

## Impact of Digital Environment Graphics on Advertising Consumption in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Graphic designers often pay a great deal of attention to the aesthetics of graphic presentations without much regard for its communication effectiveness. It is even more so when designing the digital environment. This tendency normally causes potential consumers of online advertisements to lose focus – a situation which, consequently, renders a piece of advertisement inconsequential. This study investigates consumer behaviour and the interface between consumers and businesses in the digital environment: under consideration is how consumers respond to the advertisements in the digital environment. The focus of this study, then, is on the impact that the digital environment graphics has on advertising consumption in Nigeria. It highlights the importance of aesthetics and design in the online environment, and how graphic designers and advertisers, in general, can effectively deliver messages to targeted audience. Methods which include library research, in situ study, formalism, iconographic studies, and the descriptive research approach, were adopted for this study. The paper concludes that a balance in the application of aesthetic standards and communication indices to the visual content of the digital environment can ultimately improve its visual appearance as well as how potential consumers of advertising respond to, and interact with, the advertisements and the environment, generally.

**Key word:** digital environment, graphics, advertising consumption.

### 1. Introduction

The digital environment is a virtual or cyber-generated environment accessed or created through the use of one or more digital devices such as a computer, tablet, or a cellular phone. It is as well all information environments that are mediated via the World Wide Web (www) or similar mobile devices. Particularly, a digital environment is that environment which facilitates the discovery and search of information, people, and resources. It has an overwhelming tendency to positively or negatively influence consumers of advertisements placed therein. In this era of information and communication technology, this tendency is further facilitated by the easy and rapid interface between the graphic designer (web designer), the advertiser and the consumer. Consequently, the need for both designers and advertisers to rely on the diverse means of interactive technology in the new media to advertise their products in Nigeria is not only on the increase, but has become very obvious. The Internet has evolved so quickly that it is not in any manner static, but has turned into a dynamic and vivacious space where each website tries to outpace the other in its aesthetics, functionality and importance (Fita, 2013). This, invariably, necessitates a conscious application of specific approaches to the study of online interactions, particularly, computer-mediated communication such as online advertising.

Online interactions per se, vis-à-vis advertisement, may promote products but may not influence their patronage because of the competitive market. Traditionally, consumers are rational consumers: they systematically search for and analyse information in the market before making a purchase, and have the right to seek redress in the event of problems with the purchase. In the view of Oliviera, Upreti and Kapachova (2015), although every business organization needs advertising to promote its products, yet, advertising companies should not only use it as a communication strategy, reach the target audience and deliver its message, but should, more importantly, also use it

to make the delivery of the message both creative and entertaining. This, thus, brings us to the issue of judicious integration of aesthetics and communication in the online graphic presentation.

Quite often, graphic designers pay great attention to the aesthetics of the online graphic presentation with little or no regard for its communication value. This is even so with web designers whose responsibility it is to design the digital environment. Web designing has had an incredible impression on online advertising as evidenced in an upsurge in online shopping. Consequently, and in an attempt to outpace websites to gain prominence, visibility and, of course, patronage, many designers present digital environments which flicker repeatedly with a number of aesthetic visual elements such as colours, fonts and pop-ups. Although the intention of these designers are essentially to attract web surfers and other visitors to the site, these visuals sometimes end up embarrassingly odious, thus negating its very essence.

In many instances and on various occasions, graphic design has been viewed from the standpoint of production with less concern for its consumption aspect. Fillippo (2013) observes that a common mistake made by web designers is designing a site that he (the web designer) likes rather than thinking about the end users who are the prospects and customers. This, probably, owes to the fact that web designers are apt to fall into the temptation of concentrating their efforts on design and aesthetics, rather than on message and communication. Although the works so produced could be of high aesthetic value, ultimately, the output may end up counteracting their initial purpose. The question now arises: what is the visual content of the digital environment so created? How do the commercials placed therein function within the environment? How do the consumers of these advertisements view the visual contents of the environment vis-à-vis the design and the message... and what are their overt and covert reactions? The answers to these questions will form the thesis of this discourse.

## **2. Visuals and Communication**

Visuals are ubiquitous and global cultures are essentially visual. Evidently, visual methods of communication predate written language; for instance, the pre-historic man used visuals in communicating, as evidenced in the cave paintings in France and other locations of the world. This fact is corroborated by Infographics (2017) thus: “visual communication dates back to as early as 35,000 BC”. The Egyptian hieroglyphs (fig.1), and the Maya hieroglyphs (fig. 2), which may well represent mankind’s earliest attempt to write (Silverman, 2009), used visuals for communication. These hieroglyphs were used to record state documents and important historical events. Those with religious purposes were also painted on the walls of many tombs and temples, as well as on coffins and many such places and objects.



