitable for this investigation, given the experiential nature of this phenomenon. Indeed, some members described the meaning of Harley–Davidson as indescribable, with the quip, “If I have to explain, you wouldn’t understand.” If that is accurate to any degree then visual methods are an appropriate research methodology in this context. Moreover, cameras and camcorders are frequently used by members in the HOG context. Using a camera therefore enabled the researcher to better blend into the crowd. Other strategies to enable better acceptance in the group included wearing the standard uniform of jeans and black leather. Acquiring a Harley–Davidson bike further facilitated acculturation because the researcher then moved from pillion passenger to owner and rider. Most specifically, participating as an active member and collaborating with other members generated a degree of credibility within the Australian HOG subculture and
simultaneously enhanced the validity of the ethnography but potential limitations were managed throughout this visual ethnographic adventure.

1.5. Managing potential limitations

A primary criterion of social science research is a demonstration of validity. The goal of credible ethnographic research similarly requires that issues related to validity be addressed in detail. Credible ethnographic research aims to provide a deep understanding of what is not achievable with other research approaches. Astute ethnographic researchers recognize, however, that threats to credibility may weaken the authenticity of ethnographic knowledge, regardless of the research question. Hence, priorities need to be set of rigor needs in conducting visual ethnographic research along with appropriately managing any potential limitations.

The inclusion of visual methods in marketing research facilitates a contextual reading of behavioral patterns and aspects of cultural significance. As a cultural investigation, ethnographic work assumes context dependency therefore defining an investigative space that contains the work. Unlike traditional marketing research, generalizability is not the goal and validity is in part established through member collaboration. Active member collaboration during the research process provides members a voice and generates an interest in the work. Then, sharing the findings with members as the analytical process progresses creates valuable feedback, with the findings acknowledged as meaningful to participants and reflective of the way participants experience reality. As a context driven and iterative process, the researcher consults with members while simultaneously revisiting the ethnographic knowledge generated through the investigative process. Members’ judging the work as an accurate and authentic account of the experience is an acknowledgement equivalent to a hermeneutic nod and validation of the work.

2. Conclusion

Demonstrating the value and validity of visual ethnography, this paper has showcased the intricacies involved with conducting visual ethnographic research and achieving rigor research. Emphasizing a collaborative and reflexive approach to visual ethnography may introduce researchers to perspectives beyond their own. Capturing consumer experience within visual text therefore allows a transformative potential. Achieving a rigorous and authentic interpretation is therefore achieved via a negotiation and collaboration with members and researcher. Incorporating a visual dimension may amplify ethical and political consideration given there can be no promise of anonymity and confidentiality. Hence visual ethnographic researchers walk a fine line on ethical grounds and sometimes sinking sands on political grounds, which necessarily reinforces the need for a reflexive approach. In this way, visual ethnography achieves rigorous and authentic interpretations.

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