

# Research Methodology in the Field of Fashion Study

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## ABSTRACT

The Fashion industry being the most dynamic in nature posed a serious question in front of the academic researchers as the data used in the analysis is mostly non-numeric and non-textual. The data can be images, photos, drawings, films, etc. To analyze such data, a traditional technique of numerical data analysis would not be appropriate. Also, the interpretation of such data points may be textual, which may also take a lot of time to interpret. In such scenarios, tools of visual research play an important role. In this review paper, the methods of research with respect to visual data are explained with examples. The various visual research techniques will help the academicians and students handle the data in a more effective way to draw any conclusion out of the same data.

**Key Words :** Fashion study, Visual research, Clothing study

## INTRODUCTION

Research, an important learning tool for academicians and students alike, needs to be carried out very diligently. The objective of any research is to find out the trends or insights that help conclude a research problem. Defining a research problem will be very critical in identifying the tools and techniques to collect, summarize, and analyze the data. The tools may vary depending on the nature of the data and the way or form in which we need to analyze it. The data can be analyzed through various statistical tools like SPSS. Such tools can easily work with numerical data or ordinal data. However, data that is in a non-numeric or non-textual format needs special techniques to understand and analyze.

Examples of it can be images, pictures, videos, sculptures, etc. Such data needs a different technique for analysis as the traditional methods and rules cannot be applicable in this case.

The analysis of this kind of data is very much required for decision-making in the fields of healthcare, crime investigation, events, ancient history, human evolution, etc. Quantification or tabulation of such data is not possible by normal methods. These data points are studied through

the observations. In this paper, a visual analysis technique is discussed in detail.

Objectives of the research are as follows:

- To know what is the research in the field of fashion
- To know the characteristics of the data used
- To understand the methodology of research in the fashion field

### Data used in fashion study:

#### **Contemporary Data:**

The data collected in the fashion sector talks about what are the current preferences of the wearer. The data can be collected through qualitative or quantitative methods.

The quantitative data can be collected through surveys where the objectives are to find out the existing preferences and shopping habits, analyze retail sales data, and employ statistical methods to interpret findings.

The qualitative method includes conducting in-depth interviews or focus group discussions with designers, consumers, or industry professionals. Research can also find out the current preferences of styles worn by people after observing a particular category of people in a

particular area<sup>2</sup>. This data would be non-numerical in nature and help the researcher to find out the hidden meanings and perceptions about the current fashion trends.

### **Historical data:**

The fashion field is mostly controlled by historical data which is non-textual and non-numeric. Examples of data used in the research are images, drawings, sketches, illustrations, film, videos, collages, sculpture, artwork, graffiti, advertising, cartoons, etc. (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1: Examples of data used for the analysis (A combination of painting, photograph, and drawing)**

As the data required for the study of fashion trends is pictorial, there are many problems faced in analysis. It is important to study the characteristics of such data to understand the complications of the analysis.

The characteristics of such data are as follows:

- The quantum of data is huge and generated by several people simultaneously
- It is mostly non-structured
- It takes a variety of forms
- It cannot be replicated easily
- It needs a special skill to appreciate and understand

Also understanding of elements is very subjective. Because of these features of the data, there are limitations in analyzing as :

- Such images cannot be studied with quantitative methods which are freely available and widely used
- General analysis tools like descriptive, and predictive analysis tools cannot be applicable to study the fashion data

- Sufficient Storage capacity is required to store the huge quantum of images, videos, etc.

Hence such historical data has to be analysed using visual research tools.

### **The basics of Visual research:**

The process of research involves objective identification, relevant data collection, data analysis, presentation, and making a decision depending on the conclusion.

Research in the fashion field is qualitative research focused mostly on understanding the fashion trends over the years with the objectives of

- Study of the evolution of clothing, attire and accessories
- Study of the prints, styles and texture
- Study of stitching and weaving techniques and patterns
- Study of how cultures and religion influence clothing or *vice versa*

### **Role of Visual Research:**

Visual research is a qualitative analysis by observation of photos, videos, and images to conclude the aspects of social life and the way of living<sup>6</sup>.

