

*Visual Social Communication Through Photographic Images,*

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Abstract

Social commentary is a method of photographic images that could change public perception towards a better life. It is an alternative method to communicate messages for public to change their perceptions or attitudes toward life issues of ethnical, political, moral and even religious matters. In western countries, social commentary images have long been accepted by the public. Hence, it could be denied that it has become one of the powerful medium of communications to foster change when reformist works by photographer Lewis Hine and Jacob Riss had proven changes in community's social life. Dorothea Lange with her image entitled 'Migrant Mother', has become the icon for depression Era in 1936, whilst landscape photography by Ansel Adam, had been able to maintain the beauty of Kings Cayon from being destroyed. Images captured by these artists had successfully improved human's social, economic and environmental values and thus, had benefited the communities for a more meaningful life. Even though camera is the mechanical device that produces images, but it is the human touch that makes remarkable pictures being produced for social commentary. Nevertheless, to date, a developing country like Malaysia has not realized that social commentary photographs as the tool for change. Social commentary photographs by Malaysian social commentary artist did not impact the Malaysian public so much. Hence, this paper focuses to find out public's perception on social commentary photography by Malaysian artists and to what extend the public understand the message. This study employed qualitative method through observations and interviews which benefited the government and public sectors on how important the impact of images could be.

Key Words: Message, Photography, Public Acceptance, Social Commentary, Communication

## **Introduction**

Social Commentary photography is dedicated to exposing social issues on ethics, society, religions, they way of life, how people live and other similarities. There is an alternative form of a message through pictures for the social communication. The purpose of social commentary photographer is to expose the unjust, homelessness, discrimination, poverty, the elderly, victims of labor and helpless children. Creative outputs from photography could be just as powerful as other known media in nurturing social communication through visual. However, the social issues that have been portrayed nowadays are too much ahead from what have been previously. They try to capture conditions which can be hazardous to those involved in it for example the social issues that involves the usage of women in prostitution, men in drug addicts, human trafficking, poverty, homelessness and other prime subjects among the societies. Nevertheless, this field category of photograph is sometimes categorized as a generally critical photographic style. This approach has also been the target of politicians who have seen this work as a preference towards socialism. On the other hand, in this current situation, this kind of approach has been gaining acceptance in the world of art and being portrayed in art galleries. This paper has focussed to find out public's perception on social commentary photography produced by Malaysian artists and elements that have been composed in the social Commentary photography for the public's understanding. This study hopes for visual social communication to be applied in Malaysia towards reinforcing public's perception on various issues of socialism.

## **Medium of Communication**

According to Mustaffa Halabi (2009), through photography, communication can be carried out effectively to everyone (Mustaffa Halabi, 2009). Hence the medium of photography can clearly prove the current situation accurately and quickly. The social commentary images have no intention to discredit or to expose the flaws of any society or group of people, but it spans the attention of people on something that has to be highlighted and provide assistance to people who are less fortunate. Helping attitude in a community with other people regardless of race, religion or skin color should be practiced and appreciated through social commentary.

In the western countries, social commentary images have been appreciated and have long been accepted as a method of expressing ideas and conveying messages. Jacob Riis (1849-1914) and Lewis Hine (1874-1940) have been committed to social change towards the end of the nineteenth century in the United States. *'How the Other Half Lives'* was the first book published by Jacob Riis. The images in it have been successful to trigger their government to realize the problem of slums and soon, proper measures have been taken. The importance of visual social commentary has become one of the most powerful medium of communications to foster change such as the works by those photography artists who have provided changes in community's social life towards the society's betterment (Husaini, 2013). Images captured by these photography artists have successfully improved human's social engagement among each other, enhancing economic status and provide environmental values. Thus, it has benefited the communities for a more meaningful life among the rest.

Social commentary photography is not only focussing on human problems but it also involves nature in our surrounding such as the illegal logging and the demolition of nature which people in urban has not been noticing. Hence, the social commentary photographs speak on behalf of the nature to avoid pollution of eco-system that has been happening. Most of the nature photographs have been used in documentaries such as the National Geographic.

From previous social commentary on nature, King Cayon photographs that feature beautiful scenic view of the King Cayon by Ansel Adam has won the hearts of millions including the authorities. The beautiful view of the King Cayon by Ansel Adam has won the hearts of millions including the authorities (Alinder, 1996). Because of the photographs, it have caused King Cayon to be preserved as a national park until today. Therefore, the role of the visual social commentary is vital in any kind of position, it has to be emphasized not only to human, but also to the nature as well. It is capable to reinforce social communication to change human's perception towards many issues.

