

# Incorporating the visual into qualitative research: living a theme as an illustrative example

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**Abstract** A recent trend in qualitative marketing research addresses the roles, meanings and contributions from visual materials and visual methods. Following relatively new trends, such as the interpretive turn, visual data, visual media, and visual methods are commanding greater recognition in qualitative marketing research. This paper, along with the film “Living a Theme,”\* a videographic study, illustrates the incorporation of visuals into a research project on thematization, and articulates the use of visuals in addition to words. Visuals constitute important means of presenting the research context, developing and pursuing research questions on the phenomenon of interest, and proposing new theses as well as presenting current theses that are in the literature.

**Keywords** Qualitative marketing research · Visual methods · Videography · Thematization

**Zusammenfassung** In der qualitativen Marktforschung hat sich in jüngster Zeit ein Trend herauskristallisiert, wonach audio-visuelles Material und videographische Inhalte verstärkt Berücksichtigung finden. Diese Arbeit baut auf der videographischen Studie „Living a Theme“\* auf und verdeutlicht wie dieses Material in ein Forschungsprojekt

zur „Thematisierung“ eingebunden werden kann und wie visuelle Inhalte genutzt und interpretiert werden können. Visuelle Inhalte bieten faszinierende Möglichkeiten für die Darstellung des Forschungskontexts, können in der Entwicklung von Forschungsfragen Hilfestellung liefern und eignen sich für den Begründungszusammenhang von gegenständlichen Themen aus der Literatur.

**Schlüsselwörter** Qualitative Marktforschung · Audio-visuelle Methoden · Videographie

## Introduction

Interest of marketing scholars both in doing visual research and in incorporating visuals into research has been increasing (Belk 2006). Using visual media, such as photographs and videos, and utilizing visual methods, such as videography, are growing trends in, especially, qualitative marketing research. As a result, visuals are increasingly used for different purposes in consumer research and in marketing. For example, visual materials are widely used as stimuli in the case of autodiving techniques (Zaltman 1997). Visuals are also extensively utilized in data collection (Tian and Belk 2005; Belk et al. 2003) when methodologies such as ethnography or participant observation are employed. Further, visuals are used in presenting research results to, for example, describe subjects, events, situations, and places. The video, *Deep Meaning in Possessions* (1987), produced from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey project, is an excellent example. Other forms of videographies, such as the ones produced by Marcoux and Legoux (2005) or Kimura and Belk (2005), and photo essays, such as studies by Sunderland and Denny (2005) and Costa (2005), represent further examples of visuals used in qualitative marketing research.

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**Electronic supplementary material** \* “Living a Theme”, a videography is available for downloading from the online version of *der markt* (doi:10.1007/s12642-009-0005-z).

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Insights into phenomena of interest are improved and better integrated with the growing use of visuals.

To propose further possibilities of using visuals in marketing research we discuss the reasons behind the recent recognition and use of visuals in qualitative marketing research. We then analyze how various forms of visuals help expand knowledge about the phenomena in focus. Finally, using the process of producing the videography *Living a Theme* as an example, we illustrate the ways of incorporating visuals into a research project and explain the contributions that visuals can make in different phases of a study.

The purpose of creating the videography, *Living a Theme*, is to study the phenomenon of thematization, a phenomenon that has attracted quite some attention in the last two decades. It is interesting to know why many consider it to be a phenomenon of our time. In this videography, we investigate if thematization is a phenomenon of our time or if it has been around for a long time.

### Reasons for the growing use of visuals in qualitative marketing research

Visual methods have been in use in different disciplines for some time. Many examples of such use are possible to find in journals, such as *Visual Anthropology*. Media studies have also employed visuals in research, and in presentations of theory and findings due to the nature of contemporary media (e.g., film and television). Use of videos has also been increasing in marketing. As Belk and Kozinets (2005, p. 197) indicate, “[a]n increasing number of marketing research firms produce videos for clients involving the use and meanings of products, consumer lifestyles, special consumption events, and other aspects of consumption that are more effectively conveyed visually.” Visuals, specifically videos, have increased usage in research by academia as well, despite a degree of resistance. Of course, educational videos have been in use in the classroom, but uses for presenting research results are also increasing (e.g., see two DVD issues of the journal *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, September 2005 and June 2007) (Belk and Wallendorf 1994).

