Conceptual Gaps in the Issues to Resolve Visual Complexities: A Contextual Evaluation of the Inspirations and Motivations in Enhancing Perceptions and Practices of Creative Thinking

Stephen T.F. Poon

King's College London, University of London, United Kingdom

stephentfpoon@aol.com

Abstract

This study addresses issues related to conceptual development of visual literacy skills, through a critical examination and evaluation of the role of effective visual design and its ideation through art and design practices. Research into the role of creative thinking as an emerging professional field of practice seeks to explore the depth of market dependence on the experiences, knowledge contribution and skills of designers for socio-economic advancement and cultural enrichment. In the broader cultural transformation marked by technological progress and a developing global marketplace, creative thinking and visual literacy are much sought after resources, be it on its own merit, as well as through collaborative ventures which incorporate insights from behavioural and marketing psychology, technology and media. As a form of cultural capital, artistic and creative resources help us understand the interrelationships between cognitive and emotional dimensions, how these factors help shape the totality of our cultural environment, innovate designers' working practices, and engage groups in society. The objective of study is premised on understanding how visual and new media literacies develop in tangent with the complexities and challenges of answering and edifying human needs, requiring comprehension, evaluation and interpretation of information. This research study examines visual literacy's effects on learning processes from acquiring facts, opening discussions, shaping reactions, creating ideas, reforming communities and enhancing social engagement. Qualitative interviews with practitioners establish attitudinal perceptions that the development of visual competencies must take into account socio-cultural contexts, inspirations and motivations critical to facilitate engagement in creative and market-driven environments. Findings provide pragmatic insights on how to cultivate and support improvements in ethical design practices, and in concluding, suggestions are offered for designer practitioners to discuss ways to critically use, evaluate and produce professional visual work throughout their careers.

Keywords: *aesthetics, creative thinking, design, socio-cultural, visual literacy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of design and visual literacy in the context of commercial practices is investigated in this research study, with critical concern for its increased importance for economic development and in reinforcing and improving the quality of human life (Ausburn and Ausburn, 1978). Various contextual elements of visuality – syntax, semantics, symbols, structures and spaces – are more than metaphorical concepts of art and culture. As a relatively newer branch of rhetorical study, it is seen as the 'bridge to knowing', rather than knowledge itself; where realisation is seated in the different contexts of cultural expressions and cultural boundaries (St Clair, 2000: 85). Of late, a number of critics are not convinced about design's abilities to demonstrate knowledge ideate information in the same coherence that verbalised language do, but much more in society are willingly embracing creative thinking for its complex task management and communication capabilities (Goodfellow, 2011: 136). As design practices mature, aesthetics and styling have gone from being back-end to end-user experiences for consumers, whereby design, sustainability, environmental impact, ethics and social responsibility must now function across the entire breadth of project planning requirements (Mononutu, 2010). Advances in creative thinking theories and integrative systems of technological applications have made it possible to undertake greater responsibility for the successful development of new ideas and innovations that leverage on cost-effectiveness, efficiency and speed, and help businesses solve complex problems, examine opportunities for fair human development across social divides, and open the way once only speculated upon, on long-sought industrial reforms.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The usefulness and role of design to provide visual solutions to real world challenges is evident in business

decision making and organisational culture debates (Kolko, 2015). A MacArthur Foundation report on digital media's role in culture reports that successful community engagement in technology networking is dependent on knowledge sharing; here is where visual and new media literacies should participate actively (Jenkins et al, 2006). Design educators insist that designing fields must no longer be viewed as commercialised fine artistry; organisational culture values such as integrity and transparency must not emanate solely from mere image expression of its "corporate soul" (Poynor, 2001: 10). Nevertheless, the risks and expectations of emerging design fields demand that the finest minds and talents be cultivated and recruited, in order to empower practitioners to serve socioeconomic needs, to contribute their experiences, knowledge and skills for social advancement, economic sustainability and cultural enrichment. What mandate the role of designers - as researchers, catalysts and practitioners - is the developing global marketplace and the need to simplify and humanise communication. Creative thinking often proposes substantial shifts from functional-based paradigms to ambiguous, psychological approaches, mobilising as many detractors as supporters, the latter persuaded by the potential benefits of creative thinking – emotional value proposition, collaboration, empathy, diversity and tolerance for failure to flourish - for institutional self-interest as well as socioeconomic and culture advancement (Kolko, 2015).

Organisational culture trends show the potential of visual, multimedia and digital literacy as distinct 21st-century enablers for social participation and learning, while the complexity and rigour which characterises intelligent design derives from visual imagination. Yet, could there be an argument to *let art be art*? That visual culture should have no more capacity that which aims to provoke, enlighten and provide perspectives; and is inseparable from traditions rather than have a functional position to address the problems of a global economy?

1.2 Purpose of Study

The objective of this study is to present preliminary evidence regarding visual literacy as a means to enhance and shape the totality of our cultural environment, innovate designers' working practices, and engage groups in society. The research study aims to:

- Identify conceptual gaps in the role of visual literacy that enhances design practices;
- Understand visual culture development from socio-cultural perspectives, in particular, how visual literacy skills builds critical social advancement;
- Evaluate the inspirations and motivation for artists by discussing contextual definitions of visual culture complexities and its ideation in visual literacy.

1.3 Research Questions

As a framework of research, the following questions will be addressed:

- *How do visuals as a language strengthen human communication?*
- *Given the language of art has enlarged and broadened, how have designed images changed to accommodate the intellectual evolution of cultural and universal contexts?*
- *How can balance between aesthetic influences, professional ethics and technological reference of visual communication practices be achieved?*
- *How do practitioners stay motivated and inspired in traditional visual methods while engaging with new dimension in visual literacy development?*

1.4 Significance of the Study

Contemporary culture is increasingly captured by and reflected in visual materials. The tipping point of design's function is its mainstream adaptability to emerging hybrid media genres; albeit many researchers believe it is increasingly hard to distinguish contrived images and their precise purpose (Brunner, 1994). In order to understand its potential and downsides, skills literacy should also be qualified as a valid tool that advances social impact. The International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA, 2012) usefully defined visual literacy as visual information processing as part of learning and sensorial experiences, including integrative, discriminative and interpretive competencies.

