PHOTOGRAPHY: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR ENHANCING VISUAL COMMUNICATION

By

By Dakyes Samaila Usman
Sunday Ogunwole
and
Joseph Azi Izang
Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Hello University, Zaria

Abstract
Information dissemination is a dynamic global phenomenon permeating through every fabric of human endeavor. Man is increasingly in dire need of information especially at the grassroots where literacy is about 25% (UNESCO, 2005). Unfortunately, literacy which enhances visual literacy (entails ability to understand, interpret and evaluate visual messages) is on the low side at the grassroots thereby creating an enabling environment for development communication which requires photographs in constructing its content. The paper reviews the role of photography and photojournalism in the construction of visual messages that break the bounds of culture and language. It advocates visual literacy as a distinct variable that enhances the ability of an individual to decode encoded visual messages. The place of photography in advertisement as a major factor that propels the economy of a nation is x-rayed and emphasized its significance in corporate promotion and product marketing. The paper concludes by recommending photography application in all areas of human endeavor considering its role in information dissemination, understanding, and interpretation of messages, documentation of events and facts, as well as enhancing teaching and learning.

Keywords: Photography, visual communication, photojournalism, visual literacy and advertising,

Introduction
Visual communication has to do with how what we see affects our thinking. It may be described as any information that is transmitted through the power of visuals which appeal to the sense of sight, but with the intention of creating a meaning. In its broad sense visual communication may be described as any form of communication whose message appeals to the sense of vision. Lester (2011) pointed out that visual communication depends totally on vision as the sensory modality for the interpretation or decoding of messages. It is a grammar of conventional and unconventional signs and symbols that represents something else either by association, resemblance or connection. A sign here means anything that tells us or points to the presence of something. The something being suggested by the sign could be an idea, a situation, a condition or even an object. Visuals in a broad sense include; pictograms, signs, symbols, iconography, photographs, to mention but a few. They are used in communication to eradicate language barriers and allows for smooth cross cultural decoding of encoded visual massages. Pictures are products of photography and they speak universal language, breaking all barriers to communication except that of visual literacy.

Photography

Photography (analog) is traditionally based upon the combination of two fundamental processes; production of images by means of light which alters it permanently and the use of light sensitive materials. Digital photography on the other hand, is a form of photography that uses an array of electronic photo dictators to capture the image focused by the lens, as opposed to an exposure on photographic film. The main tool of photography is the camera which is categorized as analog and digital. Photography applications in recent time, have been broadened by the advent of technology especially in the twenty first century. Virtually all areas of human endeavor find the use of images useful in disseminating information. Mayo, (2008) listed types of photography as follows: portraits/group, animal, landscape, sports, architecture, macro, panorama, and tabletop photography. Other areas include; social, commercial, documentary, marine, medical, fashion, photojournalism, advertising, to mention a few. Dominick, (2009) asserts that an image can speak volume of words if well composed. In 1935, Dorothea Lange snapped a picture of a starving migrant farm worker at a farm in California during the great depression. The terrible condition in which the farmer and his family lived the photograph revealed and the accompanying news coverage caused the government of President Franklin Roosevelt to rush food aid to the starving workers. (Dave, 2010).

Photojournalists are documenting events around the world, bringing photographs of important events to the public within minutes of their occurrence. Photos give important information about the subjects photographed (Bruce, 2002). It is true that photographs speak a universal language however, it should be acknowledged that not everyone is visually literate. One who is not visually literate will not be able to decode a visual message encoded say on a billboard or a farmer's manual. Ndahi, (2004) noted that in Nigeria, visual instructional materials have gained acceptance and wide application especially in disseminating information and new innovations in agriculture to grassroots farmers. The challenge here is whether or not the predominantly less literate farmer in northern Nigeria is able to decode "how to" visual instructions embedded in the design of farm instructional materials or whether students understand technical illustrations in books or target audience of billboards grasp the visual messages encoded or not is indeed a matter of concern. (Kress and Van Leeuwen, in Dave, 2012) developed a visual framework which suggests that images can be understood to be drawing as a variety of meaning -making resources grouped as:

