Review of the Visual Communication Approach of the Publication Unit of Ahmadu Bello University

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of visual communication designs published by the Public Affairs Unit of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria on the target population, with a view towards developing a prototype visual communications resource that would sen>e as a medium for publicizing the university's undergraduate programmes, using perceptive principles of design that are capable of strongly impacting on prospective students. In line with the principles of the Functional Context Learning Paradigm, an informed awareness led the study to the development of an undergraduate prospectus in print mode, based on the variables of typography, images and colours highlighted in the statement of the problem. The study explored a descriptive analysis to delineate the visual content which later guided the entire redesign procedure before administering them to respondents (prospective students) in clusters of focus groups. The results obtained from the analysis revealed that in spite of the limited media of advertising university courses, richly designed prospectuses seemed to be the preferred medium for educating and informing prospective students, their parents and guardians as well as the general public of the structure of the undergraduate programmes. The study concluded that visual communications materials that incorporated crispy digital images, simple array of page layout and appropriate usage of colours can have great impact on the target audience.

Keywords: Graphic Design, Information, Publicity, ABU, Undergraduate Prospectus, Colour, Layout

Introduction

Background of the Study

The publication unit of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) is a specialised unit in the Registry department charged with the strategic responsibility of circulating information within and outside the University, using various media such as telephone, fax, TV, posters, prospectuses, joumals, bulletins, calendars and more recently, the World Wide Web (www).

The Public Affairs Directorate of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria started in 1975, as a small unit under the Registry called Information Office with a few intermediate and junior staff, with the Deputy Registrar, as the head. The basic functions of the unit then were mainly to publish and distribute information pamphlets for the University within the two campuses at Samaru and Kongo. The office saw major changes in its structure and functions between 1986 and 1989 when the office was changed to Information and Protocol Unit. The unit was upgraded to a full-fledged department in 2006 (www.abu.edu.ng/centreinstitute/). Five units were created out of the department to handle critical and key functions such as protocol, public relations, immigrations, ceremonies, information and publications. The Public Affairs Department was later transferred to the Registry (www.abu.edu.ng).

After a study tour to some universities, the Head of Department recommended the return of the Department to the Vice Chancellor's office. The Vice Chancellor obliged to the recommendations and further upgraded the Public Affairs office to the level of a Directorate in 2013. To cope with the new status, the Public Affairs Directorate is currently making efforts to establish cadres and structures that would professionalize its services, which includes: Press Relations, Community Relations, Designing, Implementing, Managing and Content Development of News Items and Social Media sites for University's Website (www.abu.edu.ng).

In addition to the Internet, all the media sources listed above are still very effective in most developed Nations. In the case of ABU, the Internet has become the media that has represented a significant chunk of the total information circulated by the University despite the low patronage of Internet among Nigerians and Africans in general. Regional differences are quite significant as 86.9 percent and 70.4 percent of North Americans and Europeans respectively are on the Internet, compared to only 25.9 percent of Africans which have significantly grown from 9.6 percent in 2010 as observed by Toure (2014) in "Number of Internet Users", International Telecommunication Union.

The most recent plan in the reorganisation transition of the Public Affairs Directorate is to overhaul the entire central operating unit of the Registry to enhance communications, good span of control, quick and quality decisions as well as quick implementation with good results and feedback. Quality assurance and ethical practices are the overall strategic goals and major concern in the reorganisation of the ABU registry as mandated at the I24th , 139th and 141st meetings of the Governing Council held in February 2007, April 2010 and November 2010 respectively (ABU Special Bulletin, 13th April 2011). The simplicity and functionality of the structure is expected to provide an instinctive inspiration from the Head of unit down to the other members of staff. The staff becomes reliable and trusted to exercise a good degree of initiative and relative autonomy to take proactive actions based on established order. The various units under the registry have been designed to handle specific areas of operations, responsibilities and scope.

Other field units are also designed to execute this specific responsibilities as dictated by specific functionalities, within the structure. However, managers are placed to strategically handle units and the effectiveness of the structure this depends entirely on the ability of the managers to work as a team with efficient coordination. This situation analysis calls for the need to further investigate the functional issues raised in this study's background, with a view to proffer practical graphic solutions using the perceptive concepts and theories drawn from the review of literature.

Statement of the Problem

The ABU Special Bulletin, (April 13, 2011) reported that the information and publication unit specifically does not have a well organised modem operating procedure that would enhance flow of communication, good span of information/communications control, and expected results with a significant feedback. Telephone, fax, TV, Video, posters, prospectuses, journals, bulletins, calendars, maps and the Internet are the various media prescribed by the publication unit for circulating information; unfortunately, most of these sources have not been effectively harnessed except for journals, special bulletins and the Internet.