The contextual importance of visual culture must emanate from the conceptual premises that, if image is to be defined as a language, then society clearly needs to have abilities to understand, evaluate and produce visual messages. This process is adaptive, but not all society have the resources or skills necessary to understand daily torrents of visual content, or to effectively *'read'* visuals that communicate history and culture. Implicitly, the difficulty in grasping the essences and nuances of visuals often hampers our abilities to critically understand relationships between perceived purpose and reality of images. Hence, being visually literate improves one's functional grasp of social implications. Visual literacy, it is further argued, is the ability to appropriate, conceptualise and communicate information through learning in terms

of images, and is an essential skill for practitioners in making decisions about the commodious usages of visual materials. Even as international educational communities embrace visual enhancements in instruction, yet the connections and convergence of visual and verbal texts had always been evident, when the task of recording massive volumes of data led to visualisation of words into graphics (Stokes, 2001). Arguably, a great deal of information is better presented visually rather than verbally (Thermopylae Science, 2014). A review of literature is visited upon next, to examine several discursive aspects.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The extent of conscious design use is invariably traced to the growth of sectors that wanted to optimise inventions and production technologies to progressively transit from agrarian into manufacturing and industrial societies over the centuries (Owen, 1988: 1-2). Mass consumption came to depend on the power of designed imagery to produce market and goods differentiation. This included strategic uses of cultural symbols to portray brand appeals and represent business corporations, growing in tandem with technologies of mass media that once distributed cultural images to audiences (WJT Mitchell, 1994, in Mirzoeff, 1998: 5). Recent history shows consumers today have greater reliance on visual-spatial orientation for information presentation, fomenting a late 20th-century movement whereby complex computations and scientific data are presented graphically. Visualisation in communication systems heightens concepts, while graphical interactions help users make sense of data that seems unintelligible or too massive for scripted, print documentation (Jenkins et al, 2006: 30). As a form of evolving human communication, design's obvious advantage was simply its *ease of use* and *ease of learning* (Owen, 1998: 8).

Visual language structuration and symbolisms are much more global in character than verbal languages. Barry (1997) posited that the conventions of visual communication are a mixture of universal and parametric cultural conventions, accessible to all. Visual literacy is a combination of syntax and semantics, form and content. Syntax is the appearance which may be attributed or limited by, the visual elements. Semantics and semiotics refer to visual content; the way images fit into the process of communication. Roland Barthes in 1964 provides a conceptual framework for studying word-and-image relations in cultural artefacts such as advertisements and media photography, to capture the constituting relationship between literacy form and content (Evans and Hall, 2005: 33-40).

Visual thinking, in its sense of being a tool of information literacy, is described as the ability to read and understand pictorial or graphical information, and to interpret, viz. to turn such information into graphics or forms that help communicate the information (Wileman, 1993: 114; St Clair, 2000: 89). The learning of visual literacy is also one of "interpreting visual messages accurately and to create such messages" (Heinich et al, 1999, cited by Stokes, 2001). Sinatra (1986: 5) described visual literacy as an organising force in promoting understanding, retention, and recall of concepts, enabling active reconstruction of experiences to create sense and meaning, as well as recognising possibilities through new ideas, forms and innovations (Stokes, 2001). Practitioners are aware that contextual differentiation develop and shape cognitive understanding of visuality on three levels of visual language: elements, dialectics and rhetoric.

Visual elements are the phenomena that build the totality and expressive quality of an image. Fundamental elements include line, colour and shape; compounded elements are form, space, and composition; dependent elements include repetition, point of view and moment; while material elements range from textures, techniques and experiments. *Visual dialectics* refer to signs and symbols used to evoke communication, with parametric limitations such as cultural signification and construction of visual meaning. Visual symbols, while seeking universal ideation, performs a multiplicity of diverse roles in indicating experiences and communicating information processing of human cultures and communities yet their cognitive complexities creates patterns of *visual rhetoric* (St Clair, 2000: 87-89). The value of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa as a masterpiece is framed around visual meaning as its rhetorical reference: meaning precedes cultural recognition. By contrast, a Ming dynasty artefact qualifies as Eastern without any detailed information. Visual elements are an instrumental form of balance between verbal and visual cues in design practices such as photography, and the natural interdependence between the two expressive modes can foster critical social dialogues, creating meaningful symbolisms and messages (Bourdieu, in Evans and Hall, 2005).

Visual literacy for problem solving and critical thinking can be applied to all learning; however, the creative professions are increasingly called to justify their social engagement in the context of promoting meaningful change (Poynor, 2001: 12). Designers, through collective voices of resistance (graphic designer Ken Garland's *First Things First Manifesto* in 1964, reaffirmed in 1999 by modern practitioners, being one famed instance), have been noted to account for their value to society through reconstructing and re-evaluating their practices and processes, and to justify their use of visual talents for the production and