> *"representational meanings (where actions, events, and symbolic concepts are shown in an image), interpersonal meanings(where relationships are constructed between the viewer and -what is being viewed using resources such as high or low angles, use of colour, and shot distances), and organizational meanings (where compositional layout choices influences an image) " (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, in Dave, 2012)*

Those who create visual images do so with a purpose in mind using certain techniques, to understand such visual composition, the target audience should be able to understand the technique used and the purpose. This is necessary because visual literacy is about creating and analyzing visual messages as they are often intended to influence and persuade the target audience. Visual literacy to a large extent depends on level of education, which in Nigeria the level of illiteracy is high compared to other parts of the world. (UNESCO, 2005 in Dave, 2005) reported that Nigeria's illiteracy rate is 25% adult male, and 40% adult female, by extension,

visual illiteracy in Nigeria can be said to be 65% resulting from a poor educational system. This situation poses great challenge to visual message encoders (Graphic designers and photojournalism) who construct visual information at various levels using images of all sorts. Photography is given emphasis in this discussion for the vital role it plays in the effective construct of visual information as opposed to* text. (Frank, in Dave, 2005) suggested five photographic techniques of image composition for encoding and understanding visual messages, they are:

Angle: which has to do with the vantage point or direction from which the artist photographs the subject.

Framing: deals with the decision as to where the edges of the image will be, the photograph determines what will and what will not, that is whether it should be close up or zoom back. Frank also believes that **light** is one of the most powerful tools of the photographer. The interplay of light and dark and the sharpness of contrast between light and dark contribute to the mood a photograph conveys.

Focus is another technique used in communication photography suggested by Frank, he notes that clarity or blurrness of the image ranges between the nearest and farthest things that appear in clear focus which defines the photograph's depth of field.

Composition is the fifth photographic technique that Frank suggested. He raises a number of questions such as; what is in the foreground? Are the elements arranged in any particular pattern? Is the visual weight balanced? (Dave, 2005)

In light of the above analogy, a graphic designer, (Erin Riesland, 2005, in Dave, 2005) suggested that when encoding a visual message, the encoder should raise certain pertinent questions and find answers to them, such as; What am I looking at?, What does this image mean to me?, What is the relationship between the image and the displayed text message?, How is this message effective?. An individual's ability to interpret photographic images depends on a number of factors such as; training in photography which enhances an individual's ability to frame, compose, and control depth of field, focus and so on.

Encoding and decoding visual messages

The effectiveness of photography in advertising has been well proven and is today nearly omnipresent. Bruce, (2002) noted that hardly could there be a billboard visual message today that does not employ photography. The encoding of a visual message is a delicate exercise that requires an in-depth knowledge of the basic elements and principles of design with which the message is carefully encoded in a manner that it addresses all categories of target audiences. Arens (2005) opined that the construction of such visual language must be all encompassing to take care of both the semantic and artistic content so that the target audience will not in any way be misled or mis-informed. Elements of design such as; line, texture, color, tone, shape, space, pictures, etc. are creatively manipulated by the use of the principles of design; harmony, proportion, rhythm, variety, contrast, emphasis, balance (symmetrical and asymmetrical), to a make a visual statement that will be understood by all manners of audiences irrespective of their income, educational backgrounds, culture/belief, socio-political and religious inclinations as well as their visual literacy.

Encoding a visual language that takes care of these psychological variables is indeed tasking. Eno (2010) notes that the encoder of any visual message must bear in mind these variables and that the advert of certain products or information may be more stimulating than others. For

example, advertising nude fashion wears in Sokoto State where the population is 90 percent Muslim and where Sharia law operates may generate some level of tension. Such advert must be designed in a way that the visual message will not infringe on the socio-cultural and religious belief of the target audience in the state. On the other hand, the encoding of semi-nude fashion wear may or may not generate any serious tension in states like Lagos, Edo, Plateau, or Akwa-Ibom.