Through a thrifty situation analysis, from a pilot study conducted on the information, unit of ABU Zirra (2015), observed that the university maps and undergraduate prospectuses are the visual communication materials that are completely out of publication and production despite the continuous impact maps and prospectuses make globally. Prospectuses in particular were last published in 1984/1986. From 1986, there have been noticeable and tremendous global developments in the area of design, printing, products and digital equipment which have transformed the layout of visual communication materials entirely. As such, prospectuses and all other visual communication materials ought to be regularly redesigned, reproduced and circulated to their consumers.

Apart from being obviously outdated, the existing edition of the undergraduate prospectus has some shortfalls, and does not seem to represent modem graphic and visual communications standards. When viewed at a glance, one perceives a lack of aesthetic appeal because of the poor design concepts of the document's layout. The design layout of the prospectus has four glaring features that summarise its flaws.

- The absence of colours;
- The low quality of images;
- The improper use of typographic elements; and
- Low paper and print quality

Based on this informed awareness within a functional context, the state of ABU prospectus raises the need to redesign a visual communications resource for advertising undergraduate programmes.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to assess the impact of visual communication design through exploring solutions with design tools, theories and perceptual principles; while the objectives are to:

(i) Assess the quality of the visual communication materials adopted by the Publication unit of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria;

(ii) Examine the impact of the visual communication materials on the target audience;

(iii) Develop a prototype design template of an undergraduate prospectus for Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Researeh Questions

From the-problcms and objectives of this study, the following researeh questions are raised:

(i) What is the quality of the existing ABU prospectus produced by the publication unit of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria?

(ii) How have the visual communication materials impacted on the target audience and what results have they actually produced?

(iii) What principal elements and principles of design are essential in developing a prototype of ABU Undergraduate prospectus?

Significance of the Study

Redesigning 1ayout concepts and prototype of an undergraduate prospectus for Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria will:

(i) Sensitise prospective students of academic and extra-curricular options available through the use of an effective prospectus dissemination

(ii) Help the University to further advertise her key selling points by a way of redesign of its undergraduate prospectus with a view to reaching out to more prospective students.

Justification of the Study

Through an informed awareness, it was observed that a lot of prospective undergraduates find difficulties in accessing relevant information pertaining to university programmes due to insufficient information. Based on this informed awareness within a functional context, redesigning, developing and circulating visual communications materials that would function as the lead advertising tool for undergraduate programmes, will also project the culture, environment, social life, sports facilities and several activities that will sustainably inform and educate prospective students, parents and visitors about A.B.U.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

Layout principles that enhance the appeal of visual communication materials come into play in a wide range of media such as print, broadcast, the Internet, outdoor advertising, and way findings, to mention a few. Each aspect of these visual communication designs is broad in its own sense. As such, the scope of this study is delimited to the print and publication design templates for an undergraduate prospectus for Ahmadu Bello University Zaria.

Literature Review

Introduction

The review of literature identified and discussed some fundamental concepts and history of visual communications, elements and perceptive principles that govern publication design in general. The theory of combining typography and image together with other formal elements of design (line, Shape, Colour) discussed how Visual Communications can enhance the conveyance of message quickly, easily, reliably and clearly, especially when digitally ordered with computer and layout design softwares. These ideas were drawn from the works of Cheatham and Owens (-1987), Lawson (1990), Labuz (1993), Tscichold (1995), Dakyes (1999), Lidwell (2003), Evans (2003), Ryan and Conovcr (2004) Buser (2006) and Sale (2010) and they mainly constituted the theoretical framework of this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theories are fundamentally hinged on the Shanon model of communication as well as LidweTs theory of the effectiveness of text and images in Visual Communications. Ryan and Conover (2004) observed that communications is as old as man, but the communications model has over the years remained fundamentally the same in terms of flow of idea from one source to another source, (from sender to receiver) and from receiver back to sender, holding that the two-way process of communication can only be efficient if it flows along five component parts (Sender, message, medium receiver and feedback) to ensure that the message was understood.

The various design theories in the literature reviewed were the theoretical phenomena that were systematically engaged as guiding principles in redesigning layouts for the A.B.U. Undergraduate Prospectus.