manipulation of incessant commercials and images, and committing reckless visual fraud (Bierut, 2007: 52-53). 20th-century visual communication has continually remapping its roles to suit new activities, covering increasingly broad scopes and initiating new approaches and techniques to deal with complexities by leveraging new developments in digital technologies, resulting in profound changes in terms of challenges, issues and perspectives in design practice. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)'s conceptual definition for visual literacy refers to an individual's "abilities to learn to interpret, analyse, evaluate and use images reflectively and ethically" (cited by American Library Association, ALA, n.d.).
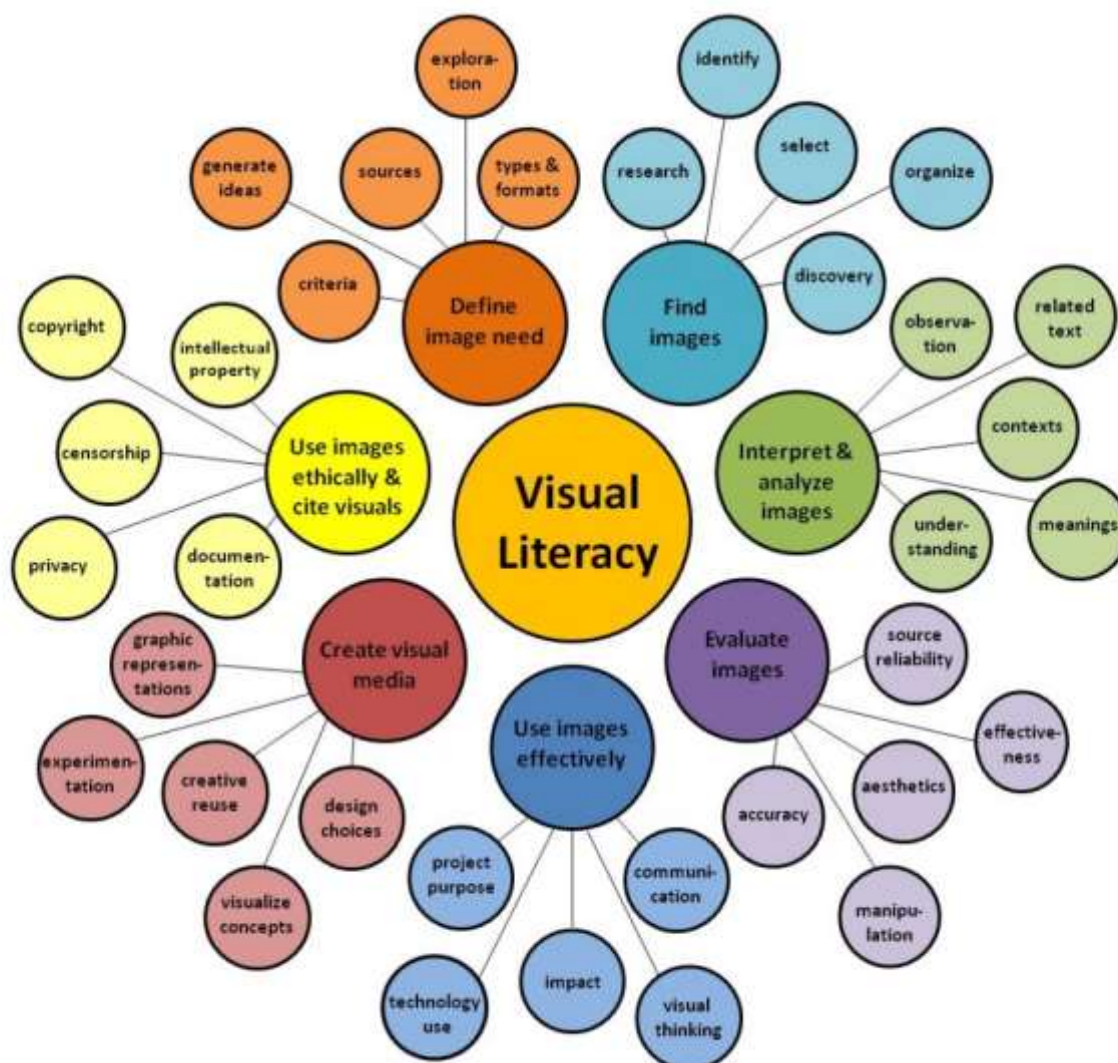

Figure 1   **Model of Visual Literacy (Source: ACRL, 2013)**

Visual literacy (Figure 1) as a witness of cultural transformation and reorganisation is symbolically marking its evolution. In 1994, for instance, European public libraries, art galleries and museums had reportedly approached the then-novel concept of open access digital media, by collaborating and producing visual documentations of artefacts of socio-political, cultural and historical value through extensive archival of educational text repositories, multimedia presentations and online collections to enable access by scholars and the general public (Veltman, 1994: 21-22). The emergence of technologies has changed traditional methods of image production, but antithetically, in certain industries like computer-animated feature film-making, also helped fosters human creativity as the cultural outcome of talent investment at organisational levels (Catmull, 2008). Design practice today reveals a deep concern for the widening contexts in which design education is delivered, in its intent to change, delight, inform and fulfil human needs (Norman and Klemmer, 2014). Some researchers challenge traditional visual learning that

emphasise disinterested aesthetics, taste and refined cultural consumption, and question when designing arts may cease to be separate fields that operates according to set rules, and instead be forged into more liberalised, complex and contextualised environments, where theories, principles, case studies and evolving conceptual approaches can be appropriated to develop more effective, ethical, practical real-world solutions (Mirzoeff, 1998).

2.1 Conceptual Framework: Socio-Cultural Perspectives

Rationalising the uses of art and art forms is relative, and in each social condition, art's social importance may implicate the collective reception due to its reproducibility: the mechanical reproduction of works designed for reactive or progressive movements, not of individuals' contemplation (Benjamin, 1969: 14-15). Social constructionist theories of literacy development as a "changing and socially conditioned notion" have been fostered with the basic aim of broader access to learning visual media culture (World Commission on Culture and Development, WCCD 1995: 160). This line of thinking can be traced to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 5-6) who considered the legitimacy of social separation between those who produce aesthetic works (artists), as a distinct economic condition against those who consume (viewers and audiences). Believing the pursuit of aesthetics to be a classifier of culture, whose meanings result from seeing and representing existence in particular contexts, Bourdieu argues that art is boiled down as a purified, sublimated domain that requires "pure gaze" to relate realities and represent human imagination, and necessarily formed out of practitioners' *habitus* or disposition systems and interpretive skills gathered through the lens of "taste".

