

# Uncovering Hidden Meanings, Values and Insights Through Photos

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**Abstract:** Photographs have been used as a means of data capture for many years. Their use in recording observable phenomenon in anthropology is well documented. They also provide a valuable tool for researchers from other disciplines. This paper explores the use of photographs in qualitative business research. It demonstrates how the use of photographs can enrich the business research process through a range of techniques such as photo-elicitation, autodiving, projective prompts and phenomenological interviews. Drawing from a selection of the researchers' past studies, a comparative review of the use of photographs and the benefits they bring to the data capture process is examined. These studies range from an analysis of visible face makeup, place attachment in a rural community using farmers and town respondents and international students' perceptions of home. The photographs capture the outside image of what a respondent is sensing and experiencing inwardly, providing a prompt for the respondent to drive the interview with their own words, language and values. In all instances photographs were found to augment the quality and richness of the data captured and provide an extra depth of analysis that otherwise may not have been discovered. In addition, the paper highlights the dynamics involved in the process of using visual data capture methods. The photographs were used for respondents to engage in a free sorting task which is useful in uncovering respondents' values and meanings when asked to explain choices made between their photographs. This is of particular use in difficult to articulate situations like face makeup self perceptions and personal attachment to the environment. Our findings suggest that photographs are an increasingly important tool to use in business research and that they enhance the breadth and insight of the qualitative research process. The procedures and value gained using photographs are outlined along with a discussion on the benefits and disadvantages of this process.

**Keywords:** photoelicitation, qualitative research, autodiving, projective prompts, interviews

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the use of photographs (photos) in business research methods and highlights how they have enriched the research process in each instance. 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 from other disciplines (Stanczak 2007). Indeed, photographs have been used as visual projective techniques in a variety of disciplines, including marketing (Soley 2006), tourism (Jenkins 1999) and education (Kaplan and Howes 2004; Loeffler 2005). 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. In this case, the results of a free-sorting task were analysed by the Repertory Grid Technique (Kelly 1963), which is useful in uncovering respondents' values and meanings when asked to explain choices made between objects (e.g. photographs), particularly in difficult to articulate situations. The technique has been used to explore perceived value and value that was latent in direct question interviews (Gutman 1991, Zeithaml 1988). Consequently, this technique has been used in two of the three studies discussed in this paper.

To explore the benefits and disadvantages offered by photographs used in research, three diverse studies are reviewed, including an analysis of visible face makeup; a study on place attachment in a rural community using farmers and town respondents; and finally, a study into international students' perceptions of the home environment. Each study is outlined, followed by a discussion of the common benefits and problems associated with Photoelicitation techniques.

## 2. Study 1: Analysis of visible face makeup

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into why women wear make-up. It explored how visible face-make-up affects the way women consume appearance in everyday life, how they feel about themselves, and the role make-up played in their perception and image of self. It utilised a phenomenological methodology to explore this everyday behaviour.

Adopting this methodology, the study used a combination of qualitative techniques including observation, in-depth interviews and photoelicitation as an auto-driver. In line with existential phenomenological principle, the study used these techniques to explore the symbolic nature of face makeup and the emotional dimension that it represents to women. By including photoelicitation, it was possible to explore this emotional dimension further and gain a clearer interpretation of the experiences and dialogue that was captured in the data.

In this study respondents were provided with a disposable camera and asked to take 4 (four) photographs of themselves with an emphasis on face and shoulder shots during the following different 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).

In addition, they were all asked to take 4 (four) photos, or 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). This facilitated the repertory grid technique ensuring a range of the photographs could be sorted.

The camera was then returned to the researcher who developed the photos and set up a time 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; Ryan and Ogilvie 2001). 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.

Respondents were also shown a series of eight photographs of different forms of facial make-up with their responses to these plates documented. Included in these photographs were extremes of beauty and cultural difference, from the perfect model face to an extreme gothic representation. The eight photos were used as a projective technique to elicit respondents' reactions to different make-up outcomes. The main purpose of this extra stimulus was to confirm if the participants' impressions of themselves were congruent with how they perceive others (Richins, 1991; Woodward, 1997) and to understand their intentions to consume or reject these specific facial appearances.

The rationale and benefits from using this type of methodology coupled with photoelicitation was that phenomenological principles explore the essence of a specific phenomenon of interest and its experience on the senses. Central to the phenomenological approach is that there is a core meaning that is mutually understood through the experience of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Thompson,

Locander and Pollio (1990) argue that existential phenomenological study comprises of three important categories. These include “intentionality”, “emergent dialogue”, and the “hermeneutic circle” (p 347), and these three elements provide the base for this form of methodology in this study.

