

Visual Communication for Activism: The case of the EndSARS protests in Nigeria

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Abstract

Visual communication plays an important role in the human society today. It serves as a viable medium and tool for activism and protest movements. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar as a framework, this study examines how visual images could serve as an effective tool for activism and protest movements by analysing selected images of the 2020 EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

The study shows that the representation of visual elements such as objects, persons and events in these images suggest a dominating participation of young people during the events, as well as a depiction of law enforcements agents, the police, as oppositions to the activities of the protests, which gives insights into the essence of protests struggles which is a fight against police brutality especially towards the youth . This study further reiterates the effectiveness of visuals such as protest images for activism as it does not only help in communicating the concerns, rage and demands of protesters but could also serve as a narrative and documentation of the protest events.

Keywords : image; narrative, police brutality; representational meaning; visual grammar .

1. Introduction

Communication is the bedrock of life's engagement. However, visual communication, although has a long history, is very effective in the contemporary world. This is because it plays such an important role in digital communication. Schreiber (2018) observes that digitally mediated communication has developed from a predominantly text-based medium to one that is multimodal and highly visual. For example, on social media (Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram), people do not only use written text to communicate and express their thoughts and messages, they also use other media such as memes, images, and video. Hence, visual communication serves an important role in areas such as social media, education, science, culture, and politics.

The present-day society is moving towards a visual era whereby visual imagery serves as a vital and connecting part of social life. Images as opposed to explicitly text-based interactions, provide more concise means of interacting and experiencing human relations, as well as interpreting and understanding events and happenings (Valentini, Romenti,

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Murtarelli, & Pizzetti, 2018). Thuy (2017) notes that images are used in two ways; first, they help to clarify spoken or written text, and then they could help to establish unique meanings. Nonetheless, images and photos shared across different media channels are becoming profoundly relevant in our understanding of contemporary visual culture (Rose, 2016). Kress and van Leeuwen (1996 cited in Valentini et al., 2018) however argue that images cannot be considered as neutral reflections of reality, rather a social mechanism that seeks to portray reality and provide a context that is negotiated between the producer of the image and the viewer.

In contemporary communication, visual imagery such as photos, illustrations, posters, ads, cartoons, emojis, placards, films, and architectural diagrams are becoming inevitable. For instance, visual communications are utilised by social movement activists in their campaigns to bring about social and political change. Activism, a form of vigorous campaigning is aimed at bringing about social or political change. Protest is a form of activism (Chiluwa, 2018). However, Bichler and Beier (2016) note that visual communication is used by activist to make information more comprehensible and overcome language barriers. Activists utilise these visuals (e.g. signs, symbols, photos, comics) to help them maintain their moral ideals and activities across time (Fernández, 2021).

1.1. Protest Images as visual narratives

Without narratives, human communication becomes flawed. There are messages and narratives in visual forms strewn all around the world. This is largely due to new technologies, which allow people to share their daily experiences through images or videos taken with their mobile phones (Williams, 2019). Wagner (2017) believes that through this technological convergence, pictures, videos, and news stories also portray illusions or reality. A visual narrative is a visual representation of an event, occurrence, or story, communicated through visual media such as photos, videos or graphics (Everett, 2017).

For decades, visual narratives existed in different forms including caves, tomb paintings, scrolls, and sculptures (Beckett, 1994 cited in Williams, 2019) and have evolved into visual media such as films, cartoons, and photographs which have become central to contemporary communication (Crilley et al., 2020). According to Crilley et al. (2020), this mode of communication has become increasingly important in recent years because the way people learn about, think, and respond to developments or events in the world is inextricably linked to how these events are made visible to them. Thoughts, ideas as well as experiences are now expressed as visual narratives (e.g. images) (see Everett, 2017). People create, share, and also come across visual compositions daily and these compositions vary in terms of their narrative detail (Williams, 2019).