Since designing is perceived as the essence of fabrication, a critical socio-economic perspective challenges visual proponents with multiple literacy issues, as not every level of society will have the skills or opportunities to fully understand the role of images in and through diverse, cultural-based conventions. In furthering Bourdieu's perspectives, artists and design fraternities could not feasibly claim to produce outputs of value for serving human needs if political semantics exploit the concept of "communities of taste" and the experience-based economy today assume control in the service of corporate ideologies in an open market, thus forcing artists to become business people merely to evaluate one's stock value of taste (Anderson and Pold, 2011). Other aspects of contemporary socio-cultural development continue to legitimise visual practices. Douglass Kellner (1998) proposed that multiple literacies are necessary to meet the challenges of today's society; literacies include print literacy, visual literacy, aural literacy, media literacy, computer literacy, cultural literacy, social literacy, and eco literacy. Rick Poynor (2001: 8) views visual literacy as a gradual process of gaining sophistication of perceptions, conception and image vocabulary. Popular judgements of visual works such as films, sculpture, theatre productions, etc. are increasingly wrought from understanding visualisation as systems of representation and signification that allows human thought production and communication about reality (Kazmierczak, 2001). For instance, stage symbolism theories connote the use of performances in cutting across sacred spheres of culture to trace and document narrative memories. Performance arts researchers argue that the use of powerful imagery as material evidence to expose dissent and dissenters of mainstream politics makes them a contentious blank page, an empty frame, "the frame with no art" that awaits intelligent decryption and interpretation (Minh-ha, 2015: 138). If visual literacy is to be regarded as a language, it necessitates knowledge of how to communicate using these languages, which includes acuity to visual messages and critical reading or viewing images. Visual literacy, like verbal literacy, is thus culturally-specific, while some symbols or images are perceived to be universal and timeless, globally understood and often, reformative in nature.

Additionally, social considerations of visual's role are found in defining, demonstrating, and evaluating the impact of images as elements of narrative differentiation in proving political and cultural change (Rogoff, in Mirzoeff, 1998). Sociological perspectives help point to viewers' conscious understanding of their position in relating to the images and the mediums of cultural communication. This is a particular consideration for younger, contemporary visual designers who must often seek inspiration yet avoid imitating peers' work they view online or via social media networks to compare quality of output and outcomes, while observing audiences' critiques and reactions (Newport, 2016).

2.2 Issues in Creative Thinking Processes

Expertise, creative thinking and task motivation, according to Amabile (1998, cited in McAdam and McClelland, 2002: 89) are the three factors which encourage the development of high output; the absence of which discourages persons of "normal capability from idea generation, resulting in limited creativity and innovation". Inspired by multiple sources yet likely indifferent to extrinsic motivation, creative workers synthesise passion and discovery. Intrinsic motivational processes which create their desire to be creative such as developing leadership potential, recognition by peers and perceived status, determine outcomes

(McAdam and McClelland, 2002).   Developing original work is always desirable for artists and designers (Van Camp, 2007: 247).   Originality, the elementary heart of artistry, is the outcome of one's capacity to act or think independently.   Objects, shapes and forms of inspiration may have no monetary or cultural value: a pile of string might be more visually engaging than a sports car, while for design students, inspiration is often from direct environment engagement (Reading, 2009).   In the visual environment, repeated engagement or cursory glances shape different contexts and dimensions (Webster, 2012). Visualisation, as the process of transferring cultural information and experiences enables the communicator and audiences to share a common understanding of the signified and objectified message or object (Mirzoeff, 1998: 6).   Drawing and illustrating become a fundamental part of learning to visualise; visual texts such as scripts, sketches and storyboards are crafted to sum up experiences and problems that shapes character or speculate on promoting social progress through time, to derive and capture complex interrelationships between perceptions and truth through visual representations.   Unlike mass media which aspire to influence others' way of thinking (O'Keefe and McCornack, 1987), artists draw what they see and try, through drawing, to learn from what they perceive.

Professional visual communicators must carefully select and decide the necessary elements, to "distinguish superficial, inferior and pseudo-sophisticated messages from [what's] real and valuable" (Ausburn and Ausburn, 1978).   Every revolution in design technologies produces communities of sceptics, and hence, the capacities of visualisation as knowledge creation and cultural learning competencies, in the new media era of advanced technologies, are continually discussed in scholarly circles (Elkin, 2009: 98-103). Contemporary artists – Duchamp, Picasso and Warhol, among others – have raised provocative debates about their experiences (and that of their peers) in "recontextualising" traditional visual culture, in search of aesthetic exploration viz. appropriating and reproducing others' works or elements of popular culture in their outputs (Akpang, 2013; Naumann, 2012; Van Camp, 2007).

Assuming the complexity of visual information as a configuration of the world's contradictions, paradoxes and complexities, design practice is framed in a dialogical relationship with visual literacy.   Today, designing cannot claim to make do without digital technology; simultaneously, designers are urged to revise professional methods and aim for ethical approaches within project structure implementation that adheres to design protocol (Jenkins et al, 2006: 16).   Traditional graphic designers jump into critical stance as soon as the notion of 'screen technologies' is mentioned:

> "Dematerialisation [of observed elements] is a cultural phenomenon in itself: perception and transience, ambient media, portable devices ... all attempt to reinforce interaction between human beings and the machines that serve them.   [Yet] ..., there is qualitative difference between [interactive and electronic] hyperspace and passive screen environments (e.g. television and film), as the celebration of the journey itself – the promenade – is as important as the destination" (Armstrong, 2009: 120-121).

An alternative methodological paradigm, the "authorial avoidance strategy" (Rock, 2004, in Bierut et al, 2006: 225-232) has even been proposed by graphic designer and 2006 National Design Award recipient Michael Rock: a pragmatic philosophy best described by the mantra, 'Daring to be Creative' - one which does not oblige practitioners to address copying issues but to enjoy the research process and to strip themselves of responsibilities that holds back the potential breadth of aesthetics in their outputs.