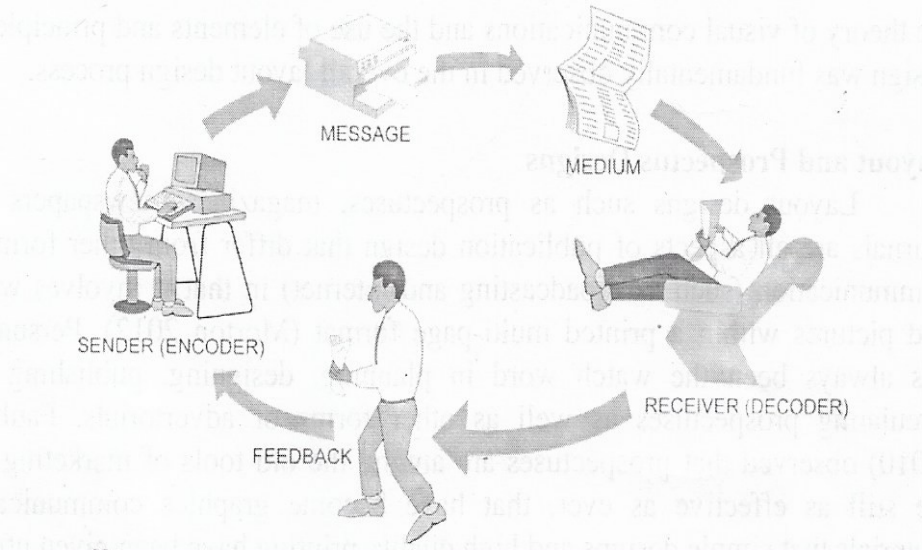

Figure 1: *Shannon Weaver Concept of Information flow.*
Source: Redrawn from Ryan and Conover (2004) Graphic communications today, 4th edition.

Conceptual framework

The schematic diagram which shows the variables included in the study, discusses Miles & Hubennan's (1994) conceptual framework which explains either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied the key factors, constructs or variables - and the presumed relationships among them.

This study specifically explored the Functional Context Learning Paradigm (FCLP), an idea which mainly helped to identify a problem within a given environment and proffer practical solutions to the problems identified. Sticht (1985) in Tibekiiem (2011) observed that the functional context approach emphasises the significance of making solutions relevant to the experience of learners and their work setting

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The finding of new information was facilitated by making it possible for the designer to relate it to knowledge already possessed and transformed old knowledge. The developed visual communication design was done creatively using computer skills and transferred from the confines of the studio to the "real world" where it was enhanced. The FCLP served as a guide

in articulating the design variables listed in the problem of statement, while the theory of visual communications and the use of elements and principles of design was fundamentally observed in the overall layout design process.

Layout and Prospectus Designs

Layout designs such as prospectuses, magazines, newspapers and journals are all aspects of publication design that differ from other forms of communication (such as broadcasting and internet) in that it involves words and pictures within a printed multi-page format (Morton 2012). Persuasion has always been the watch word in planning, designing, publishing and circulating prospectuses as well as other forms of advertorials. Faulkner (2010) observed that prospectuses are among the old tools of marketing that are still as effective as ever, that have become graphics communication materials that simple designs and high quality printing have been given utmost priority to attract and possibly persuade prospective users. Colours can also make a design conspicuous, cheerful and stimulating. Donahue (1978) stated that layout aitists prefer to design their layout works in colours because colours are emotional and subjective elements that affect intuition and very likely to persuade.

Images are a large component in the redesign phase. The adage that a picture is worth a thousand words applies to advertorials and other forms of visual communications especially an institution's website and in the layout of its prospectus. Therefore, institutions need to employ imagery in advertising their programmes periodically and succinctly. The image content needs to be very attractive; otherwise an audience may be put off the school entirely. Attractive imagery from around A.B.U. were shot and used as part of the design element explored together with colour and typography. The International Style suggests a preference for photography in place of illustrations or drawings to portray reality more strongly. Lidwell (2003) acknowledged that "Pictures are generally more easily recognised and recalled than words, although memory for pictures and words together is superior to memory for words alone or pictures alone" (p152).

This study also leveraged on exploring the Functional Context Learning Paradigm (FCLP) which basically entails the identification of problem within an environment and proffering practical solutions to the problems identified. In exploring acquired technical graphic skills, backed by an informed awareness of the FCLP, Yakubu (2011) suggested that the learning activities (creativity, execution resourcefulness to achieve compelling results) should be geared towards practical outcomes, and should relate to real functional contexts to foster practical solutions to problems.

The entire lay out procedure was executed using both freehand sketches for conceptualization and computer design software to order the layouts. The conventional design practices come with a whole lot of disadvantages. For instance; accurate rendering and arrangement of shapes, types and images can be extremely time-consuming and any change in design might call for an overhaul of the entire process. Also, less work is achieved with greater effort, making the entire procedure of drafting and completing a design layout quite longer than using computers and digital devices. The advent of computers introduced the era of digital designs, making images, texts and symbols highly manipulative.

Summary

The review of literature was gleaned from the background of visual communications, history and principles of print layouts, visual elements and perceptive principles of layout organization, as well as the role of computers in modern graphics design. Also visual

elements in layout designs, typography, imagery, aesthetics, branding and the role of computer technology in designing visual communication resources were the general theories that guided the entire research.