It is used widely in

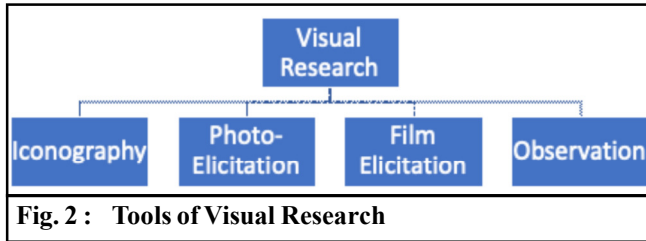
- Anthropology,
- Ethnography,
- Semiotics,
- Healthcare,
- Crime investigation and other such studies.

To understand how visual research topics can be discussed, the following example will help. The topic of the study can be “Analysis of the fashion trend of Indian rulers during the British era.” Under this topic, the objectives can be stated as follows:

- To know the culture, and religion of society through the clothing, appearance, way of living, and art
- To know the aesthetics or appearance of clothing parts
- To understand the various accessories used
- To know preferences of the colors
- To know the changes that happened in clothing over the years

As the traditional data collection techniques and the analysis tools may not be so effective to conclude in this regard, a researcher must consider the visual analysis

tools. Some basic tools are as follows (Fig. 2):



**Fig. 2 : Tools of Visual Research**

**Iconography:**

It refers to the study of the identification, description, and interpretation of symbols and imagery in art, particularly visual arts. It examines how these symbols and images have been used throughout history to convey ideas, beliefs, and cultural values and their impact on the garments used. For example, Pablo Picasso’s “Dove of Peace”, was a symbol of peace that was used by many as a symbol of hope after World War II. Even the United Nations and the Olympics are using it to show the unity among participants.

**Photo Elicitation:**

It is a method for conducting interviews or focus groups where photographs are used as prompts to guide the conversation and to understand their perception toward a garment used or the fashion styles. They can express their emotions and interpretations of fashion and may reveal unconscious biases toward certain styles. The photos can be provided by the researcher or taken by the participants themselves (called native photo-elicitation). Alexander McQueen frequently drew inspiration from historical periods, by studying the paintings and drawings and reworked Victorian silhouettes and corsetry into dramatic, avant-garde pieces. The following questions about garments can help find the trends from the photographs:

- What emotions does this outfit evoke in you?
- Can you imagine yourself wearing this? Why or why not?
- How do you think this style reflects the time it comes from?

**Film Elicitation:**

Film elicitation is like photo elicitation, but it uses film clips instead of photographs to prompt discussion and gather information from participants. Researchers show participants short film clips that are relevant to their research topic. The clips can be from feature films,

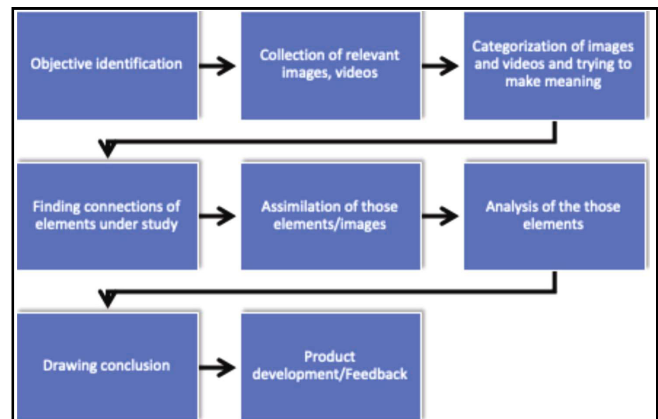
documentaries, or even home videos. Participants are encouraged to discuss their reactions to the clips, their interpretations of the events portrayed, and how they connect to the garments worn by the participants in the film.

**Observation:**

It is a time-consuming process where a researcher must carefully study the dressing of the objects under study to find what color, fabric, and design they prefer over others to identify the trends. It gives the researcher first-hand information about what trend is preferred by the wearer.

