

## Response to Style in Print Media Advertising Images: *A Case Study of Female Youth in Nairobi*

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### Abstract

*Advertisements in print media in Kenya use realistic images to convey precise messages. It is posited that stylised imagery can be used to communicate denotative and connotative messages more effectively to specific social class audiences whose perception of images is influenced by their homogeneous socio-cultural background. The aim of this study was to investigate if different art genre communicated divergent messages to a select audience. The sample group in this qualitative study were female millennials aged 20 to 34, drawn from Nairobi. Stratified, purposive sampling was employed. Focus group discussions collected data which was subjected to thematic analysis. Divergent views were seen without and unexpectedly, within the cohort group members. Social class had an effect on the levels of elaboration. The study is significant to advertisers because results show that though images were able to generate diverse messages, they varied too widely to be of use.*

**Keywords:** Advertisement, Art style, Communication, Image, Social class, Visual rhetoric.

### INTRODUCTION

In the crowded field of advertising, 90% of the readers first consider the visual images. 65% will go further to process what the graphics convey, and only two percent will process the text (Muers & Aristoff, 2009). This represents loss of interest and attention of the target audience, and by extension loss of revenue and impact of message communication. The advertiser must strive to produce images that make the familiar, unfamiliar and hence noteworthy among the various publics (Mohanty & Ratneshwar, 2014; Shroeder, 2006; Scott, 1994).

The traditional photograph as used in print media advertising, may not be as effective in communicating singular messages as assumed. Though viewed by designers as transmitting prescribed advertising messages effectively, there is no research backing this. It is necessary that images are created that communicate predetermined messages succinctly. Despite this, research specific to these assertions and the effects of visual rhetoric is hard to come by.

Images whose visual structure also known as style,

has been manipulated are posited to have the potential for semantic condensation (Kjeldsen, 2012). They encourage visual elaboration through employing rhetorical discourse and thus result in a viewers' comprehension of an image's message (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). Progressively, it has been shown that depending on how they are executed, images can depict both denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative images which tend to be explicit, transmit similar fixed meaning to all. Connotative images which lean towards being more implicit are subjective.

This study was carried out among female millennials aged 20 to 34 in Nairobi. The research objectives were to compare the scope of message(s) between different socio-economic groupings as well as among members of the same socio-economic group in response to the images communicated by different art genre in print media advertisements. It is important to note that it is the degree of diversity of message interpretation, measured using the numbers of different messages put across that is of importance. It is a study that seeks to explore the ability of an image to express a universal message regardless of what the message

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is and thus match specific art genre to the ability to convey a distinct message type.

A major limitation noted from the study was the lack of visual literacy common among the Nairobi populace. However, this claim could not be conclusively stated due to lack of empirical scientific evidence to support this statement. It manifested itself when respondents were not capable of expressing themselves optimally (Mick & Politi, 1989; Rossiter, 1982; Felten, 2008; Schonborn & Anderson, 2006).

## THEORY

The Rhetorical Theory put forward to explain the process of decoding messages, is interpretive in nature and is viewed as one parties attempt to influence another by designing, packaging and encoding communication materials that are to be transmitted to gain effect. According to Scott and Batra (2003), visual rhetoric, which is the meanings proffered by images displayed in advertising, focuses on the 'how' (process, conventions and tools employed) as opposed to the 'what', (semiotics) (McQuarrie, 2008). The person(s) crafting the message is aware of the socio-cultural elements that affect the delivery of messages and the traditional methods and conventions and vocabularies used (Scott, 1994; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Stern, 1990). Thus, it is possible for an encoder to manipulate images so that they convey similar messages to a homogenous target audience, by use of respondent appropriate style.

Also employed was the Schema Theory, in which constituent elements of cognition such as perception, comprehension, and our ability to discern, among others, are employed in organising knowledge. Information derived from prior experiences is pivotal in the process (Severin & Tankard, 2010; Bulmer & Buchanan, 2006a; McQuarrie & Mick, 1997). If a group of people have similar experiences and backgrounds, they should generate similar responses to analogous stimulus.

The Copy Theory which postulates that pictures represent reality, is the converse of the preceding theories. It is touted as the *de facto* theory in

regards to images in advertising (Bu, Kim & Lee, 2009; Scott, 1994).