Attention to visuals in consumer and marketing research developed as scholars understood their impact on audiences and effectiveness of communicating research ideas and findings to others. Kozinets and Belk (2007, p. 336) write, “[w]e live in a mass mediated world where rich, colorful, multilayered, sound effects-laden, quick-moving, quick-cutting, audio-visual information is increasingly the norm.” Communication depending only on words increasingly loses its audience and effectiveness in this world. As the theory of visual consumption reveals, images, specifically visual images, have come to be the media through which

much of the modern cultural codes and sociopolitical structures are represented and communicated (for a critical analysis of marketing visuals, see Schroeder 2007). Ignoring this dominance of the visual in how contemporary people encounter and assimilate their world can only diminish the communication effect of the scholar in disseminating knowledge.

The relatively short history of visuals in marketing research is perplexing since modern Western culture generally privileged sight over other senses (Jonas 1954; Arendt 1978), and vision has been the predominant mode of perception in the conduct of everyday life. Early marketing research, dominated by the principles of modern science, relied heavily on words and numbers that represented the ‘observations’ made. Qualitative marketing research originally also relied on words to describe and analyze marketing phenomena.

The reason for such dependence on words has been the power that words have in abstracting constructs from sensory experiences. Words can elicit mental images and constitute concepts without which humans could not grasp phenomena otherwise hidden from immediate sensory imprints upon the senses. In other words, from the perspective of modern science, the use of words allows perception beyond sensory experiences to enable deeper reasoning (Firat 2005). Recently, however, other means of communication have come to be appreciated more in conceptualizing phenomena. They are seen as complementary to, not competing with the verbal. Researchers have recognized that, especially when used in combination with all other signs, such as the visual and the sonic, the ability of words to provide knowledge about phenomena is enhanced. As Firat (2005, p. 193) articulates, words “can explain in detail . . . the living conditions of the hummingbird, but actually seeing the hummingbird active, hearing the buzz of its wings are experiences and insights that cannot be replicated by words.” Called emotional understanding by Denzin (1989) and experiential knowledge by Belk (1989), the use of signs other than words enables researchers to develop a deeper and more complete understanding of persons, situations, events, or places, as well as enabling them to communicate this understanding with greater effectiveness.

As a result, there are numerous reasons for the growing use of visuals in qualitative marketing research. Foremost, marketing research, once steadfastly in pursuit of objective reality, has experienced a paradigm shift, most generally known as the interpretive turn (Sherry 1991). New paradigms that are critical of positivism call for a blurring of boundaries among social science disciplines, as well as between science and art (Gould and Purcell 2000; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). This paradigm shift has helped increase the appreciation for unique contributions of images and visual methods.

For at least three decades, following the beginning of the second half of the Twentieth Century, marketing scholars were keen to establish the scientific stature of the discipline. This effort depended mostly on adopting the positivist approaches in disciplinary research, and resulted in greater respect for quantitative methods and quantifiable measures. Despite efforts on the part of some scholars (e.g., see Levy 2007) to pay equal attention to qualitative methods (for example, motivation research), quantitative methods gained the upper hand until almost the end of the 1980s. The paradigm shift from a domination of quantitative methods to a more equal hearing of both qualitative and quantitative approaches has helped acceptance of visual methods. Clearly, visual data are not conducive to quantified representation – although quantitative tables, etc., are visually presentable. On the other hand, as discussed, visual materials enhance and enable (re)presentation of data otherwise not directly presentable – such as the facial expressions of a consumer being interviewed. Using visuals, such as videography, therefore, can demonstrate findings much more forcefully and with greater rigor, since researcher interpretation of the data, as in the example of facial expressions, will not be necessary. The audience of the study can have more direct access to data.

Increasing reliance of markets and economies on images (Schroeder 2002) is another reason for the pervasive use of visuals. Most marketing phenomena, or social phenomena that marketing relates to, are visual in nature. Analyses of, for example, advertising, marketplaces, product or store design, marketing aesthetics, brand logo, and brand image cannot be accomplished without a consideration of their visual aspects. Consequently, the visual has become a natural component of researching many marketing phenomena.