Figure 1: Kings Cayon National Park



(Source: Ansel Adam, 1925, [www.codgerapps.codgerconsulting.co](http://www.codgerapps.codgerconsulting.co))

### **Artists and Images**

There are also social commentary artists from Malaysia who produced images for the public to observe. Among these artists are, Ismail Hashim, Eric Peris, Ismail Abdullah, Azmi Noor, Ling Pik Kuong, Syed Ahmad Mufazzal, Azlan Muhd Latif and Danny Lim. They have been actively producing photographs on social commentary in Malaysia. However, to what extent does their images could be accepted or understood by the Malaysian public to create change is still questionable. Malaysian public has not realized the usage of social commentary photography to reinforce messages.

### **Methodology**

Artist has been on face-to-face interviews to obtain information on their social commentary artwork and to observe expressions from them in order to understand the heart of a social commentary artist in producing their work.

## Finding and Discussion

The study has resulted five keywords that have been utilized as the elements that must be included in a Social Commentary photography artwork. All these elements have been related to each other to produce the social commentary images. These elements have been called as the 'Social Commentary Elements' featured in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Social Commentary Elements

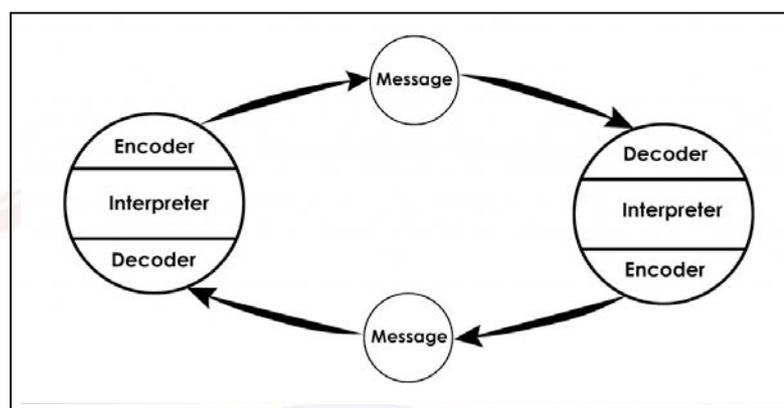


The elements contain Action, Communication, Issue, Message and Awareness. These elements integrated to provide Social Commentary Photography.

### *Communication*

The ability to communicate is a key factor to deliver the message to the public. Communication requires a reaction between sender and receiver. Courtland et. al. (2004) has emphasized that, 'communication is the process of sending and receiving messages. However, communication is *effective* only when the message is understood and when it stimulates action or encourages the receiver to think in new ways.' Therefore, social commentary images must be able to attract viewers towards a two-way communication process according to communication theory by Shram (1954) in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Shcramm Communication Model



Source: [www.communicationtheory.org/osgood-schramm-model-of-communication](http://www.communicationtheory.org/osgood-schramm-model-of-communication)

### Issues

In any society, there certainly emerge problems. However, each social problem differs according to the country. As a developing country, Malaysia is inseparable from social problems. According to a study Azlina (2010) rate of social problems in Malaysia increased from year to year. For a social commentary photographer he will bring this issue and made into artwork such as in Figure 4.

Figure 4: 'Sayang Anak ( Love the Children)'



(Source: Ismail Hashim, 2012)

### Message

Message is the main goal of the presenter to the receiver. If the message cannot be received or not been understood then it is a failure. Social Commentary artists try their best to create artworks in order to convey messages to the community. According to Obstler (1990) 'A well-defined message has two key components. First, it is simple, direct, and concise. Second, it defines the issues on your own terms and in your own words' (Obstler, 1990).

### Awareness

Awareness is to make public notice of has ocured and take action that provides them with the knowledge to create change towards something better.

### *Social Action*

In an action, a person will take some measures to follow in order to lead them towards something rewarding or towards something that might be the solution. Social action involves attitude, behaviours, laws, policies, and institutions to reflect an opportunity towards a better society. . Kotler identified it as 'The undertaking of collective action to mitigate or resolve a social problem' (Kotler, 1971).

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, the role of photography should be more aggressive in relations to communication with the public. Images in photography interact with the audience. Observers can achieve new knowledge through it. Production quality photographic images technically, should be encouraged to take the message and meaning to influence the minds of the public and also to change the situation better for the community. Photographers have to be smart to choose the subject of the images combined with the natural and aesthetic to purify society and the environment. Photography advertisements intended to influence people or potential buyers on certain products displayed or sold. Images in the ad will use photography to draw attention to the product.

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