Both moving and still advertisements in non-print media mediums have led in the use of Pop Art and Expressionism, where they are touted as being highly successful in communicating to millennials in Nairobi. Examples of this include campaigns carried out by Telkom (Telkom Kenya Ltd., 2017), Blaze Grit (Safaricom Ltd., 2018), Loop by CBA (Commercial Bank of Africa, 2018) and Absolut (Absolut, 2017, 2018). Though studies specific to female millennials in Kenya is as yet to be carried out, this opinion is widely held by influential persons in the visual illustration field such as Celestine Wamiru (Wamiru, 2020). Wamiru (2020) says that the perception of the messages put forward in Kenyan advertisements would be enhanced and improved by the use of expressionism and pop art. If targeted at the millennial audience, the artsy creative twist of pop art and expressionism would get noticed by progressive audiences in today's din of visual communication-online and offline. This view is held by other prominent design practitioners and educators such as Teresa Lubano (Lubano, 2020), and Dr. Lilac Osanjo (Osanjo, 2020). As such, it behoves researchers to study this phenomenon and decipher whether or not audiences in Nairobi's print media space subscribe to the tenets of mimesis alone, or are more capable of deciphering communications proffered by non-realistic images.

## Rhetorical Perspective and Social Class

Social classes develop a system of symbols to communicate visually (Brumberger, 2011; Singer, 2010; Pracejus, Olsen & O'Guinn, 2006; Scott, 1994; Mick & Politi, 1989). This forms a visual culture that is the lens through which individuals view and interrogate, synthesise and ultimately evaluated images (Hagtvedt, Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008; Felten, 2008; Craig & Douglas, 2005; Scott, 1994). Viewers' behaviour can therefore be studied using social class structure as a pertinent cultural variable (Soares, 2007; Craig & Douglas, 2005).

Based on the Rhetorical Theory, the question arises, what is the degree of concurrence in response given between and additionally among the AB, C1 and C2 Social Classes when different art

styles are employed in print media advertisement images within the context of millennial females in Nairobi?

Furthermore, derived from the Schema Theory is the question of what the degree of concurrence is in response given within the AB, C1 and C2 Social Classes when different art styles are employed in print media advertisement images within the context of millennial females in Nairobi.

### **Elements of design as a form of rhetoric**

A visual rhetorician manipulates the elements and principles of design to create a visual style and arguments that maximise audience response. These elements, namely line, form, shape, colour, tone, texture, and proportion, are capable of representing concepts, abstractions, actions, metaphors, and modifiers (Cyr, 2009; Bu, Kim & Lee, 2009; Scott, 1994). It is noted that unusual images tended to boost a consumers' ability to follow a mental path of thought that lead to their remembering past information stored in memory (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999).

### **Comparing photographs versus artistic renditions of advertisements**

Miller and Stoica (2003) compared the impact of a photograph against two artistic renderings of a beach scene derived from the same photograph. One was a watercolour and the other expressionistic in nature (Miller & Stoica, 2003). The study sought to find out how the visual stimuli influenced the attention of the advertisements' viewer in terms of quantity and vividness of mental imagery (cognition), and affective quality of mental imagery attitude towards the ad (affect) (Miller & Stoica, 2003).

The artistic renderings of the beach were more efficient in attracting the viewer, but the photograph was better for evoking greater quantity, more vivid and more affectively positive mental imagery (Miller & Stoica, 2003).

### **Denotative communication with pictures**

A study carried out by Scott and Vargas (2007), like Miller and Stoica (2003), also looked at stylisation as a variable. It promulgated rhetorical theory. The study was heavily informed by one

undertaken earlier by Mitchell and Olson (1981) who scrutinized attitude towards advertisements. The respondents stated what stylised images told them about a fictitious brand of tissue paper. Three images comprising a realistic cat, a sunset and an abstract picture were presented. The brand attributes tested were softness, absorbency, colourfulness, strength and price. The cat denoted softness and absorbency to the respondents. The sunset represented varieties of colour the product was available in and the abstract represented a low quality, low priced product (Scott & Vargas, 2007; Scott, 1994; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). These results demonstrated that the images caused them converge on one strong message. Several other secondary or tertiary meanings were generated, but these were less dominant (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2014).