Relatively recent advances in technologies also play an important part. First, recent advances in multimedia technologies have allowed and encouraged researchers to use visuals for greater effectiveness, especially when integrated with sound. Multimedia technologies, once exceptionally expensive and owned only by companies, served entertainment and commercial interests, whilst scientists and intellectuals neglected, derided, and distanced themselves from them (Firat 2005). However, especially the last decade has experienced a technological revolution that allowed multimedia technologies usable by the public to be of higher quality and less expensive, as well as simpler to learn and use. Thus, more and more scholars and intellectuals have utilized visuals, and have produced and distributed them through the use of these technologies. Furthermore, human experience on Earth is more visual, in effect more multimedia, than ever before largely due to much dependence of everyday life experiences on such media, like television, films, and the Internet (Mirzoeff 1999). These historical conditions made audiences pay

greater attention to the visual. In turn, it became necessary for researchers to think, do research, and communicate findings visually in order to meet the visual expectations (Belk 2006) of audiences they wanted to reach.

### Contributions of the use of visuals to qualitative marketing research

Visuals, have unique characteristics that can capture facets of phenomena that are missed by words. Thus, they provide chances to increase the effectiveness of research. When visuals are used in research, they enable the utilization of senses that allow appreciation of elements beyond the words, concepts, and ideas, thus more is derived from the research (Firat 2005). By adding the sensory, visuals complete our understanding (Pink 2001), especially in the multimedia world we inhabit. In Langer's (1963) words, our *knowledge of* rather than knowledge about the subject matter is enhanced when verbal discourse is used in coordination with other signs.

Visuals offer a powerful advantage when the audience reflects on things, people, events, places introduced in the presentation of research, as well as on the interrelations among them. Visuals allow us to capture the unique texture of informants, phenomena, and sites (Belk 1998). Many visual materials have the ability to evoke empathy (Belk 1989) by providing us with knowledge of what it is like to be someone else, to be immersed in another context, to be in “another place”. We can directly observe and have insights into how people interact, as well as how people interact with places. We can “sense” what people feel by witnessing the emotions conveyed through their facial expressions, their gestures, and postures (Belk 1998). This empathy adds further insight to our understanding and articulation of phenomena that are especially rich in emotion and experiential moments.

Often, articulation of the results of research has suffered in scholarly literature because the emotional dimension involved – especially when consumer research is concerned – lacks in verbal communication. Literary forms, such as poetry, that permit transmission of the emotional, to give the “reader” full appreciation of the states that people researched are experiencing can be used to overcome this shortcoming. Yet, opening scholarly discourse to other modes of communication can further strengthen the effectiveness of academic impact in contemporary society (Sherry 1991). Emotions are part of life and their exclusion from discourse disenchant human experience (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Furthermore, greater attention to the symbolic and the spectacle (Debord 1983) in contemporary culture calls for the use of multimedia in order for scholarly work to com-

mand attention above the clutter. It is necessary for academic knowledge not to be disadvantaged in comparison to commercial or political discourses. In a global iconographic culture – a culture where meanings are relayed less and less through sets of words (signs in general) constructed according to linguistic (or more generally, semiotic) rules of formulating analytically logical connections and, thus, sense making unit(ie)s, but more and more through iconic signs that at once conjure up images that transmit senses that can be felt as well as cognitively processed (Bengtsson and Firat 2006) – using visuals enrich research and its dissemination by capturing “the multidimensionality and multilayeredness of the collages of images that determine human sensibility and sensitivity beyond reason” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 253).

Visuals enrich the research process not only for the researcher and the audience, but also for the informants. Informants in the research project are able to express their emotions and experiences on the subject matter with greater affect, intensity, and depth by reflecting on visual media, such as pictures or videos. They can also provide greater content to their stories by using visuals. For instance, someone telling her/his holiday experiences can be more “telling”, detailed, and textured when photographs or videos from the holiday are used. Researchers, informants and the audience are enabled to “sense” the subject matter emotionally and experientially, in addition to grasping it through the reason of words, and research acquires greater qualification to “enhance and enchant life” (Firat and Dholakia 2003, p. 96).

It is clear that new media knowledge and skills needed to participate in such multimedia dissemination of scholarly knowledge will challenge the academy. Kozinets and Belk (2007) discuss the new techniques and skills that academics will have to acquire. The need for academics to inform themselves about the methods and techniques for collecting and analyzing new forms of data is just as important. Literature that will help academics develop such knowledge and skills is growing (e.g., see Belk 2007; Patton 2002).

