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Visually Speaking: A Study of How Visual Elements Impact Communication

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Research Methods

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Topic Justification

This study investigates the importance that visual images add to text in communication. Photographs and graphics can; (1) add meaning to the words, (2) create an emotional connection with the reader, and (3) simplify complex information.

Communication professionals, including journalists, designers, advertisers and public relations specialists, understand the importance of using visual elements for a deeper connection of the message to the audience. “We live in a visual age ... When we want information, we say *show me—don’t tell me.*” (Harrower & Elam, 2013)

Photography was initially used in communication to supply *visual evidence* needed by illustrators to document an event. London, Stone and Upton (2013) write, “Until photography’s invention, wars seemed remote, slightly romantic and rather exciting ... Photographs from the American Civil War were the first to show the reality of war ... Photographs made war scenes more immediate for those at home.” Seeing images of young men lying on the blood-stained ground, eyes wide and mouths gaping open, evoked an emotional humanistic connection with the viewer.

In the late 19th-century and early 20th-century, social-documentary photographer Lewis Hine created images that aided social change. Hines said, “... I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected ...” (Kobré, 2008) Jacob Riis was also a social-documentary photographer in Hine’s era. He started out working as a carpenter and then became a reporter for the *New York Sun*. “He wrote firsthand accounts of the indignities and inequities of immigrant life. When he was accused of exaggerating his written descriptions ... he turned to photographs as a means of documenting the human suffering he saw.” (Kobré, 2008) Viewers connected to the realism of the photographs on a level that was deeper than text alone. The images that Riis and Hines captured were tools of persuasion that shocked society into demanding change.

Photography was incorporated into public service campaigns of the American government in the 1930s and 1940s. Graphic designer Lester Beall used photographic images of farmers operating electrical machinery to help carry the message of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) to rural Americans. The goal of the REA was to increase the number of rural Americans who electrified their homes by increasing public awareness of the benefits of electricity. Beall designed posters for this public relations campaign. Beall felt that a designer “must work with one goal in mind—to integrate the elements in such a manner that they will combine to produce a result that will convey not merely a static commercial message, but an emotional reaction as well.” (Remington, 1993). In one of Beall’s designs, a photograph used shows a young determined farmer appearing to get his task accomplished. This embodied the message of the REA—that electricity will move the rural community of America forward by enabling farmers to increase efficiency and productivity. The model in the photograph likely resonated with the audience, since he, by his attire, appeared to be a rural farmer himself (Meggs & Purvis, 2006).

Because viewers connect to the realism of photographs, they perceive the message of advertising photos to be real. There is an implied honesty in the message. However, it is important to remember, that in advertising, the subjects are models, often *posed* to portray a message that is intentionally manipulated.

According to newspaper design experts Harrower and Elam (2013), diagrams, charts and infographics can simplify complex information. “... Much of journalism is about *teaching*. You have information; your readers need it; you must teach it to them as quickly and clearly as you can. Sometimes words work best. Other times, information is best conveyed *visually*, not verbally.” (Harrower & Elam, 2013). A graphic can be a small visual element added to the side of

a story, helping the reader quickly understand the data. Graphics can also be a full-page design that tells the story in an alternative manner than the traditional story format.

“Images are strong and seductive.” (Harrower & Elam, 2013). They give life and depth to text. They stir emotional connections with viewers. They help people *get it* – the intended message of an article. Visual images are crucial to communication. This study further investigates the importance of visual communication to viewers, readers and the public audience.

Literature Review

Most people would agree that visual elements impact communication. However, the extent and the manner in which they impact communication are not as easily recognized. Photography’s realism and implied realism are powerful forces. The control a photographer has over an image dictates the meaning the image conveys. Visual elements can be bold and realistic or subtle and almost unnoticed. Elements of design carry a message and convey meaning.

The most powerful visual element is photography. Photography gives credibility. Photography creates a deeper connection with the audience than mere text alone. Photography aids in social change.