Neumayer and Rossi (2018) however state that images have always played an important role in protest events. These images play a vital role in making protests and diverse views on political contestation visible. They draw people closer to the event. Over the years, images of social movements or protests have aided in capturing the efficacy and feasibility of abolishing laws, fighting perceived injustices, and overthrowing poor systems (McGarry et

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al., 2019). McGarry et al. (2019) argue that embedded in these images including photos, cartoons screenshots, banners, and other digital artefacts are hidden representations, narratives, ideas, symbols, and mandates contributing to the development of various forms of social conceptions of solidarities. These images are not mere visuals but embodied with unique qualities and symbolic meanings. According to Geise et al. (2020), protest images are effective carriers of campaign messages which could motivate people to hit the streets for demonstrations. These visual images are usually expected to evoke emotional reactions (such as anger and revulsion) and cause nationwide demonstrations that could even spread to the international community (Kharroub & Bas, 2016).

Protest images are not only a result of the demonstrations, but they are also part of the symbolic activities that constitute the movement and its identity. These images give a narrative of the events of happenings of the protest. As a result, it is important to examine how visual images represent different protest events around the world.

1.2. The EndSARS protest in visual narrative

The EndSARS campaign began as a response to the brutality and injustice perpetrated by a Nigerian Police unit known as the Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) (Abbo, 2021). In October 2020, a nationwide demonstration erupted to demand the disbandment of SARS (Uwazuruike, 2020). However, Esievoidje (2020) recalls that during the weeks of active demonstrations, there was innovative and creative content ranging from music, videos, images, and arts like never before. Words alone did not define the protest as there were visuals and symbols which served as resourceful modes of expressing such resistance. According to Olanrewaju (2020), social media feeds were filled with powerful images of the protests, providing real-time visual documentation of this crucial moment in history. Individuals as well as professional photographers captured unparalleled levels of non-violent activism and shocking scenes of police brutality (Olanrewaju, 2020). All of these modes surfaced on the internet as citizens of the country expressed their discontent through the social media.

Enekwachi (2020) notes that this outburst of art and creativity helped to intensify, uphold and commemorate the essence of the movement. Yvonne Etinosa, a documentary photographer and visual artist, reflecting on her experience, stated that the significant role played by women during the EndSARS as reflected in some viral visual images were so inspiring. She stressed that the active participation of women during the protests acknowledges the fact that women can and should be encouraged to take on leadership positions in society. Images of the #EndSARS protests revealed the demands, rage, ambitions, and experiences of Nigerian citizens, which also reflected how resistance to power may be achieved without guns.

Enekwachi (2020) also recalls how Victor Ekpuk, a renowned visual artist, who contributed to the easing out of military control in Nigeria, prior to the restoration of democracy in 1999, reposted on his Facebook page, a drawing depicting a youth protest against the Nigerian military dictatorship from the early 1990s (Enekwachi (2020). This image however served as a visual narrative, telling a story and calling to mind previous protests against oppression and

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brutality even during the EndSARS protests. In essence, visual narratives in the form of visual images have proven to be an essential protest tool, not just for documenting and memorialising protest events, but also for communicating and reinforcing the overall message and essence of the movement. These visual representations reveal the intentions, demands, rage, ambitions, and experiences of the citizens. In the same vein, Abba (2020) observes that during the protest certain images which circulated on social media became symbols of the protest, inspiring Nigerians to take to the streets. These photos reflected the strength, solidarity, and fervent patriotism as well. Besides, Ukpong (2020) reports that certain EndSARS photos gave a narrative of what the protest was all about. These photos revealed acts of kindness and unity amidst the protesters and some police officers who offered help to some protesters showing the existence of good law enforcement officers despite all odds. Also, certain images depicted that everyone had a role within the historic protest and that advocating for change comes with certain duties; while some images showed mothers who took their children to the protest ground showing solidarity (see Ukpong, 2020). All of these images served as visual narratives because embedded in them were different messages, stories, ideologies, as well as experiences that were symbolic of the EndSARS protests. It is also assumed that embedded in these images are certain ideologies and reflections of resistance to power.

In essence, visual communication such as protest images is not only a result of the demonstrations, but they are also part of the symbolic activities that constitute the movement and its identity.