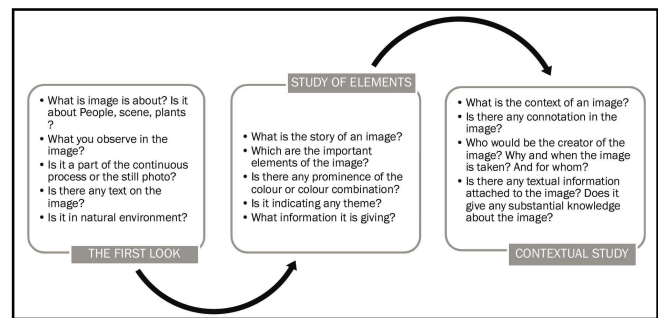
**Process of visual research:**

With the variation of data and the variation of tools, it is obvious that the process used in the analysis would also be different. The process mostly deals with understanding the images, videos, pictures, etc. through observation and finding out the theme of the data<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3 : Process of visual research**

To achieve this, a researcher must be very proficient in understanding the color theory, should be more



**Fig. 4 : Process of an image study**

observant of the finer details of the images, and should be very informative about the background of the topic under study<sup>1</sup>. Without having sound knowledge of the topic, it would be very difficult for a researcher to draw any conclusion from the series of data (Fig. 4).

Here, an example is given to analyze an Image. It is 3 steps process, and, in each process, a researcher has to go further in detail to understand what is image is depicting.

### **Use of AI in visual research:**

Modern technology of Artificial Intelligence is proving very helpful for designers in doing visual research. Some of the examples are Pinterest's Style Feed and Stitch Fix's Algorithmic Styling<sup>10</sup>. It covers the following aspects:

#### ***Automatic tagging:***

This is very helpful while doing the photo-elicitation of film-elicitation. If done manually, it will take a lot of time, but with technology, the tagging for color, style, silhouette, and pattern can be done at a faster rate. The extraction of the information from photos, videos, and drawings can be easily categorized and the understandable trend can be defined<sup>7</sup>.

#### ***Use of digital library:***

It would be easier for the designer to look for similar designs from the online library which has a lot of data about the past styles. Instead of typing out the keywords, a search with an image would be very fast and the result may be more enriching<sup>8</sup>.

#### ***Creation of mood board:***

Mood boards are an important tool for the designer to show how he has been inspired by various elements like color, texture, pattern, etc. Now it would be easier to just feed the raw inspirational images to the software application and it will create a moodboard. This will reduce a lot of manual work and kick start the design process by reducing the subjectivity of the designer<sup>9</sup>.

### **Precautions while doing visual research:**

The visual research requires a very meticulous understanding otherwise, research work may not be sufficient to prove the point. Hence, precautions should be taken while analyzing the images or any data in the research.

- A photo may be good in “showing” but very bad in “telling”. Fake pictures should be avoided.
- The images may create controversy; hence the selection of images or videos should be done properly.
- With the advancements in technology, the digital manipulation of photos/videos is very easy and can deceive the viewer.
- It should be also noted that it is a very passive medium of study. A researcher may not be available during the painting, drawing, or filming, hence he may not be aware of the exact situation of the object.
- Sufficient care is expected from the researcher to understand the background and accordingly the analysis will vary.
- If the data is collected from the primary source means the researcher is himself clicking the pictures or videos, then care should be taken to maintain the environment as natural as possible. Any modification in the natural setting may change the scope of the image.
- Also, in the case of secondary data, the data needs to be collected from authentic sources to avoid any fraudulent analysis.

### **Ethical considerations in data collection:**

The researcher should be very careful in following the ethical standards in the research.

- The photographs/video used in the research should be taken with permission. Non-adherence to it may lead to legal complications<sup>4</sup>.
- It should be also noted that plagiarism poses a great threat to research as students are not aware of the seriousness of issues. As it is not quantifiable in images, it is more prevalent in the fashion industry under the name of inspiration<sup>3</sup>.
- Manipulations of images to suit the research should be avoided.
- Research should not cause any defamation to anyone or group.
- Personal images should not be distributed.
- Data should be checked with copyright or any other restrictions.

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