This is not to say that those states have lost their moral values, rather, their level of exposure to Western life style is comparably higher. Arens, (2006) is of the opinion that designers should not be concerned with the interaction of words and images only; they must also be concerned with the interaction between the audience, the content of the communication, and the outcome of the design. In order to create dialogues that effectively persuade the viewer to adopt a new belief or change behavior; the communication designer should not rely on his intuition. He went on to explain further that designers have to devise methods for creating empathy with the viewer who will play a part in constructing meaning from the message. Sylvester (2010) supports Arens's view by suggesting that encoders of visual messages should have adequate knowledge of existing visual communication models such as; Bower's Action Research Model, Lasswell Formula, Beal and Meehans's knowledge production/utilization model, Hurlbburt's model of the creative process, McGuire's communication/persuasion matrix, Aaker and Myers model of the perception process, etc. He argued that the knowledge of these models will enhance the encoder's creative process and in turn make his campaign materials audience friendly. Sylvester further suggested pre test and evaluation of communication materials be conducted before the finished advert is presented to the target audience. While the encoding of an effective visual language is dependent upon a sound knowledge of elements and principles of design and creativity, the decoding of such messages by the target audience is also dependent upon certain variables.

The ability of an individual to decode any visual message depends on certain variables; the manner in which the message is constructed, level of education/ exposure, level of visual literacy, frame of mind of the target audience at the moment, etc. The graphic encoder is expected to meet the challenges posed by these variables, the decoder on the other hand should endeavor to construct meaning out of the encoded graphic language, his ability to adequately interpret the message depends largely on the content construct of the billboard which is usually the task of the designer to ensure that the concept of the design is simple and straight to the point, that is "successfully done", then the other variables are left to the-decoder. That is his level of education/exposure, and visual literacy will play significant role in his ability to decode the visual message.

Photo based messages

Photography is relevant and crucial to our lives in so many different ways. We use it to document our lives, create beautiful, meaningful pieces of art, and express our feelings. It is used to inform the public and increase their awareness of current events. Photographs have the effect that words do not and speak universal language that breaks the bounds of culture and other barriers, their messages are usually understood "by all" regardless of any possible dichotomy or cultural divide. The . starvation photographs below are examples of pictures whose messages are weighty. No poet could possibly construct or interpret contextually the emotions these pictures

are capable of generating in the minds of people who see them. Tens of pages could be written by the best poet on starvation, his diction, rich as it may be, the pictures will speak for themselves better than the poet's words for two simple reasons: The less literate are cut off, and two, the contours of starvation that makes up the facial expression of the starving individual cannot be expressed in text and still create the same impact. This tally well with the Chinese proverb which says "what I read I forget, but what I see I remember". Whoever sees the photograph of the starving boy (plate 1.) needs no further explanation, the picture speaks for itself. The gravity of the situation manifest in the fleshless skeleton of the victim.



Plate 1: Starving boy (Net news, 2012)



Plate 2:Mother and Starving baby (Net news, 2012)

"The United Nations Food and Agriculture division says one in twelve people worldwide is (sic) malnourished, including 160 million children under the age of Jive. Other statistics say between six and eleven million children starve to death each year" (Netnews, 2012).

The gravity of the above statement which refers to the plate 2 above, can only be imagined, the picture brings to bear the depth of the situation more than words. One can see the condition of the baby and imagine what the mother is going through which words cannot express.



Plate 3: My Wedding day (African American Wedding Net news, 2012)

Plate 3, "My wedding day" depicts a different scenario; it is a picture of a newly wedded couple, standing in front of the church where the wedding took place. No poet could possibly capture in text form the joy embedded in their hearts, nor could he describe impeccably the feelings and expressions on their faces better than the photograph. Little wonder that photo journalists strongly believe that pictures are worth thousands of words.

> *"It is the light, it is the curl in the corners of the mouth, the sparkle in the eyes, and the unedited and untainted laughter. It is a child that does not yet understand the meaning of poverty. It is the child that has not yet seen the violence and destruction so prevalent in the world. It is the child that lost their mother to AIDS or child birthing complications, yet remains joyous and youthful despite the suffering. Dignity: The quality or state of being worthy of esteem or respect" (Net news, 2012).*



Plate 4: Laughing girls Uganda, (Net news, 2009)

The above quotation is an attempt to explain the situation and possibly of the subjects in plate 4 (the laughing girls in Uganda). The author attempts to spark off emotional feelings contextually projecting into an unknown bleak future that the subjects were sure to confront. On the other hand, the picture tells a different story narrated by it.

