Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research

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**Background:** N/A

**Purpose:** Review of *Using visual data in qualitative research*

**Setting:** N/A

**Intervention:** NA

**Research Design:** N/A

**Data Collection and Analysis:** N/A

**Findings:** N/A

**Keywords:** book review; data visualization; qualitative research.
Using Visual Data is the fifth component of eight in
the research kit that SAGE Publications has
produced, which encompasses a variety of
qualitative methods including topics covering
designing qualitative studies, conducting
interviews, analyzing qualitative data, and more.
This specific text offers insight into visual
methods, which takes a unique approach to
exploring this niche research tool. As a new
researcher to the field of qualitative studies, Using
Visual Data in Qualitative Research caught my
eye as an interesting adventure as I seek to
continue to shape my framework and philosophy,
as well as facilitate the design of future research
studies. I am sure it has and will be so for others.
“The aim of this book has been to set researchers
on a journey into what is, I hope, a new and
exciting terrain, during which they may learn as
much about themselves as they do about the
research subjects” (p. 121).

The intended audience for this book is
predominately new and aspiring qualitative
researchers at the graduate level as well as current
qualitative researchers looking to expand their
practice. Since “images are ubiquitous in society,”
the “study of images or one that incorporates
images in the creation or collection of data might
be able to reveal some sociological insight that is
not accessible by any other means” (pp. 3-4). In
other words, conveying the findings qualitative
research in the social sciences may be lacking
certain insight if the author fails to include visual
data representations. Therefore, both novice and
experienced researchers alike who want to further
expand their methods of collecting and analyzing
data would be interested in this user-friendly text;
it presents a nice overview of the history of visual
data, what these methods can look like, and how
such data can be used. “The focus of this book is
on historical, theoretical and practical approaches
to using visual data in qualitative research” (p. xv).

Organized into six chapters, the author
presents an introduction to visual data, then dives
into the background and history of this type of
method, followed by approaches to visual data,
sample methods of collection, and then
presentation of such data. The concluding chapter
of the book contains a summary, which brings the
topics full circle to lessons learned throughout the
text. Each chapter builds on the prior, and creates
a framework for researchers to experiment with on
their own. Each chapter also starts with a unique
case study to help lay a foundation and build a
practical understanding of these method, and
finishes with key points from that section.
Grounded in the phenomenology of Schutz and
Merleau-Ponty, the author claims that in being
able to “see” in the way others do, researchers are
able to draw conclusions. Banks contends that
using visual data has the potential to do just that.
(p. 117).

Of the total six chapters, the first two chapters
serve as the introduction and history of visual
data, with Chapter 1 setting the tone for the text.
“Visual research should be seen as only one
methodological technique among many to be
employed by social researchers, more appropriate
in some contexts, less so in others” (p. 4). Within
this technique, the author discusses the two main
strands, which include the creation of images by
social researchers for documentation and analysis,
as well as the second strand, which includes the
collection of images produced or consumed by the
subjects of the research (pp. 6-7). Banks also
presents a newer strand which includes the co-
creation of images through collaboration of the
researcher and the subjects of study. The author
includes a brief overview of key terms and
concepts at the end of Chapter 1 which covers
terms such as “agency,” “data,” “documentary,”
“figure/ground,” “frame,” “narrative,” and more.
The author then presents the organization of the
book, briefly summarizing Chapters 2 through 5 as
well as an overview of the conclusion.

Each chapter lays out the objectives that the
author covers in that section. Chapter 2 explores
historical and foundational references in
anthropology and sociology, which were noted to
have emerged alongside the development of
photomechanical image production. Additionally,
Banks noted that images are never neutral, but
rather construct meaning. It is in this concept that
the social science research component comes into
play. Within this chapter, the author presents
positivist and interpretivist approaches which are
sometimes used with this type of social science
research. The author presents his argument on this
topic as well. He states, “participants and social
researchers alike interpreted social action
according to a broader set of contexts and
meanings...as a story that society tells itself about
itself” (p. 22). Therefore, society constructs the
meaning, which the researcher interprets.

Chapter 3 and 4 discuss the approaches to
studying the visuals and the methods of study.
Banks starts off with presentations of theory,
which he stresses impacts the researcher’s
understanding through epistemological reflection
and empirical research. With that being said, the
findings are therefore either ontologically distinct,
or ontologically constituted, which is based on the
theory of the researcher. Topics in these sections
include the importance of images being viewed in
context, presentation of issues of power, and
various forms of content analysis based on the type of media. Additionally, the author emphasized the idea of visuals being in their material form. Shifting gears into the methods, fieldwork can include methods such as photo-elicitation, film elicitation, and collaborative projects, making movies, and making pictures. A discussion regarding the ethical issues and other questions raised in relation to these strategies offers context and a bit of a counter-narrative, as well as points to consider, such as copyrights and permissions.

In Chapter 5, the author mentions the importance of being aware of the audience when presenting visual research, as well as being cognizant of the academic context. Banks elaborates on this, with different modes of presentation as well as the method of organizing this data. Since visual data can present itself in a wide variety of forms, and not always possible to directly infuse in a research paper, the author states that, “the most important issue to think through is the relationship between images and text,” (p. 97) and therefore there is some degree of researcher preference based on the objective and form of media. Once again, Banks presents issues of ethics in this chapter, as visuals are shared with both audience members and research subjects, due to the sensitivity of social research. The last major point the author covered in this chapter was the construction of digital multimedia presentations and the necessity for proof-reading such content.

The final chapter offers a summary with key takeaways and an overview of topics discussed. It recaps major themes such as interpretive analytical strategies, collaborative approaches, and reflexivity. A major question that drives this work is, “can visual methodologies yield any new insights beyond those that could be uncovered by other methodological practices?” (p. 116). This question can lead researchers to reflect when considering the inclusion of visual data in their studies. The author also includes topics of robustness and distinctiveness here.

This highly accessible book serves as a great resource for scholars looking to expand their research with visual data supplements in the qualitative realm. The author has done a fantastic job of introducing visual data research to the reader. The book is well-organized and builds on itself, as the reader is able to develop a solid foundation of where visual data is rooted, how it can be used, why it is important to use, and lastly how to present such data. Overall, this text is a useful resource and tool for scholars interested in infusing visual data in their qualitative social research. Having clear chapter objectives, summative key takeaways, and multiple infused case studies, the author does a great job at presenting a wide variety visual data methods and points to consider. With a targeted audience of new qualitative researchers, this book does a great job at being informative and thorough while still being an easy and quick read.