Researeh Methodology

Researeh Design

This study design is primarily based on a descriptive analysis to address the problems of the visual content of the existing A.B.U. prospectus in particular (against the proposed document layout and template design). This approach of analysing communication materials is preferred to the historical, experimental or scientific researeh alternatives because of the nature of the problem. This process requires identifying, describing, analysing and interpreting existing visual communications materials. Layout designs were conducted in the studio. Manual and digital means were used to reorganise visual elements using computer technology to reorganise a range of variables: process colours, typography, images and good print quality.

The description of the problem of this study highlighted some of the challenges encumbering the quality of print and publication materials of the publication unit, especially the design concepts, in the existing undergraduate prospectus. In this study, practical attempts were made to redress the design concepts of the visual materials in the existing ABU, Zaria undergraduate prospectus with a view to come up with a more appealing prototype design, guided by the elements and principles of design earlier acknowledged in the review of literature.

Population and Sampling

The population sampled in this study constituted of 3 clusters of prospective students seeking admissions to Nigerian universities. A total of one hundred and ninety respondents were sampled in the study. The selection was done purposively and clustered into focus groups often respondents per group, based on those that volunteered to participate in the study. The First cluster was a selection of prospective students whom were drawn from A.B.U. Demonstration Secondary School (DSS), the second and third clusters were then purposively selected from across the twelve faculties in A.B.U. to achieve an evenly spread opinion from across the university. While the third cluster constituted of students undergoing diploma and other Pre degree **courses** to obtain their responses (in their opinions) on how they had gone about seeking and gaining admissions into higher institutions of learning. Respondents were selected from clusters, based on availability and volunteering,

Data Collection

Relevant data were sought using the various researeh instruments designed for this study. Data such as historical accounts of Ahmadu Bello University, undergraduate programmes offered, mode of entry, registration procedure, extracurricular activities of the university were sought from staff of the ABU publication unit, ABU website (www.abu.ng.edu), Academic Planning and the Student's Affairs Division of ABU were used as the typographic element in the layout designs. The developed prospectus was then shown to the prospective students in Focused Groups to seek their opinions on the possibility of its acceptance and also persuade them on the need to advertise university programmes in such visual communications resources.

Instrumentation and Instrument Validation
The instruments used for data collection included a set of open ended questionnaires and unstructured interviews that were administered in Focus Groups. These instruments were administered to respondents in focus groups during the pilot and the main study. For the effectiveness of the entire process of navigation, grammar, readability, and clarity from the viewpoint of persons that are not familiar with the content, the instruments were evaluated by the researcher's Post Graduate supervisors, who are seasoned scholars on the subject matter.

Data Analysis and Presentation
Introduction
This aspect presents the statistical analysis of the responses on assessing the impact of visual communications approach of the publication unit of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The tables present the total outcome of responses from the clusters that made up the study population.

Analysis of Layout Designs
The entire process of redesigning the prospectus layouts started with the process of making sketches, then making rough designs before going ahead to design the comprehensive designs. Samples of the thumbnail sketches are presented on Figures 2, 3, and 4. This procedure involved using pencil and pen on paper to produce drafts of ideas and perceived concepts after which they were developed to the images presented on Figures 5, and 6.
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After preliminary sketches were made, Corel Draw and Adobe Photoshop softwares were used to graphically render and modify the layout designs of the proposed prospectus layouts. The concepts of the layouts laid emphasis on design principles and theories gleaned from the review of related literature that enhances visual communications. This approach of following design standards were in direct contrast with the manual design approach used in the former layout designs. The comprehensive designs were then carried out using computer design softwares and presented on Plates I, II, III and IV.

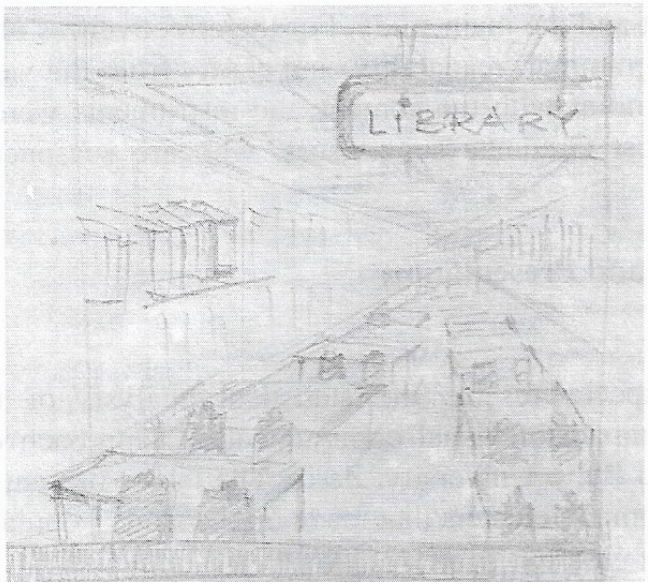

Figure 2: *Thumb Nail Sketch for Prospectus Layouts,*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*