Photography in photojournalism

A journalist constructs stories, a photographer captures pictures of nouns: people, places and things and photojournalist take the best of both and uses it to enhance the quality of his story and importantly too, uses his photos to create conviction. Mayo, (2008) notes that photojournalism is today of the same status as all other forms of journalism. It is part of the daily stream of information and to which readers have a critical attitude. He went on to say that photojournalists must take on the role of storytelling rather than seeing themselves as illustrators of articles.

Recent studies in Eye-tracking where computers follow the movements of a reader's eyes over the page, show that a photograph is the best eye-catcher and the most used entry point to reading an article. Photographs create interest for the article and often make the article more valuable in the eyes of the reader. Mayo, (2008) is of the view that in telling a story, a sentence needs a subject, verb, and a direct object. In the same vein, news photos need the same construction. Photojournalists tell stories with their images and words are often used together to emphasize a point.

Role of photography in advertisement

Photography plays a significant role in encoding visual messages of billboard adverts. Gulbin, (2008) says that "photos are like adds (sic) in that glancing moment to trap the reader. If a photo is interesting enough, the reader will stop to it and read the caption and if the interest stays there the title of the article is read next." He went on to note that only 5% of readers read an article but almost all the photos get noticed. Juha elaborates further, "the basic reasoning for the above is that people are buzy (sic) and fundamentally lazy. We seek information via the way which is the most effortless. The conclusion is that photos are of primary importance when selling magazines". Gulbin's views underpin the role of photography in billboard advertisement

particularly in a country like Nigeria where large chunk of the population is not literate (UNESCO, in Dave, 2005). Hence, photo based information in desirable. Photographs are certainly powerful medium for non-verbal communication in advertising rather than in photojournalism. Photography has given designers the choice to enhance advertising design in many ways. Different images such as action shots, still-life, fashion, etc, are used to create adverts that aimed to promote and sail new products.

Conclusion

Photography has undoubtedly found relevance in all spheres of life, as it enhances the understanding of text messages, create conviction, impress memory and interest in the print media. Photography is playing significant role in corporate promotion and product marketing, above all, it enhances visual literacy. Photography has become an indispensible global phenomenon.

References

Arens, Williams (2005). Contemporary Advertising: Chicago. Irwin Inc.

Bruce, G.V.B. and Helen, K. (1999). Advertising Principles: Choice, Challenge, and Change. NTC Publishing Group.

Dave Gray (2005). Visual Literacy. International Society for Technology in Education and Media Literacy. Iste@iste.org.www.iste.org. Accessed in June 2, 2012.

Dominick, J.R. (2007). Dynamics of Mass Communication: Media in the Digital Age. USA: McGraw Hill.

Eno Edem, Uak G. Mbaba, Alice Udosen and Enang Patricia Isioma, (2010). Literacy in Primary and Secondary Education in Nigeria, http://www.acadimjournals.og/JLC Accessed on June 2, 2012.

Gulbin J. (2008). Digital Photography: from ground up. Canada. Friesen Corporation.

Juha (2006). Photography in Advertising.

Lester, P.M. (2011). Visual Communication: Images with Messages. Boston, USA. West View Press.

Mayo.B (2008). The role of Photography in Photojournalism http://www/ psnews.net/news.asp?dnews-54119 Accessed on June, 2, 2012.

Ndahi Paul Ajayi (2004). A Survey of Visual Aids Design Production, Usage, and Evaluation in Enhancing Trainning and Capacity Building. Unpublished MA Thesis. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Susanne Stokes, (2012).Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning, http://eric.ed.gov/ERICweb Potal/search/simple. Accessed in 2012.

Ebigbagba, Z.S. (2010). Graphic Encoding Choices in Development Communication. Unpublished PhD. Dissertation. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria