Iconic Photos of the Vietnam War and Their Influence on Collective Memory
Angie J. Lovelace (Dr. Harlen Makemson), Department of Communications

The Vietnam War was defined as the —first televised war, but it has been the still photos, the single frames, that have carved its place in history. Eddie Adams‘ image of the execution of a Viet Cong member on the streets of Saigon and Nick Ut‘s photo of a little girl running naked down the street after being burned by napalm are two examples of —iconic‖ photos as defined by scholars. These iconic photos have appeared repeatedly in the media, they have been reused and repurposed by popular culture, and they appear in history books as visual representations of the war. Previous scholars such as David Perlmutter suggest however that the public‘s understanding of the circumstances captured by these photographs may be limited. If these scholars are correct, then what meanings are everyday citizens attaching to these iconic photographs? Through the use of in-depth interviews with a sample population of individuals, age 15 or older during the height of the war, oral history provided insight into the iconic qualities of the photographs and how they have contributed to collective memory of the war era. Results indicate there is a disconnect between recognition of the photos and an understanding of the details. Collective memories are shared memories, constructed by society. The photographs typically triggered memories concerning the issue of the draft and war protests occurring within the United States. None of the photographs studied focused on the American soldier, but people typically remembered how the war affected people they were close to, and how the country responded to the war. Iconic photos did not positively influence the collective memory of specific events and details of the war, instead they helped to frame the war within emotional and personal memories.