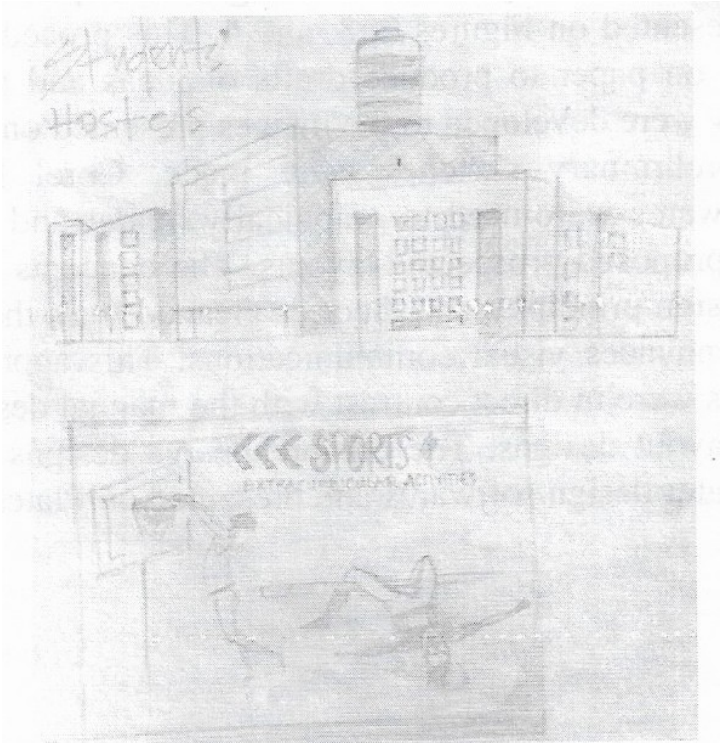

Figure 3: *Thumb Nail Sketch for Prospectus Layouts*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*

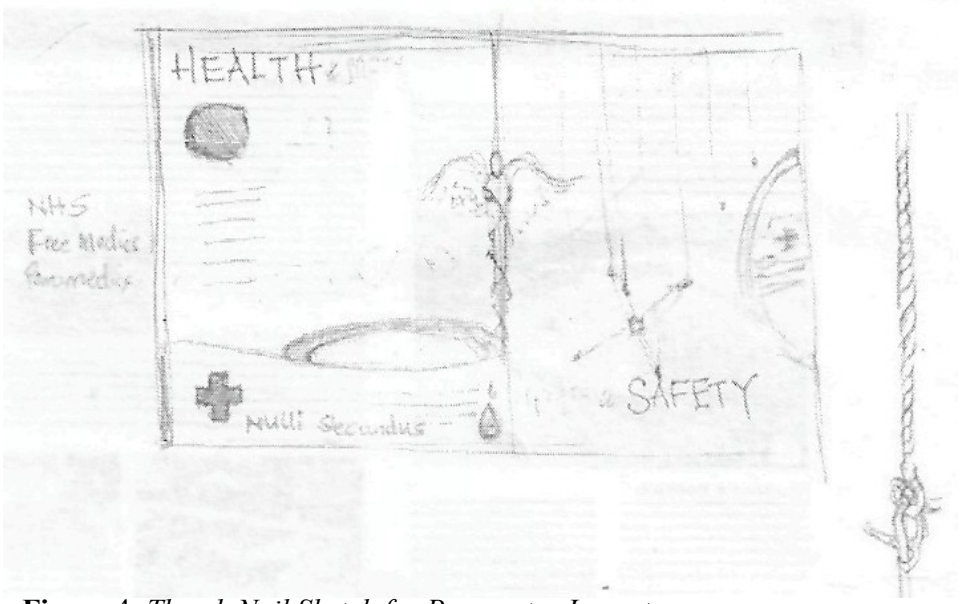

Figure 4: *Thumb Nail Sketch for Prospectus Layouts*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*