In Scott and Vargas (2007), 31 different stylised images were used in the experiment. They informed rhetorical stream of thought by demonstrating the potential for a system of visual conventions and associations to signify, at a primary level, the units of construction used for creating writing (Scott & Vargas, 2007). Researchers used the same semiotic symbol, for example a cat, but varied the images' artistic style (Scott & Vargas, 2007; Scott, 1994; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). By making reference to art styles that use artistic conventions to communicate, these experiments were successful in communicating certain implicit messages to their target audience.

Not all scholars are in agreement that visual images are capable of communicating, or engaging a viewer in rhetorical discourse. In their view rhetorical discourse has to consist of a reasoned, distinct, organised line of argument whose points are laid out systematically. Though images can be used to communicate, they are not capable of engaging rhetoric and simply offer a platform for a visually manifested process (Smith, 2007).

This would bring into question the degree of concurrence in response given within the AB, C1 and C2 Social Classes when different art styles are employed in print media advertisement images within the context of millennial females in Nairobi.

Due to inherent thought that style does not impact on visual rhetoric as much as the pictured object (Larsen, 2008; Bulmer & Buchanan, 2006a; Scott, 1994). As a result of this assumption, academic literature has tended to delve into understanding the mind and processes it engages in to comprehend an advertisement, but not how the advertisement itself is formulated and the theory behind the creation and structuring of an advertisement image, and how a viewer responds to an image art style. Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006a) submit that the nature, meaning and variations of rhetorical impact in ads, should be explored. Smith (2008) observes that though earnest research into visual communication started mid-twentieth century, until recently, not much has been achieved in the way of developing new frameworks within which advertising in its current state can be studied (Hatfield, Hinck & Birkhoht, 2007). Advertisers need to understand how consumers behave in their roles as recipients of communication (Malmelin, 2010).

active and attribute variables. The active involve art genre and are pop art, expressionism and realism. The attribute variables are demographic and are socio-economic class, age, and level of education. The dependent variable is the response to print media advertisements. A subject with the attributes of the demographics in question, when introduced to visual stimulus conforming to the active variables, activates a schema. The schema deployed is influenced by internal and external factors. Information processing theory and the rhetorical theory are engaged in the precipitation of a process that calls attention to the communicative dimension of the image. This culminates in response to the image.

A Conceptual Framework was developed based on literature reviewed (Figure 1). The independent variables under consideration consist of both

### RESEARCH METHODS

This qualitative research which adopted interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, relativist ontology, and subjectivist epistemology focused on the 'how'. The logic of inquiry was inductive, looking to discover patterns in thought (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). It made it possible to establish whether or not there were discernible differences in response to the different art styles used in print media advertising across the different

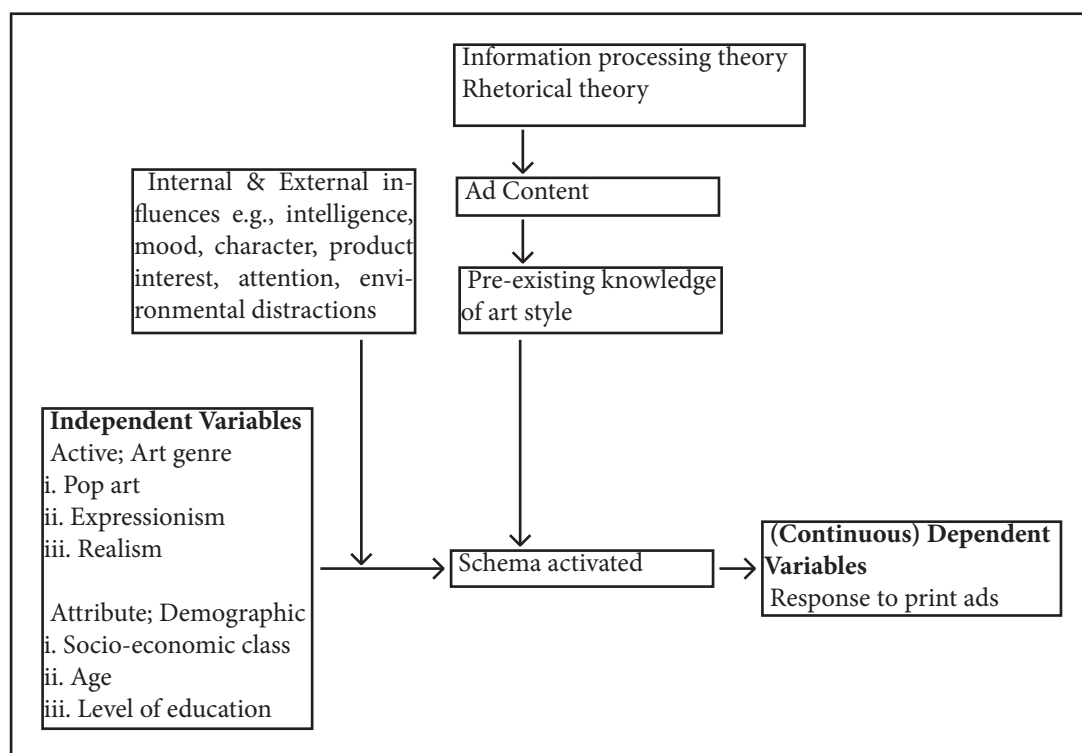


FIGURE 1  
Conceptual Framework  
Source: Okwiri 2020

Social Classes. It looked at print media advertising images found in magazines aimed at millennial females aged 20 to 34.

Focus Group Discussion where interview guidelines were used were held. The respondents were presented with 6 images comprising 3 face images and 3 food images. Data was collected using digital recording equipment and written notes. The responses were transcribed.

Though, it can be argued that separating visual from verbal destroys the advertisement to the point that it is bereft of meaning (Scott, 1994), in order to mitigate information bias created by copy, it was excluded (Phillips, 1997). In order to eliminate bias due to brand, fictitious brands, were employed (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Scott & Vargas, 2007; Underwood & Klein, 2002; Laczniak, DeCarlo & Sridhar, 2001; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Two product categories were used to mitigate bias towards category.

Five popular women's lifestyle magazines on the Nairobi market were selected due to their readership and distinct media category. These were Parents, True Love, Drum, Passion and African Woman (McQuarrie & Mick, 2008).

The study was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya, which was represented by its eight residential areas. These were Starehe, Dagoretti, Embakasi, Kasarani, Lang'ata, Makadara, Kamkunji and Parklands. The respondents in this qualitative study were selected from sampling logs created for the study location using stratified, purposive sampling (Groenewald, 2004; Klaus, 2002). They represented the AB, C1 and C2 Social Class respectively (Table 1).

The qualitative data was grouped into categories which were determined inductively. Open coding

was used (Moghaddam, 2006). Subsequently, content analysis was carried out, followed by coding (Moghaddam, 2006). The themes were quantised, transforming the data into nominal data. This process enabled calculation of the effect size (Bowling & Ebrahim, 2005; Bazeley, 2004). These figures were then compared across the three social classes namely AB, C1 and C2.

**RESULTS**

The responses ranged from only one class enunciating a particular key theme to all three classes expressing and agreeing a particular image communicated a singular key theme. Disparate opinions between the classes is classified as one response, referring to only one social class selecting a key theme, followed by two and then three social classes sharing the opinion that an image articulating a similar key theme.

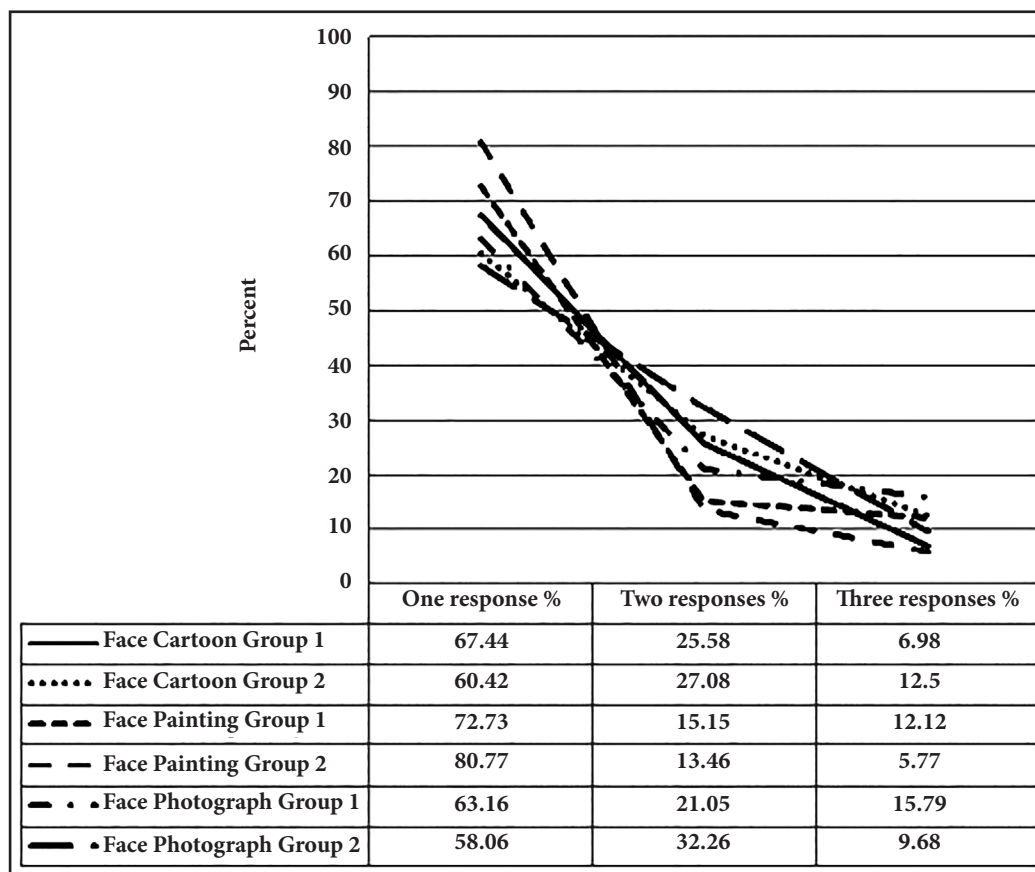
A high number of respondents from all three classes AB, C1, and C2 held divergent views in their response to the face images presented (Figure 2). It stood between a low of 58.06% and a high of 80.77% averaging at 69.42%. There was a mid-ground with similar responses between two social classes that ranged from a low of 13.46% and a high of 32.26% averaging at 22.86%. All three classes agreed on the same communicative message at a low of 5.77% and a high of 15.79% averaging at 10.78%. These figures bore testimony to a high rate of divergence of opinion.

A high number of respondents from all three classes AB, C1, and C2 held divergent views in their opinions of what the food images presented as shown in Figure 3. This stood between a low of 52.38% and a high of 72.72% averaging at 62.55%. There was a mid-ground with similar responses from two social classes that ranged from a low of 21.05% and a high of 38.10% averaging at 29.58%. All three classes agreed on the same

**TABLE 1:** Distribution of focus group discussion respondents by Social Class

Cycle of focus group discussion	Class AB	Class C1	Class C2	TOTAL
Focus group discussion 1st cycle	8	8	7	23
Focus group discussion 2nd cycle	8	7	6	21
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>44</b>

Source: Okwiri 2020



**FIGURE 2**  
Consensus in response to face image groups 1 and 2, Classes AB, C1 and C2  
Source: Okwiri 2020

communicative message at a low of 3.7% and a high of 17.65% averaging at 10.68%. These figures bore testimony to a high rate of divergence of opinion.

**Variety of themes within the same cohort**

Table 2 summarises the number of different themes elicited by the various art genre mentioned by each of the Social Class groups for each of the images they were exposed to. It must be noted that the themes mentioned were sometimes repeated across the various Social Class groups. Besides the diversity of themes mentioned, there was contradiction of opinions on specific themes. For example, in the Face category the respondents mention that the model was either happy or unhappy as a contradiction within the same cohort in Session 2, C1, Cartoon, Session 2, C1, Photo, Session 2, C2, Cartoon. In the Food category, the fact that chicken was either cheap or expensive as a contradiction within a cohort, was mentioned in

the group Session1, C2, Cartoon, Session 2, AB, Abstract, and Session 2, C1, Abstract.