Rock also raises the question of immutability: Should established or successful designers continue attempting different approaches in their work *to change society* (the object of designing), or would they become so indifferent and comfortable with their creations - and detached from society - that after a saturation point of working for many masters, they merely produce reactions, to reflect corporate investments, trappings of large-scale nationalism and branding that do not qualify as proper "discourse, discovery and experimentation" (Rock, 2004, in Bierut et al, 2006: 233-4)? If designing is an investment in culture, then the questions are conditional to understanding the distinctly tough issues of creative thinking processes that every practitioner need to face up to, and seek clarity for why they do what they do, more than being anxious about "getting people to like what [they] do" (Rock, in Bierut et al, 2006: 224).

To take this discussion further, the next section of research moves into designing a framework of thought analysis to understand practitioners' perspectives about their role, conceptual and working habits, and ethical debates on works reproduction practices.

3.   RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Relevant data was gathered from literature and databases in order to analyse and arrive at a more complete understanding of practice complexities.

3.1 Framework for Data Analysis

Qualitative method was used for data collection as individual interviews are effective to seek insights on practitioners' personal values, behaviours, perspectives and experiences. Interviews have been demonstrated in literature as a reliable qualitative method for consensus reaching in a variety of content areas in design practice. Subsequently, the goal is to advance the field of visual literacy by scoping the problem and possibly identify solutions.

3.2 Data Collection and Instrumentation

This study was conducted using the qualitative method. Permission was granted from the researcher's institution to collect data from participants. To investigate the problem, experts in the field had to be identified. The criteria used to select participants were demonstrated expertise in fields of visual literacy. Contact with participants consisted of an introductory letter with an explanation of the study objectives and a request to participate on a voluntary basis, and to be interviewed. The introductory letter was distributed via e-mail and also onsite visitation in an initial meeting has ensued.

Unequivocally, the essential instrumentation used to gain insights was the one-on-one in-depth interview through online, after the pro-situational option results in immediate inconveniences for the decision. Online interview is more convenient for both interviewer and interviewee in terms of flexibility of time arrangement. Secondary data sources guided the accomplishment of goals of the study. Literature included information from journals supplied insights, while online interview questionnaires were distributed to practitioners through social networking. In-depth interview is the instrument to get the story behind the practitioners' experiences. The 6 participants are: Magoz, a nomadic illustrator from Barcelona; Raphael Charles, a contemporary concept designer from Brussels, Belgium; Chris Lee, a design director from Singapore; D.U.R.A, a contemporary pattern designer from Malaysia; Susan Kare, an inspiring graphic designer from United States and Jeff Friesen, a prestigious award winning photographer from Canada. The practitioners responded independently using a set of questionnaire sent through electronic mail. Without being overly rigid and prescriptive, the replies were analysed for commonalities, and each practitioner's responses was synthesised.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The groups include qualitative results in practitioners' style, new dimension, issues, information, differences and materiality. This section presents the findings from the analysis.

4.1 Style

Style differentiates one practitioner from another. Yet the "false" opportunity to favour style, notes Helfand and Drenttel (in Bierut et al, 2006: 202-206) should not be at the expense of content and substance. Certain styles have become influential in image production today, but Charles notes,
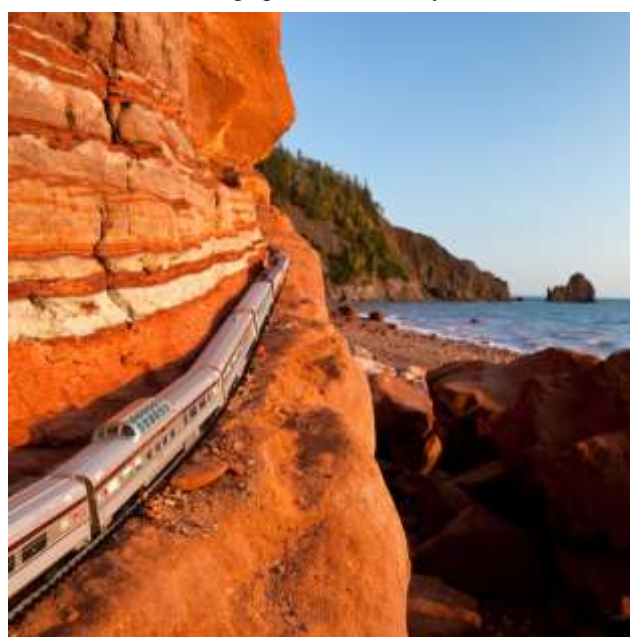

Figure 2   Ghost Train Crossing Canada by Jeff Friesen

What's meaningful today could be crass tomorrow, so dominating styles should never influence designers to the point that they want to change their style based on every fad that comes along. Demands of the commercial art world help our industry accept fresh and unusual styles and at the same time, gain commercial value too.

For Friesen, core photography practices have evolved insofar as technology develops, and the only real advancement is "the photographer's ability to make and communicate art" (Figure 2).   For Lee, a different perspective is shared, in that style, once reached, may remain relatively static, since "illustration is my hobby, and [myself], the illustrator, a hobbyist".

4.2 New Dimensions

Traditional methods in digital painting have created new dimensions. Magoz states,

Whether pencils, oils or digital tools, our creativity is unstoppable.   Traditional and computer-based mediums are complementary ... in my eyes, there is no gap in between.   While computers have made everything sleeker, faster and more uniform, offline works have different depths and textures.

Susan Kare thinks practitioners should embrace both mediums and be willing to expand their work to suit (Figure 3):

The art of designed images has changed greatly with software which saves time and money, and creatively applies techniques to birth different styles and feels.

Figure 3   The Iconic Pixels of Susan Kare

Magoz concedes that not every image produced digitally is great but at least, "we should experiment constantly and express ourselves through innovative methods to discover new levels of creativity" (Figure 4).   D.U.R.A encourages younger practitioners to do something different or unique with their work.

Untrained artists should not consider themselves as designers or visual artists merely because they can do a little trick using Photoshop.

Figure 4   Rediscovering Mutual Funds by Magoz

4.3 Working Issues

Interviewees agreed market prices and economic circumstances have big impacts.