In the phenomenological process, ‘*intentionality*’ contends that “lived experience may not always honour standard conceptual boundaries and, therefore, must be understood relative to the specific life-world from which it emerges” (p 347). Photographs coupled with the participants rich descriptions of what they were wearing, why and what was transpiring at the time, provided a rich snapshot of events that made interpretation of participants’ ‘lived experiences’ clearer.

Existential phenomenology also uses rich, descriptively focused interviews where questions are guided by the participants’ responses. Dialogue should be non-judgmental in nature (Colaizzi 1978, Kvale 1983, Polkinghorne 1989) and through the process of ‘*emergent dialogue*’ understanding is gained (Thompson et al., 1990). In this instance by allowing respondents to drive their own interviews using their own photographs to reveal what was important to them and the rationale for their behaviours.

The third category, ‘*hermeneutic endeavour*’ is where constant evaluation and re-evaluation of the data is conducted. Each part of the narrative was examined alone and then, as a whole, with interpretations being continuously revised as more information becomes available. It is a back and forth process from which commonalities appear (Bleicher 1980, Ricoeur 1976). These commonalities are then grouped or bracketed to become themes. Within this three phase process, the use of photographs in this study, added to understanding each of the phases of the phenomenological process in more detail providing richer clarity of participants intended meanings.

During the in-depth interview, respondents’ feelings, attitudes, perceptions and experiences about make-up were explored using the ‘focussed’ interview format (Sampson 1996). To draw out these feelings from participants, a combination of projective techniques and laddering in the form of the Kelly Repertory Grid technique (identifying how any two of three stimuli are similar but different from the third stimulus) was used (Kelly 1963, Zaltman and Coulter 1995). Respondents were asked to identify from their set of photos the image they perceived as being different to the others, and the shots they would group as the same. They were also asked which of the photos they liked the most, and which the least, as well as discussing the rationale for their choices.

In addition, a description of each participant’s make-up history was documented with reasons for change explored. Feelings and emotions about wearing facial make-up and facial adornment were also discussed and the signification of the medium extrapolated from the data gathered.

Findings from this research indicate that the reasons why women wear makeup are multi faceted and influenced by a variety of stimuli; however, the most compelling reason that emerges is women’s desire to conform to a societal appearance code. The code is strong in moulding and guiding facial appearance in every day encounters and the benefits derived from adhering to this code are numerous. It seems that by conforming to the code the individual increases their chance of acceptance and success within their respective community.

In this study individuals perceived that the face was an intricate communication tool, and the make-up upon it a complex sign of one’s status, level of conformity and overall standing within the community. It is evident that this silent language of the ‘sign’ is learned through experience and in this way becomes accepted as a meaningful symbol within the society’s culture.

### **3. Study 2: Place attachment in rural town**

This study explored the impact that place attachment had on a range of economic and social consumption decisions made by residents of a rural town in Australia. The study was an attempt to provide an understanding of how rural residents (both ‘town people’ and ‘farmers’) related to their locality and how this relationship affected their consumption behaviour.

Place attachment has been noted in the literature as a complex construct and researchers have noted the need to further understand its impact on consumption situations (Kleine and Baker 2004, Milligan 1998, Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck and Watson 1992). While the construct has been used to understand attachment with recreational sites and tourist destinations (Kaltenborn 1997, Milligan

1998, Moore and Graefe 1994, Warzecha and Lime 2001, Williams and Patterson 1999), place attachment has had limited applications that have focussed on home location environments, particularly in a rural town context.

Given the need to maintain the human, economic and social capital of towns in rural districts across Australia (Cocklin and Alston 2003), research on residents' attachment to their town and its subsequent impact on consumption choices is timely and appropriate. It can provide opportunities for local retailers to understand consumers' motivations and, by using this knowledge, develop loyalty among local residents. Therefore, this study was designed to provide insights into the way that local demand can be developed, providing a practical contribution to solving some of the sustainability issues that are of concern in many regional areas of Australia.

The first phase of the research was an exploratory, qualitative design. The purpose was to:

- Explore concepts of place attachment
- Determine language that was suitable for the questionnaire that was to be used in the quantitative phase
- Develop some of the hypotheses that were to be examined in the quantitative phase of the research.