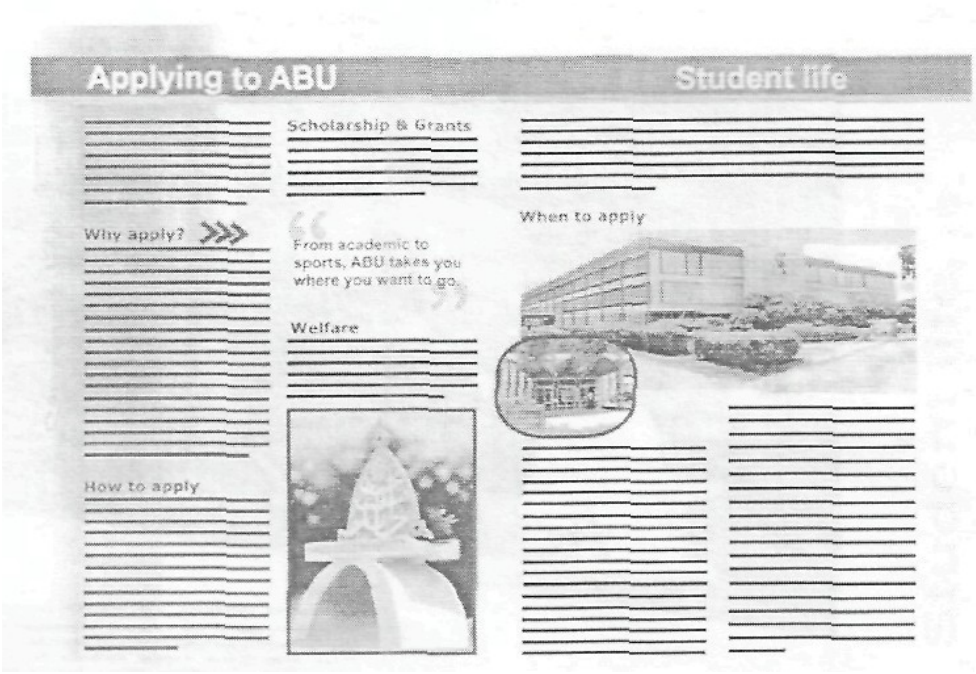

Figure *5*: *Preliminary Computer Swatch, for Prospectus Layouts*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*

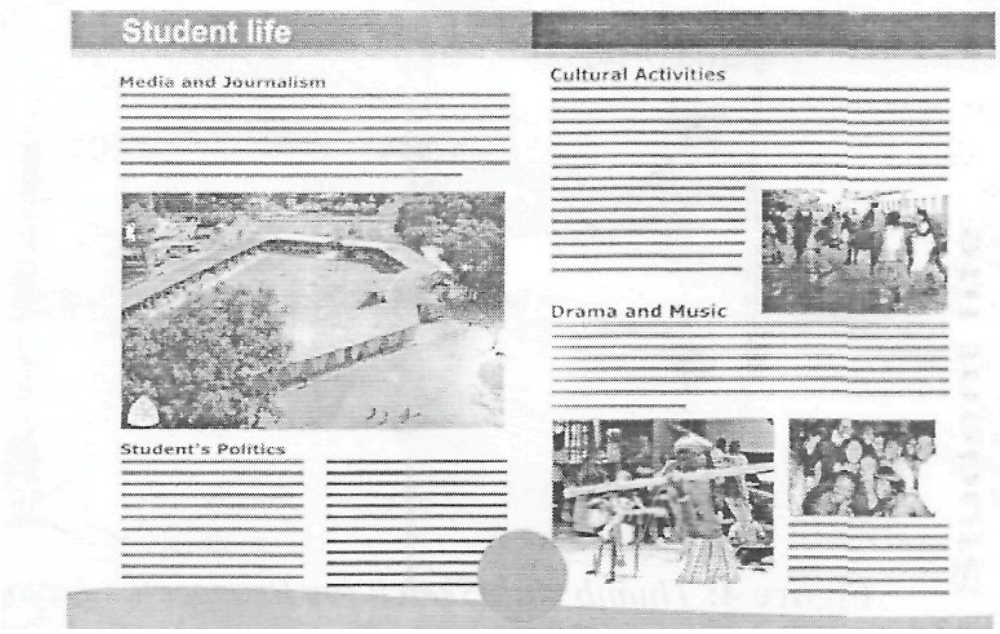

Figure 6: *Preliminary Computer Swatch, for Prospectus Layouts*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*



Plate I: *Pages from the Redesigned Prospectus (Centre Spread Design Containing Image from the University ICT Centre.*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*



Plate II: *Inner Page Layouts.*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*