In the late 1800s, photography was used only as a tool to aid wood engraving (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). However, the photographic printing process would eventually evolve and emerge in mass communication. Mathew Brady’s photograph “Freedmen on the Canal Bank at Richmond,” was used to document a historical moment in time. Brady photographed a group of slaves, who had just been freed in April, 1865. John Macdonald, an illustrator, recreated Brady’s photo by hand carving a wood block for printing in Scribner’s magazine engraving (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). At this moment in history, during the Civil War, Union forces had made advances against the Confederate troops in Richmond, Virginia. The image of the recently freed slaves was printed

in hopes to help further the momentum of the victory for the Union. The use of Brady's photo was, in essence, one of the earliest instances of photojournalism.

The use of photography for the graphic that Scribner's magazine printed helped the illustrator create a more life-like image that was viewed by the readers as a believable, historical record of a moment in time. Viewers connected to the realism of a photograph on a level that was deeper than that of the connection to a drawing or painting—in that by viewing the image that more closely represented reality, they perceived the message of the photograph to be real and more true; this particularly, is what made photojournalism so important.

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Powerful as it is the use of visual elements is at times questionable. Photographs can manipulate a message. In particular, the human form is used to influence. Manipulated photographs can manipulate messages. Photography in any design helps the illustrator create a more life-like image that is viewed by the readers as a form that they can connect with on a level that is deeper than that of the connection to a drawing or painting. Photographs are seen as art that more closely represents reality—even if incorporated in a design that challenged reality.

Because viewers connect to the realism of photographs, they perceive the message of advertising photos to be real. There is an implied honesty in the message. However, it is important to remember, that in advertising, the subjects are models, often *posed* to portray a message that is intentionally manipulated.

Photography was incorporated into public service campaigns of the American government in the 1930s and 1940s. Graphic designer Lester Beall used photographic images of farmers operating electrical machinery to help carry the message of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) to rural Americans. The goal of the REA was to increase the number of rural Americans who electrified their homes by increasing public awareness of the benefits of electricity. Beall designed posters for this public relations campaign. Beall felt that a designer “must work with one goal in mind—to integrate the elements in such a manner that they will combine to produce a result that will convey not merely a static commercial message, but an emotional reaction as well,” (Remington, 1993). In one of Beall’s designs, a photograph used shows a young determined-looking farmer appearing to get his task accomplished. This embodied the message of the REA—that electricity will move the rural community of America forward by enabling farmers to increase efficiency and productivity. The model in the photograph likely resonated with the audience, since he, by his attire, appeared to be a rural farmer himself (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). However, the man was a model, dressed intentionally to appear like a farmer. He

was directed to pose in the desired manner and express the desired emotion. Agricultural equipment was also incorporated into the photograph as a prop to demonstrate the desired message of the public service campaign.

The human form is often used in commercial photography. Herbert Matter was a designer who incorporated photography into designs for advertising posters. Matter was hired by the Swiss National Tourist Office in 1932 to design tourism posters for his native Switzerland (Meggs & Purvis, 2006).

In his poster, “Slopes,” he shows photographs of men and women expressing positive emotions in facial expressions and body language. He also uses photographs that show movement of the skiers and imply the excitement of skiing. His incorporation of women in the image gives the impression that the slopes of Switzerland are for men and women alike.

In the foreground of the image, Matter placed a large photograph of a woman looking up at an angle that implies she is looking up at the ski slope. Matter’s use of a model, posed and photographed at extreme angles and with high contrast lighting, produces the desired message that the product/service is exciting and challenging, yet not too dangerous or extreme. Switzerland, therefore, seems exciting in an attainable way.

Because viewers connected to the realism of the photographs, they perceived the message of these photographs to be real. There is an implied honesty in the message.

It is important to remember, however, that Matter posed the models, created the lighting effects and designed the layout intentionally. Thus, the message is one that is intentionally manipulated. The models may never have skied. They might never have been on a ski slope. However, they appear just as Matter intended for them to appear—happily skiing. His use of photography in advertising made the intended message more powerful.

The Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) advertising agency created a subway poster ad campaign for Levy's Jewish rye bread in 1965. "Mass communication stereotypes were replaced with more realistic images of people, and taboos against representing ethnic minorities were broken," (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). The advertisements included models in photographs. The models were viewed as real people from society. In the Levy's rye bread advertising campaign, the models appeared believable. The facial expression of the models gives the viewer the impression that they are truly enjoying the bread.