Qualitative research and, specifically, the face-to-face interview, provided an appropriate environment in which to explore the emotional and symbolic dimensions of place attachment, adding a depth and richness to our understanding. There was a need to understand the 'essence' or 'spirit of place' (Kruger 1996, Milligan 1998, Relph 1976). This 'essence' can be manifested as the emotional aspect of place attachment, and as such, was better captured in a personal interview setting. Further, a review of the literature found no construct or framework for place attachment that was replicable within the present study. Consequently, the in-depth personal interview technique was chosen to develop an understanding of place attachment and its impact on consumption.

Hull IV (1992) used photo-elicitation to examine suburban residents' perceptions of the image created by the physical features depicted in an array of photographs of scenes from their neighbourhood. He found place attachment was higher when there was a good fit between the perceived image from the photograph and a respondent's own self-image. It was evident that photographs were helpful in place studies. Indeed, photo-elicitation was felt to be ideal for the present study as it could uncover the feelings and emotions that lie behind a visual scene, revealing (in this case) residents' image of their town, and how this image was influenced by the physical aspects of the town and surroundings.

Thirty in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours and was audio taped and transcribed. Respondents were chosen at random from the town's electoral register. Respondents were initially sent a disposable camera and a letter outlining the study requirements. They were asked to take photographs of places, people and things that were important to them in their lives. Subsequent in-depth interviews discussed the respondents' meanings, sentiments and stories behind the chosen photographs. The interview structure followed the 'focussed' interview format (Sampson 1996) that had a general question outline to guide the interview, but allowed the flexibility to adapt and probe within each interview situation.

Respondents were prompted beyond the photographs by asking them to talk about other places that were important to them that were not shown in the set of photographs. In addition, respondents were asked "What would you miss most if you left your home town?" This question was included to create the setting of 'loss' that often leads people to realise the relationship that exists between them and a place (Dixon and Durreheim 2000).

Ensuring the validity of in-depth interview findings required the use of a number of measures. The interviews were all conducted in a similar setting and, therefore, differences introduced by different settings were minimised. The nature of place attachment is that each person has different specific 'places' that are important to them and, therefore, comparisons were made at a broad level across the interviews. Generalisations from the interviews were also based at a broad level, with each aspect referred back to existing literature for reference to existing themes and constructs. Construct validity was addressed by referring emerging themes and constructs back to the literature and asking some interviewees (five) to review the summaries (Strauss and Corbin 1990, Yin 1989).

A total of 537 photographs were provided by respondents, with an average of 16 photographs for each respondent, acting as auto-drivers during the interview. The photographs were categorised according to groupings derived from a content analysis of the respondent-generated photographs and previous literature (Hull IV 1992, Kaltborn 1997, Korpela 1989). The photographs were classified within broad categories with the following categories being represented most strongly:

- Natural and built environments
- Family and friends
- Farm environments.

Other photograph categories included:

- **Significant events:** such as the Town's Spring Festival, occurring at the time of the study
- **Possessions and collectibles:** less common than given to expect as a result of previous research (Belk 1998; Ellis 1985; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).
- **Photographs** of cars, taken predominantly by male respondents, and pets rounded out the categories.

In determining the main themes from the research, the narratives generated from discussions with the photographs were analysed as a primary source of data. Comments such as "*But I couldn't take a picture of them because they were at work*" [F, under 40, T] or "*They were too shy to have their photo taken*" [M, under 40, T] were expressed by some respondents. In these cases, respondents were encouraged to talk about the person (or place) missing from their photo collection. How each respondent reacted to the experience of taking photographs was an important aspect of the interview process.

Pictures of the home, the town hospital (often because it was a place of work and held strong self-identity and social memories) and various town buildings symbolised respondents attachment to the built environment of their town. Public facilities were a consistent feature in respondents' photographs, with the recreation centre, medical suites, senior citizens centre and schools being sources of pride, companionship, work and self-identity, as well as symbols of safety and town well-being. Often these facilities were the setting for social gatherings and subsequently held fond memories of friendship, enjoyment and social bonding. This was also evident within the natural environs of the town, including picnic areas and parks.

The social fabric of the town was evident across many of the photo collections. The positive lifestyle qualities of the town were evident, with safety, peace and quiet and an intense sense of community spirit underlying the stories derived from a range of photographs. Childhood memories and family gatherings created a nostalgic feel, with respondents creating their stories around photographs of the picnic areas, memorial park and churches.

