Chapter 3

From the Visual Turn to Turned Up Visuality: Modes of Interaction in the Digitalized Era and Ways to Utilize Them

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ABSTRACT

The humanities and social sciences discovered the field of visual research in the 1990s and proclaimed several “turns” to emphasize the importance of visuality (or the visual mode) and shape the future direction of research: imagic turn, pictorial turn, iconic turn, and visualistic turn. Almost 30 years later, the individual lifeworlds are heavily influenced by the digitalization of technologies and the globalization of material and immaterial goods – products, ideas, and imaginations that rely on certain ways of visual presentation, images, and visual media in general. The individual lifeworlds are increasingly based on digitally mediated visuals and the interaction with as well as the communication using them (often intertwined with direct ways to interact, like touch, speech, or gestures). Visual-based alternatives to commonly used methods like interviews and surveys are discussed, finishing off with an introduction to the methodology of the creative interview, a qualitative instrument to gain and explicate information, and imaginations using respondent-produced sketches and drawings.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9188-7.ch003
INTRODUCTION

The humanities and social sciences discovered the field of visual research in the 1990s and proclaimed several ‘turns’ to emphasize the importance of visuality (or the visual mode) and shape the future direction of research: e.g. imagic turn (Fellmann 1991), pictorial turn (Mitchell 1992), iconic turn (Boehm 1994) and visualistic turn (Sachs-Hombach 1993). Almost 30 years later, the individual lifeworlds are heavily influenced by the digitalization of technologies and the globalization of material and immaterial goods – products, ideas, and imaginations, that rely on certain ways of visual presentation, images and visual media in general. The first two decades of the 21st century are shaped by digital technologies and innovations that exploit these technologies and utilize them. This revolution in the making is characterized by new technologies that fuse the physical, digital and biological worlds (Schwab 2017, Schwab et al. 2018). This revolution is accompanied by the development and formation of global cultures that are fostered by digital technologies with a low threshold, like the immaterial information and imagination, communication and networking resources of the Internet and the World Wide Web. In these global cultures, visuals gained a new power because of their quasi-universal comprehensibility (in contrast to language-specific speech and text) and their easy and fast diffusion via networks, platforms, social communities, and the globalized professional media industry. New tools like tablets and applications like Instagram accelerate the impact of images and imaginations in the distribution and perception of information from individuals as well as organizations and political actors.

This emphasis on the visual mode of perception, representation, and communication in the 21st century has created the need to grasp, study and understand the usage of the visual mode as well as the desire to foster this mode for research and value creation. It spawned several trends spanning from the AI-based, automated analysis of images (think of e.g. face detection on surveillance cameras and automated digital image search and interpretation), heavily image- and visualization-based methods to foster creativity to the use of participant-produced photographs and images in social research. This chapter focuses on how these innovative approaches can be utilized to gain hidden knowledge, to gain new aspects, to solve problems or to foster creativity.

The chapter begins with an introduction to modern mass media and the construction of global identities. Then the increased and increasing importance of visuality is presented. Following, visual knowledge, as well as perception and processing of visual information in psychology and cognition research, is shown. Thereafter visuality in the social sciences and visual (research) methods are presented to shed light on the use of images in the research process. The chapter finishes with the introduction of the creative interview, presented and illustrated with several case examples, a summary, and outlook.
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