Chapter 1

Linking Theory to Visual Communication

Our lives are filled with visual information. Some visuals are obvious—such as a Calvin Klein magazine advertisement, where the visual dominates our senses. Other visuals are so common that we take them for granted—the octagonal shape and red background of a stop sign, for example, where the shape communicates importance and the red color communicates danger. Indeed, even printed text can be considered visual: we visually process the shapes of letters collectively to understand a textual message.

While visuals constantly bombard us, the study of visuals employed in mass communication has grown in importance through the years. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, a journal published through the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication (AEJMC) that was created in 1992, is now a popular and well-respected publication. AEJMC and the International Communication Association both have divisions devoted to visual communication. Many universities have now developed visual communication literacy courses. Photojournalism and Design academic tracks are common at universities around the world.

Several factors have led to the expansion of visual communication research.

The emergence of new technologies has made visual information more accessible than some traditional media such as newspapers and radio. Internet content is highly visual.
The development of complex software such as Photoshop and InDesign has created new areas of research dealing with both the use and the effects of software.

The visual communication field, long the purview of individuals with Masters of Fine Arts degrees, now has several scholars with PhDs conducting research.

The influx of researchers with PhDs has increased both the quantity and quality of visual communication research. While much research continues to be descriptive, many new scholars are conducting studies involving rigorous research methods.

Conducting Research in Visual Communication

The keys to successful visual communication research lie in two broad areas: A rigorous methodology and a compelling theoretical framework. Subsequent chapters will detail research methods utilized in visual communication. Briefly, social science methods of survey, content analysis and experiments have been used. Qualitative methods, such as historical and critical/cultural analyses, have also been employed.

Theoretically, visual communication researchers have borrowed many of the traditional theories of mass communication, including the theoretical frameworks given below.

Framing

An obvious theoretical framework for visual communication is framing, which is actually based on the idea of a photograph. When photographers take pictures, they cannot capture the entire world in the frame of the photograph. Photographers must select only part of the real work to appear within the photo frame, while eliminating everything else. Thus, the idea of framing looks at the selection of what content is included in the photograph, why a photographer chose this content over other content, and what effect the content has on views of the content.