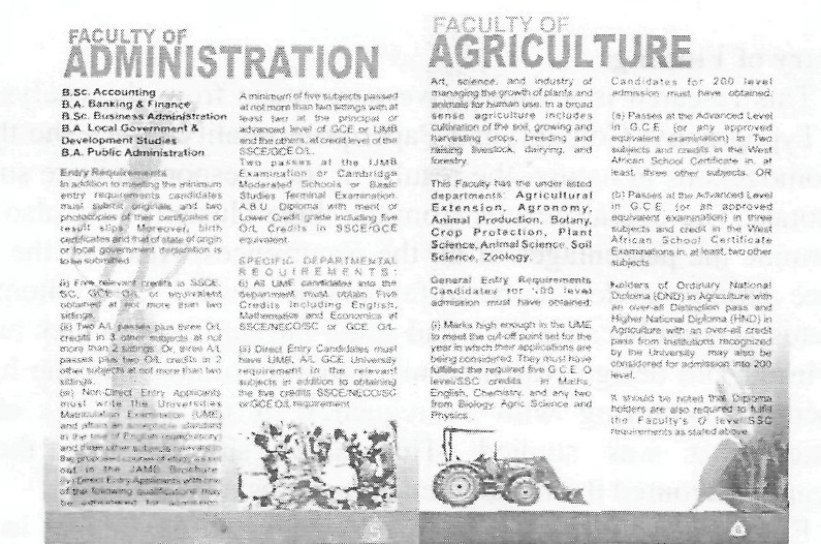

Plate III: *Inner Page Spread (Faculty of Administartion and Agriculture)*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*

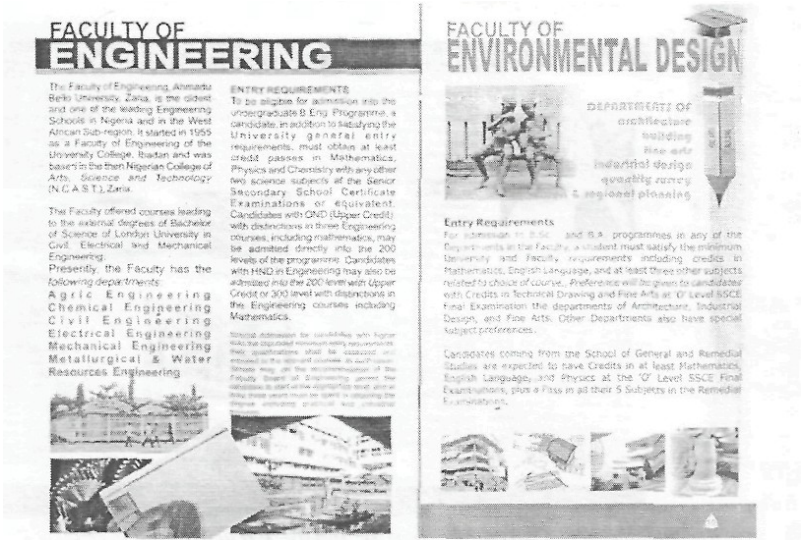

Plate IV: *Inner Page Spread (Faculty of Engineering & Env.Design)*
Source: *(Original Design by Bonaventure Zirra 2012)*

Summary of Findings

This researeh is a cumulative percentage from the analyses of Image usage; Typography; Colours; and Paper/print quality. Since the three clusters were homogenous in nature, the results of their responses were summed up in group totals. The overall results from the three clusters were also summed up to determine the percentages of all the occurrences. Also, all the results from the three groups tended to be unfavourable toward the content of the old prospectus version because they had some fair and poor scores but the use of colour in the old design was the only variable to have had the highest "very poor scores" occurring with a frequency of 67 (40.6 *%)* of the entire population that was studied. The tables showed that the responses significantly favoured the redesigned prospectus more.

Fifteen respondents in the first cluster rated the images in the existing prospectus as poor, 84 in cluster B and 4 in cluster C making a sum total of 103 respondents (62.42%). The use of typography was also rated poorly as a total of 43% rated it poor while only 35.15% rated it to be fair. In the use of colours, 53.9%' of the respondents rated the colour usage to be poor while 40.6% rated it to be very poor.

The second researeh question'sought to find out how those publication materials impacted on the target audience and what results have they actually produced. The scope of the study focused basically on prospectus which was no longer in production. The results significantly showed that the variables (Images, Typography, and colours) highlighted in the old prospectus, were generally poor. The redesigned prospectus shown to the respondents adopted the Claude Shannon's model of communication concept which demonstrated flow of information from the sender to the receiver-through a medium, and back to the sender. After the initial studio based design procedure, a formative evaluation of the layouts, most of the respondents embraced the idea. The results from the focus group discussion generally show that the redesigned prospectus was persuasive enough to visually communicate university programmes as well as other extra-curricular options. Some respondents also suggested that they would also like soft-copies of redesigned prospectus sent to them, as well as recommend copies to prospective friends.

The last researeh question sought to know what principal elements and principles of design are essential in developing a prototype of ABU Undergraduate prospectus. In the review of literature, Lidwell (2006) affirmed the positive combination of imagery and typography and how it impacts on an audience, a conscious combination of both images and types was a guiding factor in the studio procedure of designing the layout templates which made respondents like the redesigned prospectus more. The assessment of the typographic elements showed that the non-serif and grid proved to be more legible, appealing and communicative as observed by Wallschlaeger and Snyder (2002). In the redesigned layout designs, digital images were used to replace the illustrations of the existing design. In addressing the problems of halftones observed in the existing layout designs, Devries and Rosen (2002) affirmed that digital images store bits and pixels in binary codes that aid digital display.

