Life/Style OnLine[©]
A Web-Based Methodology for
Visually-Oriented Consumer Research

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ABSTRACT

We describe *Life/StyleOnline*[©], a web-based interactive data collection technique that allows respondents to manipulate visual images of products as a means of expressing their tastes and preferences. This research tool is comprised of a browser-based software interface with an extensive database layer, which handles storage and retrieval of visual images.

KEYWORDS
Consumer research, online data collection, visual imagery

INTRODUCTION
The Web offers exciting new possibilities to communicate with consumers. Numerous commercial websites offer visitors engaging, interactive platforms, but the semiotic dimensions of presenting visuals online are still murky. In particular many social science researchers are not fully exploiting the capabilities of online media to probe deeply into consumers' motivations and preferences. Existing methods of data collection, largely focused on the written or spoken word, need to adapt to the enhanced possibilities for visual research offered by the Web. The use of visual stimuli by consumer researchers has largely been confined to small-sample qualitative studies that typically build upon methodological traditions developed in disciplines such as clinical psychology, visual sociology, aesthetics and anthropology. In the main, these techniques use visual material as part of a stimulus or response format and require "deep" interpretation as the analysis approach.

The *Life/Style OnLine*[©] technology was initially developed to explore the germination and dissemination of style trends among young fashion-forward female consumers and to contextualize their choices in fashion categories to other lifestyle choices. The project was funded by The National Textile Center, U.S. Department of Commerce. Although these web-based tools were developed in the context of a specific substantive domain, they have considerable general utility to other applications, both academic and commercial.

At the core of the project was the development of a web-based interactive data collection technique that allows respondents to manipulate visual images of products as a means of expressing their tastes and preferences. This research tool is comprised of a browser-based software interface with an extensive database layer, which handles storage and retrieval of visual images. One innovative feature of the software that generates the web pages is that it is a form of dynamic html (html scripting). Therefore, the large number of web pages that might be required by a specific research application are not individually created html files, but are instead interactively created online in response to the behavior of the respondent. The specific pages, then, do not actually "exist" until the time of application when the program creates them "on the fly" on the basis of respondent behavior, research design parameters, and information in the database (visual and verbal).

A major focus of our ongoing research program has been to learn how female fashion opinion leaders integrate information from mass-media lifestyle depictions as they form their own consumption preferences and communicate these choices to others. The basic feature of the product selection and assessment portion of the *Life/Style OnLine*[©] protocol is to have respondents assemble – on their computer screens – collages of product images they associate with images of selected people and lifestyle scenarios.

There are three visual layers in the current data collection paradigm: (1) sorting and selection of images of people in their daily lives (this involves the online sorting of images into discrete categories and the selection of category prototypes); (2) establishment of a social context in which product selection will occur; and (3) selection of an "ensemble" of products perceived to be ideally suited to each social context. This final step involves the selection of an "ideal" product from a larger set of category possibilities and the progressive assembling of a product ensemble. Both sorting and collage creation tools also pair image manipulation and selection processes with verbal response protocols (open- and close-ended formats). A demonstration version of the software is available at http://fafnir.berry.edu/ConsumersOnLine/index.html.