

# VISUAL CONSUMPTION

**Jonathan E. Schroeder**

**University of Exeter**

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## **Abstract**

Visual images constitute much corporate communication about products, economic performance, and social responsibility, and also inform governmental efforts to create positive attitudes for citizens, consumers, and organizations. Brand image, corporate image, advertising images, and images of identity all depend upon compelling visual imagery. Variously referred to as the attention economy, the aesthetic economy, and the experience economy, this visual turn in marketing may call for new perspectives and research approaches. How do images communicate? What does the production and consumption of images mean for marketing and society? How does the handling of images in the allied fields of visual studies, art history, film theory, design management, and corporate identity shed light on the relationships between visual processes and consumption? This paper discusses methodological and theoretical issues of visual images as they pertain to consumer behaviour via interdisciplinary research examples and exemplars. Visual consumer research cuts across methodological and topical boundary lines – the possibilities and problems of visual approaches encompass experimental and interpretive realms, and include such varied topics as information processing, image interpretation, and research techniques.

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## VISUAL CONSUMPTION

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Visual consumption characterizes life in the information age—the computer, the Web, and the visual mass media structure twenty first century lives, commanding time and attention, providing a steady stream of images that appear to bring the world within. Encompassing not only visual oriented consumer behavior such as watching television, playing video games, bird watching, tourism, museum going or window-shopping, visual consumption also introduces a methodological framework to investigate the interstices of consumption, vision, and culture, including how visual images are handled by consumption studies. Visual consumption constitutes a key attribute of an experience economy organized around attention, in which strategic communication – including advertising, promotion, Websites, retail environments, and mass media – incorporates visual images designed to capture attention, build brand names, create mindshare, produce attractive products and services, and persuade citizens, consumers and voters.

Visual consumption represents an emerging branch of consumption studies, one that relies on interdisciplinary methods, based on a semiotically informed visual genealogy of contemporary images. Approaching visual representation via interpretive stances offers researchers a grounded method for understanding and contextualizing images as well as cultural centrality of vision. In connecting images to the external context of consumption, researchers gain a more thorough – yet never complete – understanding of how images function within contemporary society, embodying and expressing cultural values and contradictions.

Visual consumption begins with images, and finds allied approaches within visual sociology and sociology of consumption research (Ekström and Brembeck 2004; Lash and Urry 1994; Schroeder 2002). Acknowledging that products, services, brands, politicians and ideology are marketed via images, and that consumers consume products symbolically, implies rethinking basic notions of economy, competition, satisfaction, and consumer choice. Visual images exist within a distinctive socio-legal environment – unlike textual or verbal statements, such as product claims or political promises, pictures cannot be held to be true or false – images elude empirical verification. Thus, images are especially amenable to help strategists avoid being held accountable for false or misleading claims. For example,

cigarette manufacturers have learned not to make text-based claims about their products, relying instead on visual imagery such as the lone cowboy.

Researchers have focused on the image and its interpretation as foundational elements of consumption, bringing together theoretical concerns about image and representation to build a multidisciplinary approach to consumption within what has been called the sign economy, the image economy and the attention economy (Goldman and Papson 1996; Lash and Urry 1994). Images function within culture, and their interpretative meanings shift over time, across cultures and between consumers. Visual consumption studies aims are generally interpretive rather than positivistic – to show how images *can* mean, rather than demonstrate *what* they mean. Image interpretation remains elusive – never complete, closed, or contained, to be contested and debated.

Research on visual consumption has gone through several phases. In the first phase, researchers such as Erving Goffman and Howard Becker deployed photographs as data, evidence and illustrations within research projects and scholarly reports documenting visual aspects of society. In the second phase, visual images came to both reveal and reflect broader sociological issues, such as alienation, anomie, identity, and exclusion, as researchers began to focus on the representational power of images via self-portraits, subject generated images, and photo elicitation techniques (van Leeuwen and Kress 2001). In the current phase, visual images themselves have assumed central importance, drawing from cultural studies and visual studies disciplines that emerged to interrogate popular cultural forms, and later visual culture. Within this phase, a typical study might investigate how the television news channel CNN covers a war, emphasizing the visual technologies that structure information and ideology, or bring a sociological perspective to a Website art piece, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach beyond the interests of aesthetics or art history.

Each phase contains several streams of research, including those that focus on image interpretation from various perspectives, such as psychoanalysis or semiotics (Hall 1997; van Leeuwen and Kress 2001). Others emphasize image-making as social psychological act of representing and communicating, drawing on traditional anthropological and sociological theories and methods. Another approach utilizes photographs, or other visual artifacts, as stimuli for research, for *photo-elicitation*, akin to projective measures within psychology that investigate deeper meanings and associations that people bring to images. An additional related practice concerns visual presentation of research, documentary films and videos as well as more filmic treatments of sociological topics such as rituals, subcultures, or tourism.

Visual consumption research rests on a set of assumptions about contemporary consumption in Western industrialized societies. First, strategic marketing communication, including advertising, promotion, public relations, and corporate communication – and the mass media that it supports – has emerged as a primary societal institution. For marketing no longer merely communicates information about products, it is an engine of the economy, an important social institution and a primary player in the political sphere. Marketing communications heavily depend upon photography, which includes still photography, film, and video. Second, the world's photographability has become the condition under which it is constituted and perceived – every single instant of one's life is touched by the technological reproduction of images (Cadava 1999). From this perspective, there have been no significant events of the past century that have not been captured by the camera, indeed photography and film helps make things significant.