### **On the contribution of the visual to the knowledge about thematization and: living a theme**

*Living a Theme* is a videography project on thematization, or more specifically, on themed environments and consumers’ orientations toward such environments. Thematization – which we define as the patterning of space, activity or event to symbolize experiences and/or senses from a special or a specific past, present, or future place, activity or event as currently imagined – is a phenomenon that has recently attracted much attention. Themed environments constitute (secular) material forms that shape contemporary culture

(Gottdiener 2001). Themes spaces come in great variety. They are theme parks, such as the Universal Studios which has the theme of the Hollywood movie experience, and Disney World, which brings together several different theme parks including the EPCOT Center, theming different countries of the world, and Animal Kingdom, theming wildlife habitats. They are restaurants, such as the Rainforest Café, theming the flora and fauna of Earth’s jungles, and the Hard Rock Café, theming the rock-and-roll experience. They are hotels, such as the Luxor Hotel and the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas, theming ancient Egypt and the natural wonders of the world. They are shopping malls, such as the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. They are also found in the neighborhoods in our cities, such as the Via Rodeo (Rodeo Drive) in Beverly Hills, California, and the Wharf in Baltimore, Maryland. Further, this is a global phenomenon; we can visit the French Street in Ýstanbul, Turkey, the Red Square in Tijuana, Mexico, and Chinatown in London, England, and the list goes on. Themed environments are all around us and interest in knowing why this is a phenomenon of our time has increased. One of the characteristics that make this phenomenon attractive is its visual nature. As Mirzoeff (1998) suggests in his description of the attractive pastel colors of the New York skyline at the *New York, New York* Hotel in Las Vegas, thematization is a part of visual culture and visual discourse creation. Therefore, use of the visual in research on this topic naturally has many advantages for acquiring deep insights about the phenomenon.

This project started at the Heretical Consumer Research Conference in Orlando, Florida, where participants were required to go on field explorations for a day, then analyzed the materials different groups gathered in different themed locations in order to advance theoretical insights. We, the producers of *Living a Theme*, spent the field day at EPCOT (acronym for Experimental Prototype Community Of Tomorrow) Center, a theme park within Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Specially of interest was the World Showcase section of EPCOT, which features several countries of the world. We videotaped and took photographs of the environment, of the visitors and visitors’ interactions both with each other and with the spaces at EPCOT. We conducted interviews with several visitors. We did not have any specific a priori theory before our explorations in the field; we only had ideas regarding topics to explore to simply understand the phenomenon of theming and its allure in contemporary society. Following the field study, we screened the visual materials we had and this process led to our decision to further study the *theming of spaces*. We also developed a few theses for further study based on our field experiences and the insights we acquired from the data we had collected. Since we had visual materials (in the form of videos and photographs) from our visit to the Walt Disney World, as

well as photographs from our separate previous visits to Las Vegas, and since the phenomenon is visual in nature, we decided to produce a video.

In our examination of the visuals and other data we had, the question arose as to whether thematization is a phenomenon of our time or a phenomenon that has been with us for a long time. In the search for enlightening answers to this question, we have developed other questions, including how consumers consume themed spaces, what role they play in the theming of the world, and if they make distinctions between themed areas and the world outside of such places.

Videography consists of different forms, such as “(1) videotaped interviews, (2) observational videography, (3) autovideography, (4) collaborative, (5) retrospective, and (6) impressionistic” (Kozinets and Belk 2007, p. 338). Essentially, it is the study and communication of phenomena primarily through the use of video. In this videography, as is the case in a written article, we first introduced the concept and raised our research question through the use of photographs of Las Vegas. This was supported with an audio narration explaining the themed context depicted in the photographs. The audio narration we use in parts of this videography allows us to present the visual more powerfully. It provides the opportunity to express our descriptions and analytical insights from the visuals and the interviews.

Later, similar to a written article, we provide a review of the literature regarding the theses on thematization. These theses advanced by observers of contemporary culture explore why people visit, enjoy, and appreciate themed environments. Visual images of the books along with some other footage connecting with the theses are presented to better acquaint the audience with the issues at hand. Two themes that are common to the theses found in the literature are (1) that thematization is driven by corporations and (2) that contemporary consumers are accomplices in the theming of the world, and these themes are emphasized by the visuals.