There were many comments on the quality of life in the town, which were not captured in the photographs but came as a result of describing the activities and images within the photos. The following quote is an example of these feelings and one that was not specific to a particular photo but to an overall feeling that emerged from the discussion of the feelings and sentiments behind the photos.

*I think it is just the peace and quiet. The fact that to go and do my grocery shopping isn't an ordeal like it might be in the city. You don't have to fight for parking and crowds and you can just get in and get it done. I think a lot of it is just the open space not being crowded in and just the peace and the quietness. (F, 40s)*

Respondents were asked to choose their three most important photographs and describe how they felt when they looked at them. This technique was adopted from Hull IV et al.'s (1994) research and revealed similar emotional responses to Hull IV et al.'s (1994) classification. Feelings of peace, calm, nostalgia, uniqueness, freedom and safety were evident in the responses, with the emotional link between place and person being evident. The interviews emphasised the attachment process in three ways, namely:

- Attachment to a contextual setting allowing some activity to take place (place dependence)
- The place becoming an extension of oneself with it being "*incorporated into one's concept of self*" (Krupat 1983: 343)

- The care and maintenance of the place for long-term life of the place (Steel 2000)

#### **4. Study 3: Students perception of home**

Overseas students have access to a number of learning opportunities available by virtue of a highly competitive tertiary education market system. Despite the increasing trend for remote, online-based learning programs, many students elect to travel outside their home country to experience the cultural difference of studying abroad. The benefit is symbiotic, with crucial university funding being attracted by increased numbers of overseas students seeking an enriched studying experience.

The focus of this research was the on-campus learning experience received by ex-patriot students studying in Australia and Singapore. How these students adapted to the different physical, social and emotional environments when studying overseas was examined. It concentrated on students' consumption of the 'home' phenomena through an experiential and sensory approach demonstrating the influence of the senses in the adaptation process.

The international tertiary education market is fiercely competitive. The United States is the world's main provider of education for overseas students, followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany, and Canada (Marginson 2007). Student evaluation of higher education has been debated at length within the literature (Clouder 1998, McKenzie, Sheely and Trigwell 1998, Wachtel 1998) and is one of the most extensively researched areas in education (Wilson 1998). Studies have also been conducted that explore reasons why students seek tertiary education (Floyd and Gordon 1998, Thornburg 1997); factors that influence their choice of destination (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002) and success factors for universities marketing themselves internationally (Mazzarol 1998, Marginson 2002). If Australia is to improve its market share it must understand the key differentiating offerings which may not solely involve academic factors. To be effective in communicating to prospective students by using their language and perceptions of Australia, the need to find research methods that uncover these perceptions in meaningful ways is required. Photoelicitation and autodiving interviews is one technique that offers such insight and understanding. As Marginson (2007:32) noted ...*"Australia needs to understand the positive influence and importance of freedom, natural landscapes, space, beaches and climate to the overall decision-making process of overseas students."*

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-two students using photoelicitation as an auto-driver. Overseas students who were going back to their home country for the inter-semester break were approached to participate in the study. Students were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos of important places, people and things that represented home to them in their own country as well as their country of study (Australia or Singapore). The follow-up interviews were audiotaped and transcribed resulting in an extremely rich data set which was analysed and coded for emerging trends.

The twenty-two students generated a total of 286 photographs. These photographs were grouped and coded by the researchers resulting in a number of emerging themes. Students volunteered for this study so a bias toward overseas students that had relocated successfully was an anticipated result. When recounting their experiences, all students referred to the positive influence of their senses (sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste) on their experiences, making those experiences more memorable and real. In some instances awareness of this sensory influence helped bridge the gap between their home and country of study.

Recreational site research identified the substitutability of one site with another as an aspect of recreational place choice (Wyman 1985). This phenomenon was evident in this study's results. Some other mix of environments in the new country became the overseas student's substitute 'home'. This substitutability was reflected in students' pictures and dialogue of places, people and objects (Ryan and Ogilvie, 2001). Dispersed throughout the discussions was the consistent reference to sensory stimuli used to emphasis feelings and the importance of the experience to the student. Almost every interview reported some reference to one or more of the senses in the dialogue of recounting experiences and special memories.