A third proposition focuses on the intertwined concepts of identity and photography, in which individual and organizational identity remains inconceivable without photography. Personal as well as product identity (already inextricably linked via the market) are constructed largely via information technologies of photography and mass media. The visual aspects of culture have come to dominant our understanding of identity, as well as the institutionalization of identity by societal institutions. Yet photography does not represent the truth; it is not a simple record of some reality (Burgin 1996; Coleman 1998; Slater 1995). Visual consumption research has framed photography as a consumer *behavior* as well as a central information technology. Photography's technical ability to reproduce images makes it a central feature of visual culture. Fourth, the image is primary for marketing products, services, politicians, and ideas. Products no longer merely reflect images—the image often is created prior to the product, which is then developed to fit the image. Many products and services are designed to fit a specific target market; they conform to an image of consumer demand, exemplifying a seismic economic shift towards experience, towards images, towards attention.

These four propositions create an interdisciplinary matrix for analyzing the roles visual consumption play in the economy. Specifically, they call attention to photography as an overlooked process within the cultural marketplace of ideas and images. This set of propositions directs our gaze to the cultural and historical framework of images, even as it questions the information that feed those discourses.

Today's visual information technologies of television, film, and the Internet are directly connected to the visual past (Cadava 1999; Schroeder 2002). Research on

information technology (IT) or information and communication technology (ICT) usually focuses on complex, sophisticated systems such as mass media, the Internet, telecommunications, or digital satellite transmission arrays. These constitute the basic building blocks of the information society—where information is a crucial corporate competitive advantage as well as a fundamental cultural force. The World Wide Web, among its many influences, has put a premium on understanding visual consumption. The Web mandates visualizing almost every aspect of organizational communication, identity, operations, and strategy. From the consumer perspective, visual experiences dominate the Web, as they navigate through an artificial environment almost entirely dependent upon their sense of sight. Photography remains a key component of many information technologies—digital incorporation of scanned photographic images helped transform the Internet into what it is today. Photography, in turn, was heavily influenced by the older traditions of painting in its commercial and artistic production, reception, and recognition (e.g., Osbourne 2000; Slater 1995).

Associating visual consumption with the art historical world helps to position and understand photography as a global representational system. The visual approach to consumption has afforded new perspectives to investigate specific art historical references in contemporary images, such as the gaze, display, and representing identity. In addition, researchers can take advantage of useful tools developed in art history and cultural studies to investigate the poetics and politics of images as a representational system. Finally, art-centered analyses often generate novel concepts and theories for research on issues such as patronage, museum practice, information technology, and marketing communication.

Constructing a visual genealogy of contemporary images helps illuminate how marketing communication works as the *face of capitalism*, harnessing the global flow of images and fueling the image economy. Marketing images often contradict Roland Barthes's influential notion that photography shows 'what has been'. As consumers we should know that what is shown in ads hasn't really been, it is usually a staged construction designed to sell something. Yet, largely due to photography's realism, combined with technological and artistic expertise, marketing images produce realistic, pervasive simulations with persuasive power. Advertising conventions encourage use of a narrow set of expectations to decode and decipher imagery—positive expectations, generally, which promote promising conclusions about the advertised item. Contrary to museum going, for instance, looking at ads seems to require withholding one's cultural knowledge so that ads become spectacles of visual consumption. Furthermore, information technology makes looking at many things possible,

but it does not necessarily improve our capacity to *see*—to actively engage our senses in reflective analysis. For most consumers, the growing volume of images works against understanding how they function – they rarely take the time to thoroughly reflect on marketing imagery, its position as something that apparently comes between programs, articles, or Websites make it seem ephemeral or at least peripheral to serious consideration. However, images are vitally connected to the cultural worlds of high art, fashion, and photography on one hand, and media realms of news, entertainment, and celebrity on the other.

A central debate within visual consumption research concerns the polysemy of images. Some approaches suggest that images float in the ‘postmodern’ world—signs disconnected from signifiers—leaving viewers free to generate novel, resistant, and idiosyncratic meaning. Certainly, consumers generate their own meaning, as they bring their own cognitive, social, and cultural lenses to whatever they see. However, researchers generally agree that this does not mean that the historical and political processes that also generate meaning are eliminated – images exist within cultural and historical frameworks that inform their production, reception, circulation, and interpretation.

Methodological issues within visual consumption stem from its interdisciplinary roots. Researchers have debated central concerns such as agency vs. structure in image interpretation and influence, the role of the unconscious, and consumer response vs. producer intention. One overlooked aspect concerns the role of fellow scholars, particularly those with visual expertise, in doing visual consumption research. Researchers consistently benefit from art historians, artists, and others with specific expertise – yet many scholars rarely make the effort to consult cross-disciplinary colleagues about their visual materials.

Future research must acknowledge the image’s representational and rhetorical power both as cultural artifacts and as engaging and deceptive bearers of meaning, reflecting broad societal, cultural, and ideological codes. Research studies focused on the political, social and economic implications of images, coupled with an understanding of the historical conditions influencing their production and consumption require cross-disciplinary training and collaboration. To more fully understand images, researchers must investigate the cultural, historical and representational conventions that limit both encoding and decoding interpretation processes. Greater awareness of the associations between the traditions and conventions of visual history and the production and consumption of images has led to a better understanding of how these representations constitute a discursive space within which a meaningful sense of identity and difference can be maintained. Research that extends

previous work on visual representation into historical, ontological, and art historical realms, may provide a necessary bridge between visual meaning residing within producer intention or wholly subsumed by individual response, and between aesthetics and ethics. Key questions remain about why certain images are celebrated, ignored, or vilified. Understanding the role that visual consumption plays in identity formation, visual history, and representation signals a step toward understanding how the market structures and subsumes basic sociological concerns of power, desire, and identity.

SEE ALSO

Advertising, Flaneurie, Goffman, Media and Consumer Culture, Museums, Semiotics, Spectacles of Consumption, Tourism and Consumption, Video Games, Visual Sociology

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