The incorporation of photography is a powerful tool for the persuasion of the ad design. Consumers (real people) could relate to the 'real people' who enjoyed the product. The photographer for the ad campaign, Howard Zieff, selected, "normal-looking people, not blonde, perfectly proportioned models," (Kozlov, 2009).

Viewers could also connect with the humor and entertainment in the message. The Levy's ads used the statement, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's real Jewish rye." None of the models selected were Jewish, as demonstrated by their appearance. One model appears to be Chinese. Zieff's intentional selection of the specific models supported the message of the overall design.

Graphic elements can clarify messages and carry meaning. Comprehension of text-only information is significantly lower than comprehension of infographics. The visual structure, color and typography of design are used to convey meaning.

According to newspaper design experts Harrower and Elam (2013), diagrams, charts and infographics can simplify complex information. "... Much of journalism is about *teaching*. You have information; your readers need it; you must teach it to them as quickly and clearly as you can ... With infographics, publications can combine illustration and information into easily digestible packages," (Harrower & Elam, 2013). A graphic can be a small visual element added to the side of

a story, helping the reader quickly understand the data. Graphics can also be a full-page design that tells the story in an alternative manner than the traditional story format. “Whatever form they take, they often attract higher readership than the main story they accompany,” (Harrower & Elam, 2013). Imagine for example, a checklist asking readers questions about the safety of their home. Harrower and Elam (2013) give an example of a burglar-proof checklist. In their example, they show a list of questions inviting the reader to engage by checking yes or no. “The important thing is to get the reader involved—to make information as accessible and relevant as you can,” (Harrower & Elam, 2013).

Magazines in the 1950s and 1960s were showcases for graphic design. McCall’s magazine was among one of the most innovative. In one article, “The Forty-Winks Reducing Plan,” the designer, Otto Storch, used a creative page design. Storch used a photograph of a sleeping woman in the page layout. Under the figure of the woman, the “typography bends with the elasticity of a soft mattress under the weight of the sleeping woman,” (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). The article discusses the importance of sleep. The message of the text and the bending of the type, along with the incorporation of the photograph, create cohesion throughout the design.

In addition to the visual structure of design, choice of color and typography are used to convey meaning. “The power of color to evoke an emotional response is undeniable,” (Lauer & Pentak, 2012). We speak in terms of color to describe character traits or human behavior and even to represent mental qualities. *I feel blue. I was so mad I was seeing red.* “These statements are emotional,” (Lauer & Pentak, 2012). Even before viewers comprehend the subject matter or start to evaluate the forms in a piece of art, “the color creates an atmosphere to which we respond,” (Lauer & Pentak, 2012). In a foundational sense, we can relate to warm and cool colors. Warm and cool colors evoke different reactions. Warm colors are associated with passion, happiness,

welcoming emotions and joy. Cool colors are, “automatically associated with quieter, less-outgoing feelings and can express melancholy or depression,” (Lauer & Pentak, 2012).

Choice of typography can also carry meaning. Sans-serif lettering styles, such as Arial font, can give a feeling of clarity and simplicity, described by some experts as having been stripped of unessential elements (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). A serif typeface such as Times New Roman offers viewers more ease in readability. “... its legibility, handsome visual qualities, ... By making the stems and curves slightly thicker than in most roman-style lettering, the designers gave Times New Roman a touch of robust color ...” which carries stability and authority (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). Serifs are not the only elements of typography that varies. Kerning, tracking, the length of ascenders and descenders, thickness of letters and even the use of white space are all elements of typography.

There are many visual elements that can impact communication in powerful and also subtle ways. The realism of photography, the use of color, the design of infographics, the selection of typography and the overall graphic design all carry meaning. The elements of visual communication speak louder than text alone.

Hypothesis

Based upon the previous research and inquiries, the current study attempts to more deeply explore the sub-dimensions of visual communication elements by testing the theoretical perspectives. London, Stone and Upton (2013) wrote, “... Photographs made war scenes more immediate for those at home.” Seeing graphic images of death and injury evoked an emotional humanistic connection with the viewer that mere text could not convey.

