Students' Visual Narratives Beyond Adversity

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Abstract
The study investigated how students process and translate their ideas, concepts, and emotions into visual forms, symbols, and representations utilizing various visual elements and materials. The creative process involved channeling personal accounts, beliefs, cultural upbringing, and past or present experiences amidst the pandemic during the academic years of 2020 until it was lifted. Students' visual art compositions and concepts were analyzed to unravel both the superficial and in-depth meanings behind the utilization of various images in their visual narratives. The findings indicated the students tend to incorporate specific visual art elements, design principles, and art movements in creating a visual representation of their concepts, perceptions, and experiences.

Keywords: Visual Language, Language of the Arts, Visual Communication

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Introduction

The current cultural landscape is dominated by visuals. Visuals and images exert a powerful influence on the perception of the world, shaping an understanding of a societal landscape where symbols, icons, or signs play a major role in expression, information dissemination, and communication.

The contemporary world is bombarded with a constant stream of imagery. Upon waking, individuals engage with smartphones to access social media platforms (Lennox et al., 2018). Throughout the day, encounters with branding, both within and beyond domestic spaces, are interlaced with visual and textual content displayed on various electronic devices. Signage saturates streetscapes, while large-scale billboards dominate transportation routes. Communication often relies on abbreviated text, phrases, or pictorial representations. Notably, the current generation demonstrates a propensity for expressing emotions and ideas through social media platforms, utilizing symbols, icons, emojis, and emoticons to a greater extent than engaging in face-to-face interactions.

Visuals and images have become the driving force in communication in an increasingly visual society, especially with the advent of social media platforms and smart gadgets. Visuals, particularly manga and video game aesthetics, can even dominate how young people convey their views and ideas (Ito, 2012). And this was magnified even more at the outbreak of the pandemic.

Visual Culture

Visual culture studies the interpretation and comprehension of imagery encountered in everyday life. It focuses on how individuals decipher and perceive information, ideas, and meanings conveyed by visuals, both in routine and unconventional contexts. Visual culture examines how individuals connect specific images to personal experiences and observations. As Mirzoeff (2011) characterizes it, visual culture is a practice, a dynamic process that involves the creation, utilization, and interpretation of visuals. This approach emphasizes the active role of viewers and creators in shaping meaning from visual encounters. In academic settings, visual culture refers to the study of images or visuals through various lenses such as culture, social sciences, science and technology, art movements, and history to convey specific visual concepts. The rise of the internet, digital technology, and social media has greatly magnified and boosted the influence of the visual culture across generations.

Visual Perception

Visual perception involves understanding how audiences or viewers interact and give meaning to various visual stimuli in both artistic and ordinary contexts. It is the foundation upon which artistic creation and appreciation are built. It encompasses the complex interplay between the physiological processes of the eye and brain and our cognitive understanding of the world around us. Within the context of the arts, visual perception goes beyond simply registering light and color; it involves actively interpreting and making meaning of the visual stimuli encountered in a work of art. Artists employ principles like proximity, similarity, and closure (Gestalt principles) to organize their compositions. This creates a visually cohesive and impactful piece that guides the viewer's gaze and influences interpretation (Arnheim, 2004).

Visual Culture and the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 fundamentally altered the visual landscape. Images and information dissemination took center stage, influencing understanding and experience of this global crisis. It served as a tool for communication, entertainment, documentation, manipulation and politics. People who were in quarantine or isolation have tried to find ways to cope with the challenges posed by their situation, and one of their outlets is creating and sharing various images. Images have become an even more important element in the visual narratives of individuals experiencing difficulties or uncertainties and to those who are influencing the social structures and dynamics.

Visual Arts and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the visual arts world, not just in terms of how art was created and consumed, but also in the themes and messages explored by artists. The pandemic caused cancellations of shows, art workshops, and artist residences, and financial strains in both the artists and galleries. With art spaces, theaters, and museums closed due to the lockdown, art institutions and artists shifted to the digital domains, showcasing their art pieces through virtual exhibitions (Tallone et al., 2020). According to UNESCO (2023), the cultural and creative industries suffered worse than the national economies with a significant number of creative freelancers losing their jobs and income.

Artists' Response

The pandemic also saw how artists adapted to the pandemic situation. Their artistic activities were relegated to home-based engagements (Bradbury et. al., 2021). Many artists explored themes of self-reflection, isolation, confinement, and the psychological effects of the pandemic. From paintings, to sculptures, to installation art and even in comics (Callender et al., 2020), artists paid tribute to healthcare workers, essential service providers, and everyday heroes who kept society functioning during the lockdown. The pandemic also sparked works addressing social inequalities, anxieties surrounding government responses, and the fragility of global systems.