> *Advertising agencies cut budgets hiring commercial graphic artists in order to reap bigger chunks of [profit], so I feel many illustrators are either underpaid, or hampered by payment delays.* (Susan Kare)

Another issue is when artworks are reproduced or shown without permission. The value of copying to design practice has been debated endlessly, yet, as images are accessible online, many different illustrations are available.

"Copying someone's style will be noticed," claims Chris Lee. Whether in print, electronic or multimedia forms, copyright infringements are more prevalent than ever (Figure 5). Works used without consent is tantamount to copyright violation.

> *Although legal action isn't always financially feasible, it is very important to be prepared. My illustrations were once stolen and printed on T-shirts by two big fashion companies. The incident opened my eyes to get my work watermarked before publishing them online.* (D.U.R.A)

Figure 5   Utterubbish, Singapore by Chris Lee

4.4 Discovering Inspiration

According to practitioners, sufficiency of background information is crucial before starting on a new project or assignment to drive direction. Raphael Charles (Figure 6) embraces a breadth of sources, conventional and otherwise:

> *My research involves compiling various reference sources and images; they help me stay on track. The other things I collect for project references include colour palettes, photography angles, fashion ideas and interesting landscapes or environments.*

Magoz, however, is cautious when stating his process of deriving inspiration.

> *We copy someone else to create our own, ultimate styles. But sometimes, too much information or influences is unnecessary - time will develop [one's] originality.*

Friesen, however, thinks the Internet has allowed practitioners to be more close-knit – with consequential effects of either belonging or being anti-establishment within industries:

> *Everyone knows what everyone else is doing and it is trendy to be trendy, even if it means people are copying each other. It's important to share with, and be inspired by, others; otherwise nothing new and unexpected would be created. Starting work may require copying at first to get a feel of how others create, but it should never stop there.*

Figure 6   **Wood+Magnet Natural/Padouk by Raphael Charles**

Time must be spent researching master artworks and classical techniques, but for D.U.R.A, there is a fine line between starting trends and copying (Figure 7):

> *I would say the difference is having your own voice about things you love, rather than ripping others straight off. Younger artists inevitably borrow from peers. With maturity, they move from getting warped about other practitioners' styles and methods.*

Figure 7   **Hydraskins Gadget Skins by D.U.R.A.**

Lee adds,

> *We must stay focused on achieving artistic goals, and start to incorporate our own aesthetics. We'd soon have a 'feel' of our personal styles. Though I admit it can be frustrating to feel blocked at times, but it is part of the process.*

Fresh experiences help overcome blockage, e.g. from movies, novels, literature, media, the environment (or a change thereof). Inspiration hits when they least expect. Says Magoz,

> *It is never out of thin air - I need to prepare in advance by consistently improving my creative insights. I have a journal where I list projects to be attempted. Scribbling notes is really important to help me remember ideas for future concepts to explore.*

Inspiration seeking often requires the practitioner to 'step away' and do other activities to regain direction.

> *Cooking helps me release tension.* (Raphael Charles)

> *I'm inspired after seeing beautiful home interiors online. It works like a charm, building up my excitement to start working again.* (Jeff Friesen)

4.5 Resolving Visual Literacy Complexities

For professional design projects, strong work ethics is a crucial consideration, since creativity is an "intangible, elusive" derivative, not often agentic of business management planning or part of marketing objectives (Amabile and Khaire, 2008).   Participatory culture practices of organisations today (Jenkins et al, 2006) dictates a modern convention that clients of design projects are responsible in clarifying their preferences where stylistic issues arise, but at the same time, allow creative talent sufficient space to create and innovate.

In an increasingly ambiguous, interdisciplinary environment that designing is often situated, some believe that art and design practitioners must eschew over-dependence on inspiration through references, even removing social media infotainment from workplace communication, and distancing themselves from various "shallow" distractions that hinders concentration and hampers meaningful work and creativity. Applied in particular to Gen-Y professionals, Georgetown University's Professor Cal Newport argues in *Deep Work* (2016: 126-7) that valuable creative endeavours are the net result of pre-existing passion. Since it is not always clear that the best works are executed out of energetic plunges into sourcing references, for younger practitioners, the journey is more enjoyable if they stumbled upon deep work, where creativity occurs through familiarity and "serendipity".   Visual practitioners bring different perspectives that either independently or in collaboration with others, attempt to produce social transformation through aesthetically, purposefully communicated messages, sensations and influences.   In this regard, many practitioners desist from crediting technology as the reason for pushing the creativity needle; such resistance contribute to debates about parallels between conceptual art and art-and-technology (Shanken, 2002: 436), yet the answers and demonstrated outcomes are not sufficiently satisfying.

The continuity of visual-making lies at the centre of professional design practices, but it is evident several other apparent discourses currently dominate.   The frailty of copy culture, as demonstrated by interviewees' responses, is considered a clear flouting of artistic integrity which undermines artistic ownership.   Design practitioners have to continue understanding researching to investigate the new stretch boundaries beyond the traditional limits of art materiality.   Correspondingly, must continue learning and understanding the role of technology and visual media impacts in redefining aesthetic inspirations, to improve aesthetic discourses and judgements in forming new works, or which could revive meanings of valuable visual archives.

With much compelling theories and evidence calling on institutions of learning to blend multimedia into language skills development, educators of art, design and visual culture need to strive to increase educational content that offers active visual literacy skills learning in its various mediated forms, because of the complex ways in which visuals and traditional texts interrelate that facilitates learning and communication (Macedo and Steinberg, 2007: 149-156).   Without critical media literacies, art and design students would be unable to harness the persuasive power of visual media, or to access information and fully participate in democratic self-expression and social progress" (Kahn and Kellner, 2005: 245).