Other elements of visual communication can aid in reader comprehension. “With infographics, publications can combine illustration and information into easily digestible

packages,” (Harrower & Elam, 2013). Typography can give feelings of clarity and simplicity, if ‘stripped of unessential elements,’ or can carry stability and authority (Meggs & Purvis, 2006).

Based on the literatures regarding visual elements of communication: photography, infographics and typography, the following hypotheses are proposed;

H1: Photography creates a deeper connection with the audience than mere text alone

H2: Infographics make complex information easier to understand.

H3: Typography choice will dictate meaning of text.

Method

a. The study of visual communication. To test the sub-dimensions of visual communication elements, this study selects an example from each of the three proposed hypotheses, relating to: photography, infographics and typography. The three straightforward examples were presented to the study participants and responses were solicited. Since the study is focused on visual elements of communication, the example items were presented visually.

b. Procedure. An online survey was used as a means to easily present the visual information. It was a cost and time effective way to elicit responses. The survey, created through Survey Monkey, an online survey creation service, was made available to participants through a dedicated hyperlink. This link was easily shared by email and through social media.

The first hypothesis, *H1: Photography creates a deeper connection with the audience than mere text alone*, was tested with a question posed to participants. The question, “Which of the following messages is more likely to create a response?” was presented with two choices. The first choice was a photograph of a man standing in front of the remains of his home that had been destroyed by the May 22, 2011 Joplin tornado, a caption is shared giving the man’s name and asking for volunteers to help with the cleanup. The second choice was written text only, that describes the scene and asks for volunteers. Just as Jacob Riis, a social-documentary photographer

in the late 19th century, “wrote firsthand accounts of the indignities and inequities of immigrant life. When he was accused of exaggerating his written descriptions ... he turned to photographs as a means of documenting the human suffering he saw,” (Kobré, 2008). Viewers connected to the realism of the photographs on a level that was deeper than text alone. The photograph used is one personally taken in May, 2011, in Joplin, Missouri.

The second hypothesis, *H2: Infographics make complex information easier to understand*, also presented two choices to the participant. One choice was an infographic sharing the causes and risks of colon cancer. The graphic was found online at Everyday Health Media (Spiegel & Kim, 2013). The website states that the source for the information was the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, New-York Presbyterian Hospital. The second choice was essentially the same information provided in written form. This information was obtained from the Colon Cancer Alliance website (2014). The survey participants were asked to select which one was easier to understand. This question tested Harrower and Elam’s thought that, “With infographics, publications can combine illustration and information into easily digestible packages,” (2013).

To test the third hypothesis, *H3: Infographics make complex information easier to understand*, an example was presented of one statement written in two different typefaces, each varying in case, kerning, tracking and font sizes. This was to test the concept that the visual element of typography choice can aid in reader comprehension. Typography can carry meaning. It can give feelings of clarity and simplicity, if ‘stripped of unessential elements,’ or can carry stability and authority (Meggs & Purvis, 2006). Two graphics were created using text alone, stating the same short sentence, “Help me, please.” The question presented asked which of the two demonstrated an urgent need for help. One option was in a bold, large font in uppercase. The other was a smaller, in lowercase and in a thinner typeface.

In each of the three questions, the respondent had to select only one choice. There was not an option presented to skip a question. A note was stated at the beginning of the survey notifying participants that there were only three questions to the survey. The length allowed for convenience and encouraged participation.

c. Participants. While availability and access are a component to participant selection, based on the parameters of the survey, the participants selected were also appropriate to the hypotheses. One section of the participants was Missouri Southern State University students. I contacted two MSSU instructors and requested that the hyperlink to the survey be shared with the students enrolled in their courses through class email rosters on Blackboard or verbally in class. I anticipated that students who were specifically enrolled in courses based in computer laboratories might be more likely to participate due to the higher probability of perceived convenience. One instructor offered the survey to students while in the lab.