Following the literature review, the video moves to EPCOT Center, to exhibit segments from interviews with visitors that pertain to how lay people feel about themed environments. In these segments we find that numerous visitors have visited EPCOT Center several times and that they always enjoy and appreciate the experience of visiting different “countries”. We observed, in what interviewees said and how they expressed themselves, that they did not feel any discomfort with thematization. Rather, they regard, for example the EPCOT Center, to be an experience of different cultures and places. Revealing this finding is easier through videography since the facial expressions, gestures, and postures of the consumers and interviewees are exposed as they talk about their Walt Disney World and EPCOT Center experiences.

Next, to explore the theming of spaces further, we went to San Antonio, Texas. The reason for choosing San Antonio was that it is a city where people live their ordinary lives, yet it has also become a tourist destination due to the historic site of the Alamo. The city’s heart is built around the San Antonio Riverwalk, which also is a major tourist destination. We visited and “observed” many parts of San Antonio considered to be themed areas, noticing that these were not historically created as themed spaces, but as places for people to live in. Thus, the video shows residents of San Antonio, in their daily activities at these sites, as well as the tourists. Through videography we are able to exhibit different forms of themed space construction and consumption. Using textual (Patton 2002) and critical visual (Schroeder 2007) analyses of what people told us in the interviews and their behaviors and demeanors that we captured on video, we discovered that lay people visiting themed spaces do not make the clear distinction between such spaces and the “world outside” as scholars have done in the literature. We further were able to discover that people living in and visiting themed spaces exhibited ease with their surroundings; they were not uncomfortable or disturbed by the fact that space was presented to them in themed formats.

Based on our insights from Las Vegas, San Antonio, and the EPCOT Center, we are able to raise the question of whether and how people make distinctions between themed environments and the world outside. To find answers, the video moves back to the EPCOT Center where segments from interviews reinforce the finding that people who visit the EPCOT Center are not keen on making a distinction between theme parks and the world outside. Then, images from many places around the world, which can be considered as themed spaces are juxtaposed with theme parks. Images of New York and Phoenix are displayed to show that what is themed and what is “real” is mostly in the way people approach spaces, not in the nature of how they are constructed. The Central Park amidst the skyscrapers of New York is displayed indicating how its “nature” was constructed on the images that its builders had of what Manhattan Island was like before the founding of the city. Water fountains and grassy lawns in the middle of the Sonoran Desert in Phoenix show how space that people live their everyday ordinary lives in is, in fact, totally themed after its builders’ imaginations of a livable city.

Concluding in the video with the researcher addressing the audience makes the presentation more personal, and the points discussed more conversational. The conclusion emphasizes that intellectuals and scholars are more dedicated to maintaining a distinction between the thematic and the everyday, between the “real” and the “fantasy”, than are lay people suggesting that this promises to be a fruitful issue to investigate.

## Conclusion

This videography presented is an example of how, in our contemporary world of iconographic culture, the use of multimedia can help researchers articulate positions and findings from research with greater effect and impact. The visuals, particularly, and the ability to also present directly to the audience the sonic qualities experienced by researchers in the field, help the “readers”, the audience, have better insights into the researchers’ experiences as well as into the subject at hand for a richer understanding of phenomena. Following the hegemony of the written or the spoken word over all other media, it is hopeful that now we have come to understand the usefulness of the integration of signs that “speak” to all our senses.

Thus, the visual enables us to gain further understanding and sensing of a phenomenon studied especially when used with other signs, including words. As a source of insight, it enhances the power to sense, to feel, and to evoke empathy. Through exposure to the visual we can acquire deeper knowledge of people, contexts, places, and phenomena. We can conclude that, in general, the visual both reflects and improves our vision in doing research; it further allows us to surpass cognitive knowledge by adding emotions and experiences that let us capture *knowledge of* phenomena rather than simply *knowledge about* phenomena.

We present the video *Living a Theme* as an example of how collecting research data, expanding text for analysis, and presenting research findings, as well as insights gained by the “readers” or the audience, can all be enriched through incorporation of the visual and other media. We hope that in the future no medium will be excluded from use for scholarly purposes as long as it contributes to human understanding, is used with integrity, and does fulfill a purpose of improved insight and communication above and beyond other media that can also be used.

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