Also, the theory of combining text and images appeared to be very relevant in exploring such VC materials. This theory further affirms the statement of Lidwell (2003) noting that the impact of combining text and images supersedes that of using only images or only text in a layout design. Relevant digital photographs of Buildings, equipment and campus activities were taken within the two campuses of ABU (Samaru and Kongo campuses) and were used as supporting graphics for the layout templates. All layout designs were then executed using computer and computer design programmes (CorelDraw and Photoshop). The developed visual communication design was done creatively; using computer skills and transferred from the confines of the studio to the "real world" where it was enhanced.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

In the statement of the problem, this study observed a functional graphic issue in the Publication Unit of the Ahmadu Bello University Registry. The problems were directly related to the design and publication of printed visual communication materials with particular leference to undergraduate prospectuses. The variables specifically highlighted were typography, images and colours of the existing prospectus which the objectives of the study offered practical graphic solutions using the theories and concepts gleaned from the review of literature.

Summary
The finding of new information as specified in the A.B.U. special bulletin made it possible for the designer to relate it to the design knowledge already possessed by transforming it into new knowledge of the redesigned layouts through exploring the concept of a Functional Context Learning Paradigm (FCLP).

The objectives of the study was drawn from the background of the problem, and supported by relevant literature that discussed theories and perceptive principles of layout and publication designs. The Bauhaus style, layout and prospectus design styles, aesthetic relevance, branding and the role of computer in design layout by combining typography, digital images together with other formal elements of design (line, Shape, Colour) revealed how visual communications can be enhanced and perceived quickly, clearly and reliably.

The study used a descriptive approach to explain its content. Samples of layout styles of prospectuses and other visual communications materials were randomly selected from within and outside A.B.U. to determine their design concepts. After that, a formative evaluation was done on these materials and some of them were considered in the redesigning procedures. The layout designs were developed with the aid of graphic design softwares, after which professional graphic designers were approached to make certain suggestions by assessing the designs by a way of formative evaluation.

In the results from the analysis of the redesigned prospectus, no single respondent rated image usage, typography, and colours under the 'very poor' and 'poor' category. The respondents showed favourable responses toward the redesigned prospectus. Tables 4.2 to 4.5 present the summary of all the responses and the results implied that the respondents significantly preferred and recommended the redesigned prospectus.

Conclusion
The aim of this study was set out to develop a prototype prospectus for undergraduate studies in A.B.U. Based on conceptual issues in graphic design, the idea of a Functional Context Learning Paradigm was explored in assessing ihe impact of visual communications approach of i;he public Affairs Unit of the A.B.U. registry.

The reviewed literature gathered concepts that cut across design elements and perceptive principles that govern publication and layout design in general. In the results from the analysis of the redesigned prospectus, no single respondent rated image usage, typography, and colours under the 'very poor' and 'poor' category. The respondents showed favourable responses toward the redesigned prospectus. Results of the study showed that respondents[1] attempts to assess the tise of Images; Typography; Colours; and Paper/print quality in the old and redesigned prospectus showed that the scores were significantly unfavourable to the content of the old prospectus version, while the responses favoured the redesigned prospectus layouts. Respondents significantly preferred the redesigned prospectus and recommended that such publications should be continually reproduced and circulated to prospective students.

The study revealed that prospectuses are still very much a prolific advertising medium for informing prospective students about Universities and their programmes and they are still very much effective especially in the developed countries. After analysing the data retrieved in this study, the results significantly inferred that there is a penchant need to continually redesign, publish and distribute prospectuses to intending students for advertising university courses. This assertion was determined from the data analysis section which significantly

showed that an effective use of a prospectus can actually influence specific advertisements of universities and programmes offered.

Recommendations

This study raised some obvious design problems that were discovered in the print publications of the Public Affairs Unit in Ahmadu Bcllo University registry. Attempts were made to offer practical graphics solutions in line with the principles of FCLP and the following recommendations are made:

1. When designing layout publications, special considerations should be given to the use and application of colour, images and typography. The applications of these variables (colour, images and typography) in harmony with the various elements of design should be rendered in compliance with the principles of design so as to achieve attractive layouts.
2. The Information and Protocol Unit and the University registry, should endeavour to solicit the services of a Graphic Designer and information/communication officers to complement the efforts of the few staff on ground. The designer and communication expert are to design, develop, and publish the visual communications resources produced by the University, while adequate means of distributing the publications should be put in place.
3. It is recommended that students should be given the liberty to make certain suggestions pertaining to the kind of features they would like to see reflect in subsequent editions of prospectuses as well as other subsequent visual communications that relate to their needs.

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