**DISCUSSION**

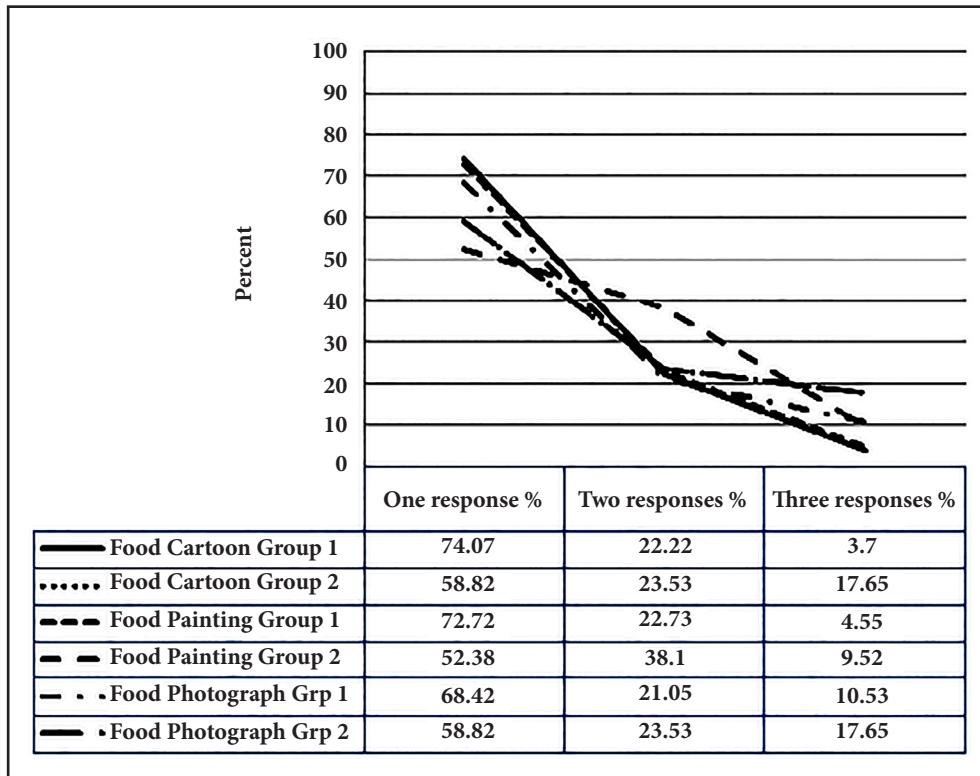
This study was qualitative in nature, and attempted to find out if stylised images communicated similar or divergent views without and within dissimilar Social Classes and if so, its extent. The main question at hand was what the effect of Social Class was on the degree of elaboration, and therefore scope of message(s) communicated by different art styles in print media advertisement.

**Sub-question 1:**

*What is the degree of concurrence in response given between the AB, C1 and C2 Social Classes when different art styles are employed in print media advertisement images?*

**Observation 1: Divergent inter-cohort opinions**

Results representing the face image focus groups,



**FIGURE 3**  
 Consensus in response to food image groups 1 and 2, Classes AB, C1 and C2  
 Source: Okwiri 2020

**TABLE 2:** Intra cohort responses; Face and Food summary for number of different themes mentioned by each of the cohorts

FACE IMAGE	Group 1					Group 2					Grand total	
	AB	C1	C2	Total	%	AB	C1	C2	Total	%		%
Cartoon	23	19	37	79	47	19	22	30	71	45	150	46
Abstract	23	15	13	51	30	19	15	14	48	30	99	30
Photo	20	11	8	39	23	12	14	14	40	25	79	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>328</b>	<b>100</b>

FOOD IMAGE	Group 1					Group 2					Grand total	
	AB	C1	C2	Total	%	AB	C1	C2	Total	%		%
Cartoon	14	10	15	39	40	8	12	13	33	34	72	37
Abstract	8	5	12	25	26	14	11	10	35	37	60	31
Photo	5	12	16	33	34	13	9	6	28	29	61	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Okwiri 2020

both one and two, showed that an average of 69.42% of the responses given were attributed to only one social class cohort. Meaning that these were singular thematic responses in that the opinions, ideas and thoughts they propagated were not shared with any other cohort. 22.86% of the responses were similar in two cohorts and only 10.78% of the views cut across and were shared by all three social class cohorts.