Not surprisingly, visual scenery was a common point of reflection when students were talking about their home and special places. Overseas students in Australia referred to the beauty of isolated beaches:

*"The scenery in Australia is, well, something that definitely means home to me here, they remind me of the sea at home, yet they are different.. I'm not used to the beaches looking like that, with open views.... There is nothing like that in Scotland",*

along with open spaces, red dirt and green fields. Specific attractions of 'home' were kept as a sacred memory and not substituted:

*"This is a beautiful photo.... Its autumn or late summer.. that part of the year the sky gets this really weird light like you can see the orange light.....It just happens sometimes then we all run out of our houses and just look at it because it is magnificent.....that's just the beauty of Norway."*

Photographs provided the most common visual stimuli for students. They were a possession that was easily transported as a memory store, providing a sense of the past and help secure their identity

*"I like to look at my photographs if and when I have past time ....Since I was young every time my parents said I was leaving my house the first thing I would grab all my photos because other things will be gone but photographs are a memory that I want to have with me forever".*

Students feel safe and secure in a foreign country when they feel 'at home' with their new environment. The environment can serve to stabilise the self-concept and thus assist in the overall positive experience for overseas students (Hormuth 1990). This research emphasised the importance of the senses when overseas students relate to their home country and their overseas study country. As the senses are so vital in providing the input for the experience of the 'home' phenomenon, their use in promoting the other (non academic) benefits of studying in Australia could be considered to give an affective, emotional and realistic account of what Australian life has to offer. Adaptation to the new environment is essential for the student to have a positive experience from the learning process. A vital part of this adaptation is experienced through the senses. The photoelicitation technique facilitated the uncovering of this dimension in students adaption process due to its ability to assist in the autodiving interview process in uncovering feelings, emotions and enhanced insights.

## 5. Discussion

Photographs motivate respondents to respond to visual prompts with more descriptive and insightful comments than they do without such visual aids (Carlsson 2001, Heisley and Levy 1991, Heisley, McGrath and Sherry 1991, Hull IV 1992, Loeffler 2005, Samuels 2004). The photograph captures the outside image of what a respondent is sensing and experiencing inwardly, providing a prompt for the respondent to drive the interview with their own words, language and values. As Collier and Collier (1986: 125) suggest, "[photo] representation of critical area[s] of the informant's life can trigger emotional revelations otherwise withheld, can release psychological explosions and powerful statements of values."

Photographs in the three studies described in this paper were developed and used as visual elicitation with respondents during in-depth interviews. "Autodiving" is the term used when an interview is 'driven' by the respondent on seeing and hearing their own behaviour (Heisley and Levy 1991). Autodiving has been described by McCracken (1988) as assisting respondents to 'manufacture distance' from their own personal feelings. Through this technique respondents can "see familiar data in unfamiliar ways" (McCracken 1988, p.24). Similar to this technique the visual elicitation allows the respondent to drive the interview as they seek to interpret their photographs and explain them. This was particularly evident in the interviews with younger respondents in study 3. The younger age group are more difficult to engage in descriptive conversation, being inclined to give monosyllabic responses (Grant 2006) yet given their own photos as drivers they could delve into the setting and open up their own responses with more depth than would possibly occur without the photo prompts.

In some cases the camera did not represent the image that the respondent had hoped for or perceived. Whilst in studies two and three this required the respondent to explain in more descriptive terms the scene they wanted depicted, one respondent (in study one) was prepared to blame the camera for the misrepresentation "Well looking at them I don't see that there is any difference, so whether that is the fault of the camera or whatever. ...although if I looked in the mirror and not the photographs I would see differently." (f, 53) This difference provided a rich source of data on perceived image and self identity. In this study the photos taken represented an iconic image of the 'self' and judged as a good or bad photo based on its alignment with the respondents perceived self image.

The descriptions of the three studies highlight the depth and richness of the data obtained from the photoelicitation process. There were, however, a number of limitations with the technique. At times the process of taking the actual photos was itself a limitation of the technique. The photos required respondents to travel (study 2 and 3) and take photos that were time consuming. In some cases (in study 2) the respondents had the camera for several weeks before taking their photos. This was especially evident with the farmers in the survey. The time factor was also important for respondents in study 1 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. Consequently, there is potential for this time lapse to influence fashion trends and hence the data collected from respondents who moved with these trends. Some respondents found the process invasive (most evident in study 1). Respondents from study one 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 (study 1) 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 similar procedure was employed in the other two studies.

Therefore our findings suggest that the use of photographs to enhance the research process is particularly worthwhile 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. Furthermore, one of the main ways to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research is through the use of triangulation. Photo-elicitation provides 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 photos in the research process far outweigh any disadvantages.

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