Documenting, preserving and providing intellectual access to visual records will become an increasingly important aspect of archival work as such materials proliferate and are widely available in electronic forms. By becoming familiar with society's levels of visual awareness, developing acuity towards characteristics of image-creating technologies as well as the conventions and modes of expression associated with particular media, expanded visual literacy will enable clearer, more effective descriptions of visual resources as valuable materials of catalogue and records, in order for future practitioners to evaluate how visual literacy keeps pace with anticipated requirements of design communities (Helfand and Drenttel, in Bierut, Drenttel and Heller, 2006).

5.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study calls on creative practitioners to identify the many existing conceptual gaps in understanding the impact of visual literacy skills; to re-evaluate the critical contribution of design literacy practices, and their outcomes on society.   As the qualitative research conducted shows, in practicing designers' point of view, visual literacy practices are riddled with identity as well as socio-cultural and ethical complexities.   Stylistic differences arise from, and are dictated by, individual personalities, and a lifelong development of personal identity, habits and character.   Visual makers must acknowledge that a particular wished – for style may not be for them, and to learn to master specific styles suited to their personal attributes.   Stylistic individuality mirrors the practitioner's capability to produce results which stretches innovation and creates opportunities for collaboration, and achieves the purpose of human communication in which visual language has a role to express, represent and strengthen.

This research also found that practicing artists and designers are wary about the processes of 'recontextualising' visual culture via appropriating and reproducing pop culture elements (Van Camp, 2012).   That they perceive copying others' concepts, borrowing or reflecting sources of inspiration for their work is *not an end but the means to an end*, it then seems crucial for commercial practitioners to change the orientation of their creative thinking - from one that blindly defends their authorship and authenticity, or avoids labels that their work is "generic, recycled, already done, pre-existing" (Rock, 2004, in Bierut et al, 2006: 232), to one where they add narrative value towards the treatment of resources, subjects, texts and outputs.   Literature shows a substantial component of contemporary visual literacy references increasingly reliant on interactive mediums such as sound, movement and imagery, and open-source references. Technology is the new symbolic reality of "what is imaginable" and for visual communication fields, new media such as online technologies enables references to be accessible for amateur and established practitioners alike.   As a social process of learning, the obligation for design practitioners is thus no long strictly about addressing copying and copyright issues, but to broaden their understanding of social responsibilities towards their end consumers and stakeholders.   Another complexity is the discovery of artistic inspiration as an external motivator, which encompasses a big map of concepts and feelings.   As designed images represent tangible outcomes of visual language, the process of working from inspiration itself improves artistic vision, an understanding and appreciation of mediums, and contributes to building remarkable cultural and universal contexts that art and design situate in.

This research confirms that rigorous visual literacy development is an essential core practice that shapes design professionalism.   It also affirms that a contextual gap exists, in differentiating between replication and copying of aesthetic influences, and the application of professional creative ethics.   Future research could address the challenges design thinkers and field workers face, when called upon to commercially replicate or reproduce elements of original ideas, and to study why investment into authentic styles are crucial.   Studies mapping design students' cognitive and emotional processing abilities when dealing with commercial sector requirements are also useful; improving bargaining and negotiation skills would form another important aspect of continuing education.   Qualitative analysis into tactics which nurture good behaviour and provide motivation can enable growth in the designer's thinking and learning processes, besides expanding their horizons and increasing art's value in facing the future demands of industry.   To reduce the possibility of heedless copying, creativity laboratories and toolbox programmes on traditional visual methods are necessary.   Future open collaborations via new media tools could involve artists, designers, regulators, enterprise owners and academics, to determine where opportunities are available to incorporate aesthetic preferences and vision into commercial sector branding.

As Keedy (in Bierut, Drenttel and Heller, 2006: 199) puts it, "Context is something *that is* (emphasis added).   […] Design is in the world – not in you".   To foster the discovery of personal styles, design practitioners must work harder on refining these styles and enlarging the scope of inspirations in communicating and advocating their own judgment and knowledge, depending less on publicly-available visual ideas, or even bravely opting out of it.   As practice these image-specific skills in their professional work, their visual literacy will grow and develop.   In this world of designed images, visual literacy becomes vital.

REFERENCES

American Library Association, ALA (n.d.) *Keeping Up with … Visual Literacy*. Contributors: N.E. Brown, K. Bussert, D. Hattwig and A. Medaille. Available at http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/visual_literacy

ACRL (2013) *Visual Literacy Array based on ACRL's Visual Literacy Standards*. By D. Hattwig, K. Bussert and A. Medaille. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Akpang, C.E. (2013) Traditionalism in Contemporary Art: Re-contextualising African Ideographs through Hybrid Aesthetics. *Journal of Arts and Design Studies*, (11): 25-36.

Amabile, T. and Khaire, M. (2008, October) Creativity and the Role of the Leader. *Harvard Business Review*. Available at https://hbr.org/2008/10/creativity-and-the-role-of-the-leader

Andersen, C.U. and Pold, S. (2011) *Is There a Conceptual Gap between Art and Business?* Istanbul: 17th International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA 2011). Available at http://isea2011.sabanciuniv.edu/paper/there-conceptual-gap-between-art-and-business

Armstrong, H. (2009) *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Ausburn, L. and Ausburn, F. (1978) Visual literacy: Background, Theory and Practice. *Programmed Learning and Educational Technology* (PLET), 15(4): 291-297.

Barry, A.N.S. (1997) *Visual Intelligence, Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication.* New York: University of New York Press.

Benjamin, W. (1969) *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. H. Arendt, ed. New York: Schocken Books/Random House Inc.

Bierut, M. (2007) *79 Short Essays on Design*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Bierut, M., Drenttel, W. and Heller, S. (2006) *Looking Closer 5: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*. New York: Allworth Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brunner, C. (1994) Teaching Visual Literacy. *Electronic Learning Journal*, 14(3): 16.

Catmull, E. (2008, September) How Pixar Fosters Collective Creativity. *Harvard Business Review*. Available at: https://hbr.org/2008/09/how-pixar-fosters-collective-creativity

Elkin, J. (2009) *Visual Literacy*. London: Taylor & Francis/Routledge.