The results for the food images in both focus groups one and two did not differ remarkably. Also supporting the belief, the three cohorts had divergent views. An average of 62.55% of the responses were single responses, not shared by any of the other two social class cohorts. 29.58% of the responses are shared among two cohorts and only 10.68% of the responses were common to all three cohorts.

It was assumed that as per the Rhetorical Theory, that societies which had internally homogenous, but externally heterogeneous global experiences, would respond to the images in a disparate manner across the three groups (Scott, 1994; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1990; Stern, 1990). The results shown clearly reflect incongruent ideas between the classes. The different social classes perceive the different art styles in a divergent manner.

The results concur with McQuarrie and Mick (2003); Miniard, Bhatla, Lord, Dickson and Unnava (1991); Scott (1994); Mick and Politi (1989); Mitchell and Olson (1981), and support the premise that an image is not a static visual device transmitting fixed messages to a divergent target audience.

### **Sub-question 2:**

*What is the degree of concurrence in response given within the AB, C1 and C2 Social Classes when different art styles are employed in print media advertisement images?*

### **Observation 2: Divergent intra-cohort opinions**

Further to the divergent views between cohorts, there are divergent views within the individual social class cohorts. A sample of the variety of these can be seen in the Food and Face Focus

Group one and two summaries in **Table 2** which shows the high extent of divergent intra-cohort opinions group by group (Scott, 1994; Mick & Politi, 1989).

Generally speaking, it was assumed that members of a specific Social Class would have social similarities and common social visual agreements that would lead them decipher similar images in a similar fashion. Their meaning and understanding assumed to be formulated in and by a society as a cohesive body that grew dependently (Brumberger, 2011; Singer, 2010; Pracejus, Olsen & O'Guinn, 2006; Scott, 1994; Mick & Politi, 1989). However, no image presented caused the Social Classes perceive similar messages. In selecting cartoons, expressionist paintings, and realistic photographs to communicate to the AB, C1 and C2 population of Nairobi, it was envisaged that they would communicate as per the set art goals of these styles of art. Cartoons are widely perceived as playful, expressionism as subjective, conveying ideas influenced by the elements and principles of design, and realistic images as objective, and reflective of true qualities and abilities. Even when in congruence with the impression emitted by an art genre, the respondents did not proffer similar messages.

It would appear that the cohorts studied herein may not yet have formed a singular interpretation of the art styles as presented, or suffer another challenge, contrary to what the Schema Theory postulates. There may have been independent factors at play that contributed to the divergent opinions in the results shown, for example visual illiteracy (Schonborn & Anderson, 2006).

### **CONCLUSION**

The results posted for both face and food responses across both focus groups one and two confirmed that AB, C1 and C2 had divergent views on the images presented to them. This was confirmation that images are not stagnant forms and are capable of eliciting elaboration from an onlooker. This outcome confirms the proposition put forward by the Rhetorical Theory, which holds at the macro level. However, the viability of this premise is tested by the results to the question on what the degree of consensus of message, and therefore scope of message(s) communicated among members



of the same demographic group in response to different art genre in print media advertisements. Similar demographics did not yield a unifying response. This was unexpected. Even where an art style engendered a similar perception, such as cartoons which were widely perceived as playful, and expressionism as subjective, it did not result in conveyance of a singular message. The result goes against the Schema Theory and renders any prior heterogeneity in opinions realised between groups ineffectual. Inter-group differences may exist due to under-laying, pre-existing intra-group differences. It is noteworthy that in general, the results from the face images differed slightly from those of the food images. Results garnered for response to image style that are based on specific product category only held true for that specific category of products. The study was not able to match specific art genre to the conveyance of a distinct message.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study as carried out did not conclusively determine which art style is an effective means of communication, if any. It was not able to isolate a specific art style that could communicate a predetermined idea to a pre-selected target audience. As such, no precise guidance can be given on the art genre to employ in print media advertising targeted at female millennials to convey a precise message.

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