The hyperlink was also shared on social media through Facebook and Twitter. The specific selection was again through available means of contact -- through my social media contact lists. The Twitter audience is of a national and global variety. The Facebook audience is more localized. Facebook offers an avenue to share the hyperlink with specific student and community groups. Not only was my contact list reached, the ability to share the link potentially made available each original individual's contact list also. Demographics of each are varied and could provide a variety in the sample. I made the link available to all 469 of my Facebook contacts and shared it in three MSSU student groups: The Chart staff, MSSU Non-Traditional Students and the MSSU PRSSA group. On Facebook, five people shared my link on their own profiles, some writing personal messages like, "Help my student out" or "Help my friend out." On Twitter, I shared it with my 192 followers. One Parisian follower retweeted the link, opening up the survey to a more global audience.

Demographic information was collected from participants to ensure it was a sample that is representative of the population. Age, gender, ethnicity, location, description of living location (urban, suburban or rural), profession, highest level of education and college major (if a student) was requested from participants. Demographic info was required at the start of the survey in an attempt to avoid skipping this.

e. Analysis Plan. Collection of responses is a feature of the survey. The results can be analyzed individually and also compared as numbers and percentages of respondents. This quantitative means of measurement is most effective to the parameters of the survey. Content and interaction analysis are two basic methods for analyzing communication (Keyton, 2011). Analysis included careful examination of demographics to understand what extent the sample represents the population. The analysis was also testing for relationships within the data. I anticipated identifying if one group of people had the same responses. It also tested for differences. If a respondent marked a specific response that was different than the majority of other responders, I had the opportunity to identify what was unique in the demographic information. Again, it possibly could have related back to whether, in turn, if others with similar demographic information had the same type of uncommon response. I searched for any recognizable theme that could be identified. The data can be plotted and stated in both visual graphs and in text format.

Conclusion

Compiling the data into a dataset, the average age was slightly higher than I expected from the potential audience. The youngest respondent was 17 years old, the oldest 71. The median age was 34, average was 36. The age of respondents was the only set of data that showed a normal bell curve distribution. The total number of participants was over 100, however I only analyzed the first 100 responses. Ten percent of respondents identified themselves as a race or ethnicity other

than Caucasian. Twenty-nine percent were male, 71 percent female. The demographic information allowed me to see that the sample was not a good representation of the population as a whole.

In the first question, 99 percent of respondents chose the photo over the text. In question two, 93 percent chose the infographic over the text. In the last question, 97 percent chose the bold, strong, larger typeface over the smaller option. Two respondents skipped the last two questions. The survey responses support all three hypotheses. The results showed a very skewed distribution, heavily in favor of the hypothesized thoughts.

Limitations

Unfortunately, there were several unexpected limitations with the online survey. I did not realize this until I had built survey my, but there were limitations to the total number of questions I could ask without paying to upgrade to the premium level of survey service. So I had to ask the demographic questions in a manner that allowed the respondents to type any text they wanted to. This eliminated the ability to easily view the statistics comparatively. Manual calculation of the responses is required. The time limitations will not allow this. A few respondents misread the questions and also mistyped in these fields, however I was able to deduce their intended response.

Another unexpected limitation of the survey is the maximum number of responses I can analyze. There were 114 total respondents and the maximum number that can be reviewed without paying to upgrade is 100. With the total response rate being so close to 100 and the responses being so close to each other, I do not see enough justification for this.

One thing that I did like about the survey was that you could review the responses as a whole and also narrow in one respondent, thus being able to pull one set of responses and look at how that one person replied to each question. It is designed to allow rather in-depth analysis. However, the time constraint did not afford it.

Finally, the design of the survey had its limitations. In an honest evaluation of the questions, I believe they are too few and too skewed. If I were to redo this, I would create more questions or perhaps questions with more response options. I would have liked to have seen a greater variety in the responses perhaps more that voted the other way. Just to imply a little more balance and eliminate the possibility of these ‘odd’ responses (opposing the hypotheses) being outliers. While I did not intentionally create a survey with options that potentially elicited such obvious responses; it could have possibly be perceived that way. I had a friend look at the survey before I sent it out and asked if a participant might be offended—if the answers might be too simplistic. I would have liked to have been able to devote more time to designing the questions. The time constraint also limited the participant selection. While the audience was potentially global, it was only provided in English. Also, only people living in the U.S. participated. I wish I could have gotten a sample that was more closely related to the population as a whole.

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