Hence, this paper aims to examine how visual images could serve as an effective tool for activism and protest movements by analysing selected images of the 2020 EndSARS protests in Nigeria. The specific objectives include;

- i. examine the representation of visual elements such as the people, objects and events in the selected images.
- ii analyse and investigate the message these visual elements communicate with respect to the EndSARS protests in Nigeria

2. Methodology/ Theoretical framework

This study adopts a qualitative research design. This involves the collection and analysis of purposively selected non-numerical data (photos) in order to help gain insights in achieving the objectives of the study. Data comprise photos obtained from different social media platforms (instagram and facebook). A total of 5 images were purposively sampled to be examined.

The theoretical Framework that guides this research is Kress and van Leeuwen theory of visual grammar. The theory of visual grammar is a social semiotic approach to visual communication and an established framework for multimodal analysis which was introduced

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by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). This framework is greatly influenced by Michael Halliday's 'metafunctions'. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that, like language, images have a grammatical structure that can be analysed for meaning. They posit that the meaning of an image is composed of three strands of meaning. These include; representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The representational meaning is realised in how experiences of the real world are depicted through objects, places and people, which are referred to as 'represented participants'. The interactive meaning is realised in the way readers or viewers are engaged using aspects like gaze, social distance and angle. Finally, the compositional meaning is realised in the information value, salience and framing of a text (image). These three principles can be applied in terms of the 'layout' of the text. However, this study focuses on the representational meaning of the image.

3. Analysis and discussion of findings

The representational meaning of an image is the message, idea or experience communicated through the depiction of certain elements. According to the theory of Visual Grammar, these elements are referred to as Represented Participants (RPs) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Represented participants are the people, places and object through which an image depicts the reality or conveys an idea or experience.

Image 1: Male and female representation



Both male and female actors are depicted in Figure 4 as equal participants. Both the lady and the man is seen carrying placards with inscription 'No More Audio Ban...', and hashtags ' #I am Nigerian, #EndPolicebrutality' with a look of anger and relentlessness. This implies that both men and women participated equally in the protest events. Although there has been protests in time past where protesters were largely males or females, the equal participation of both gender denotes that the concerns of the EndSARS protests are beyond differences rather a fight of young Nigerians regardless of gender , both young females and males have had a fair share of police brutality in Nigeria. These protesters, however, appear to be youthful and energetic, as shown in Image 1.

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Image 2: Child representation



Image 2 shows that even children participated actively in the demonstrations, speaking up regardless of their age. The children are captured sitting on the road with their placards and banners. The banner reads 'say no to police brutality', thus making them active participants of the protests. Although children do not always participate in protests and demonstrations, this highlights the dominating participation of the younger generation in the protests.

Image 3: Collectiveness-iconic solidarity



Image 3 suggest a symbolic action as the first of the young woman in Hijab, aimed towards the sky speaks of the protesters' solidarity for the cause of the protest. In this regards, the crowd being captured alongside this woman emphasizes the collectiveness and oneness of purpose of the EndSARS protesters.

Image 4: Nigerian flag



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The capture of the Nigerian flag with red/ blood drops on placards does not only speak of the nationality of the protesters, it also shows the grievances of the protesters as a nation. Although the 'white' part of the Nigerian flag signifies 'peace', the red drops on the flag suggest that there is no more 'peace' in Nigeria.

Image 5: Representation of the Police



Image 5 depicts a police van as the actor, with a spray of water emanating from the van towards two females. The females can be seen fleeing in a different direction to get away from the water. This implies that, although young men and women were protesting, police officers were also present at the protest ground. This informs the viewers that the protest was not just an affair of the protesters; police officers were also represented and appear to be in opposition to the activities of the protesters.

Conclusion

This research therefore has been able to highlight the representational meaning of the selected image of the EndSARS protests in Nigeria and thereby reiterating the significance of visual communication for activism and protest events. These images show that there was a dominating participation of the younger generation during the protests, although there is a possibility of the participation of other age groups. In addition, the police were also actively represented, however depicted as being opposed to the protesters' activities. While the protesters attempted to communicate their message to the public by lifting various objects such as banners with inscriptions, the police actions were aimed at the protesters, such as pouring water on them and attempting to disrupt the protest, which is contrary to their duties as law enforcement officers. Also, beyond the individual participation of the protesters, there was also a communal presence. In essence, these images do not only serve as visual representations of the activities of the protests, they also reveal the demands, rage and concerns of the EndSARS protests.

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