The Study

This study aimed to explore how university students adapted their artistic practices in response to the challenges of the pandemic. The study examined the ways in which students incorporated elements, symbols, styles, and ideas into their visual creations under these unique circumstances. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how students translated their thoughts, feelings, and experiences into visual representations during this unprecedented time.

The students who participated in the study were non-fine arts majors. Majority of the student participants are those majoring Agriculture, Veterinary Medicine, Applied Physics, Nutrition, Biology, Development Communication, Forestry and Computer Science.

The study is descriptive, focusing on how students utilized specific visual elements, forms, and materials to convey their ideas or concepts beyond the literal images of their creative outputs. Analysis of students' artworks centered on thematic frequency distributions in the following areas, the art movements or styles that they have chosen as references, the visual

elements, icons, and or symbols they incorporated in their design, the materials that they used, and their written rationale or write-up discussing the general and specific ideas behind their artwork.

This study investigated three key questions related to student artistic expression during the pandemic:

1. How did students translate their thoughts and concepts into visual representations?
2. What visual elements (line, color, shape, etc.) were prominent in the students' designs, and how did they justify their use in their compositions?
3. What specific circumstances arising from the pandemic influenced the students' creative process and the final artworks?

The data used in this study were the visual artworks of students under the Arts 1 general education course of the University of the Philippines Los Baños spanning the pandemic years of 2020 until the easing of the lockdowns in 2022.

For an Arts 1 activity exploring the language of visual arts, students created artworks based on the following instructions:

1. **Art Movement Selection:** Students had the freedom to choose an artistic reference point from a broad range, spanning Classical and Renaissance periods to Dadaism and Post-Modernism.
2. **Composition and Concept Integration:** They were then tasked with planning a visual composition that incorporated their chosen art movement in relation to their own developed visual concepts.
3. **Visual Representation and Expression:** Within this composition, students created specific visual representations that embodied their ideas and how they connected to the chosen art movement or style.
4. **Artistic Freedom in Materials and Elements:** Students were encouraged to utilize any visual elements (line, color, shape, etc.), icons, and symbols in two- or three-dimensional formats – whichever best suited the needs of their concept. They were also free to choose materials they felt were most appropriate for the composition or that they were comfortable using.

Discussion

The study investigated how students process and translate their ideas, concepts, and emotions into visual forms, symbols, and representations utilizing visual elements, art styles, or art movements. The creative process involved channeling personal accounts, beliefs, cultural upbringing, and past or present experiences amidst the pandemic during the academic years of 2020 until the latter part of 2022. Students' visual art compositions and concepts were analyzed to unravel both the superficial and in-depth meanings behind the utilization of various images in their visual narratives.

The results show that a majority of the student respondents develop and translate their ideas or concepts into visual representations by combining certain visual elements, symbols, and icons into their visual compositions. Students also utilized materials available at home or in their dormitory mainly due to the constraints posed by the pandemic lockdown.

Findings

Students gravitated towards art movements that aligned with their need for self-expression, such as Expressionism and Cubism. Pop Art's use of familiar imagery and Post-Modernism's questioning of norms were also prominent choices. The use of fundamental visual elements like shape, color, and line suggests a focus on clear communication and impactful imagery. Design principles like contrast and emphasis/subordination helped students deliver clear messages, while rhythm and balance offered a sense of order and stability during a disruptive time. The primary inspirations for students' artwork were the pandemic itself, personal reflections, and a focus on aesthetics and expressing emotions. Additionally, personal well-being, intellectual musings, and advocacy for social and environmental issues also played a role.

Conclusions

The findings indicated the students tend to incorporate specific visual art elements, design principles, and art movements in creating a visual representation of their concepts, perceptions, and experiences. Students' visual ideas or concepts indicated a variety of sources of influences from their pandemic experiences, to personal reflections and to purely aesthetic focus of creating their artworks.

This study highlights the power of visual art as a tool for self-expression, particularly during challenging times. Students utilized art to process their experiences of the pandemic, explore their emotions, and potentially find solace or meaning. Understanding these motivations can inform art education practices and encourage the use of visual arts as a means of communication and emotional exploration for students.

Further studies could focus deeper into the specific ways pandemic, calamities and other circumstances influenced the content and style of students' artwork. Additionally, exploring the role of art education in facilitating students' use of art for self-expression during challenging times would be valuable.

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