Evans, J. and Hall, S. (2005) *Visual Culture: The Reader*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Goodfellow, R. (2011) Literacy, Literacies and the Digital in Higher Education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(1): 131-144.

Heinich, R., Molenda, M., Russell, J. D., & Smaldino, S. E. (1999). *Instructional Media and Technologies for Learning* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

International Visual Literacy Association, IVLA (2012, August 14) *What is "Visual Literacy?"*. Available at http://ivla.org/new/what-is-visual-literacy-2/

Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Clinton, K., Weigel, M. and Robison, A.J. (2006) The New Media Literacies: Skills needed for full engagement in today's participatory culture. In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st-Century.* NML White Paper. Chicago, IL: The MacArthur Foundation.

Kahn, R. and Kellner, D. (2005) Reconstructing Technoliteracy: A multiple literacies approach. *E-Learning*, 2(3): 238-251.

Kazmierczak, E.T. (2001) A Semiotic Perspective on Aesthetic Preferences, Visual Literacy and Information Design. *Information Design Journal*, 10(2): 176-187.

Kellner, D. (1998) Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogy in a Multicultural Society. *Educational Theory*, 48(1): 103-122.

Kolko, J. (2015, September) Design Thinking Comes of Age. *Harvard Business Review*. Available at https://hbr.org/2015/09/design-thinking-comes-of-age

McAdam, R. and McClelland, J. (2002) Individual and team-based idea generation within innovation management: Organisational and research agendas. *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 2: 86-97.

Macedo, D. and Steinberg, S.R. (2007) *Media Literacy: A Reader*. New York: Peter Lang Inc.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (1994) *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Minh-ha, T.T. (2015) The Image and the Void. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 15(1): 131-140.

Mirzoeff, N. (1998) *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Mononutu, C. (2010, April 13) Design Social Responsibility: Ethical Discourse in Visual Communication Design Practice. *Desain Grafis Indonesia*. Available at http://dgi-indonesia.com/design-social-responsibility-ethical-discourse-in-visual-communication-design-practice/

Naumann, F.M. (2012) *The Recurring, Haunting Ghost: Essays on the Art, Life and Legacy of Marcel Duchamp*. New Haven: Readymade Press.

Newport, C. (2016) *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.

Norman, D. and Klemmer, S. (2014, March 25) State of Design: How Design Education Must Change. *LinkedIn (Pulse)*. Available at https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140325102438-12181762-state-of-design-how-design-education-must-change

O'Keefe, B.J. and McCornack, S.A. (1987) Message Design Logic and Message Goal Structure Effects on Perceptions of Message Quality in Regulative Communication Situations. *Human Communication Research*, 14: 68-92.

Owen, C.L. (1988, October 20) *Design Education and Research for the 21st-Century*. Speech presented at the First

International Design Forum, Singapore. From Proceedings of the First Internal Design Forum, Singapore Trade Development Board: 34-45.

Poynor, R. (2001) *Obey the Giant: Life in the Image World.* London: August Media Ltd.

Reading, C. (2009) Sources of Inspiration: How Design Students Learn from Museum Collections. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education* 8(2): 109-121.

Rock, M. (2004) Mad Dutch Disease. *Premsela Lecture*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Stichting voor Nederlandse Vormgeving.

Shanken, E.A. (2002) Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art. *Leonardo: MIT Press Journals* 35(4): 433-438.

Sinatra, R. (1986) *Visual Literacy Connections to Thinking, Reading and Writing*. Chicago, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

St Clair, R. N. (2000) Visual Metaphor, Cultural Knowledge, and the New Rhetoric. In *Learn in Beauty: Indigenous Education for a New Century*. Arizona: Northern Arizona University.

Stokes, S. (2001) Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective. *Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education*. Available at http://ejite.isu.edu/Volume1No1/Stokes.html

Thermopylae Sciences (2014, September 15) *Humans Process Visual Data Better*. Available at http://www.t-sciences.com/news/humans-process-visual-data-better

Van Camp, J. C. (2007) Originality in Postmodern Appropriation of Art, *Journal of Arts Management, Law & Society,* 36(4): 247-258.

Veltman, K. (1994) How the Information Highway Can Transform Education: Reflections on McLuhan's Vision. *Multicomm*, 94: 221-247.

Webster, C. (2012) The Journey and Movement, Repetition and Time: Drawing within my visual practice. *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 11(1): 27-47.

Wileman, R. E. (1993) *Visual Communicating*. New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications.

World Commission on Culture and Development, WCCD (1995) *Our Creative Diversity*. Pretoria, South Africa.

IMAGES

Figure 1: *Visual Literacy Array based on ACRL's Visual Literacy Standards* by D. Hattwig, K.Bussert, and A. Medaille. Copyright 2013 The Johns Hopkins University Press. This image first appeared in PORTAL: LIBRARIES AND THE ACADEMY, Volume 13, Issue 1, January 2013, p.75. [Image]. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/visual_literacy

Figure 2: Friesen, J. (2012) *Ghost Train Crossing Canada* [Image]. Retrieved from http://www.jeff-friesen.com/canadian-ghost-train-crossing-canada-jeff-friesen-photography/

Figure 3: Kare, S. (2014) *The Iconic Pixels of Susan Kare* [Image]. Retrieved from http://kare.com/

Figure 4: Magoz (2013) *Rediscovering Mutual Funds*, Money Sense [Image]. Retrieved from http://magoz.is/rediscovering-mutual-funds/

Figure 5: Lee, C. (2008) *Utterubbish, Singapore* [Image]. Retrieved from http://theasylum.com.sg/project/utterubbish/

Figure 6: Charles, R (2015) *Wood+Magnet Natural/Padouk* [Image}. Retrieved from http://www.raphaelcharles.com/shop-1/woodmagnet-naturalpadouk

Figure 7: D.U.R.A. (2014) *Hydraskins Gadget Skins* [Image]. Retrieved from http://dura-artspace.com/hydraskins-2014