Figure 1. An Egyptian hieroglyph  
*Source: Hare, Thomas. Microsoft Encarta 2009*



Figure 2. The Madrid Codex: Maya hieroglyph  
*Source: Hare, Thomas. Microsoft Encarta 2009*

There is, in fact, scarcely any human endeavour that does not subscribe to the munificence of visual elements in its daily operations. Visuals are a very vital feature in communication, be it primitive or modern, analogue or digital. Graphic design, therefore, takes full advantage of this important factor. Warner (2009) submits that graphic design is principally about visual communication, information and persuasion using print and electronic media. Today, technology has allowed for access to visual media such as digital media, video games and television in a way that young adults have integrated these media into their daily lives (Glore, 2010). Evidently, visual elements thus have a

place in global culture, and design and aesthetics have definite effect on how products are perceived, valued and utilized.

### 3. Visual content of the digital environment

The digital environment is replete with copious visual contents; however, this study will review just a few because of their relevance.

- *Images* – In a digital environment, images play a significant role. It becomes needful to present in the digital environment images that create value by telling a salient story. When a body of text is split up with some persuasive images, there is an inclination for people to finish reading what has been written (provided that the images are high quality and contextually germane). Where images are concerned, colour plays a significant role: the simplest set of colours expresses thoughts without words and influences audiences. Thus, the choice of these colours should give vigour and lucidity to the brand mission, so that it can attract prospective customers. In addition, contrasting colours can do a magic: the stronger the contrast, the more powerful the message. The graphic designer, therefore, has to build an articulate and comprehensible communication through the impact of colour: a message is more easily remember when fewer hues are used in a composition.
- *Videos* – Videos are amazingly useful for presenting common problems in the online environment. They also help in showing the solutions to such problems that a given product can offer. Thus, a grand video can serve as an added influence for a campaign.
- *Infographics* – “An infographic is a visual tool used to communicate data, tell a story or illustrate a principle, as clearly and effectively as possible” (Mammoth Infographics, 2017). Infographics are an exceptional apparatus for drawing upon all complex data and statistics, and collating them into a persuasive, easily intelligible visual display. For an infographic to be effective, it becomes important that the layout and design be very impactful, with a combination of the right colours, shapes and fonts to convey important data.
- *Presentations* – Presentations function in much the same way as infographics, but they focus more on attractive design and colour. In this way, they have the ability to draw the reader *into* the text. Presentations, though, have a greater scope than infographics.
- *Screenshots* – A screenshot can provide an audience with a glimpse into the inner workings of a product or service. Services and functions offered can be shown from a direct perspective. Screenshots are very useful for backing up the claims made in sale content. It is also possible to annotate screenshots if the aim is to draw attention to a particular part of the image or provide a more in-depth explanation of what goes on behind the scenes.

The visual content of a digital environment permeates the visceral psyche of an audience, and persuades it to learn more about a given brand (figure 3). If a premium visual content (which actually echoes what potential consumers are in search of and promotes it frequently) can be generated, it stands that the reputation and consciousness of the brand is certain to soar. However, a bland or poorly designed content has a tendency of exacerbating rather than ameliorating the digital environment.

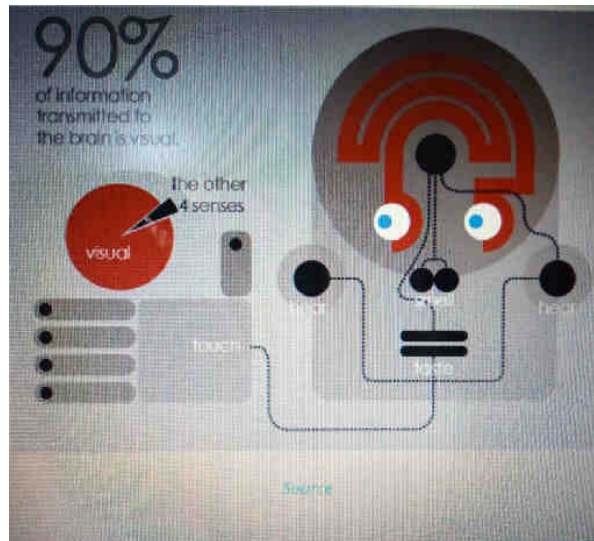


Figure 3. The visceral psyche of an audience illustrated  
*Source: <https://blog.kissmetrics.com/>*

#### 4. Consumers' view of the visual content

Man “is genetically wired to respond more positively to images than text” (Mammoth Infographics, 2017). On daily bases, consumers and potential consumers of advertising are exposed to a number of graphic images communicated through media outlets like newspapers, magazines, posters, billboards, the television, the Internet and many more. Perceptibly, many web surfers and visitors end up not realizing their intentions due to *sweet* distractions which bombard them or, which they are exposed to, every second. As a result of this exposure consumers, in the view of Campbell (2000), have developed a more sophisticated understanding of mass media and of advertising which, in effect, have “challenged designers and advertisers to create more attraction through captivating visual images and response to their messages” (Iyama and Akpan, 2013).

#### 5. Design and Aesthetics in a Digital Environment

Graphic design, according to Warner (2009), is principally about visual communication, information and persuasion using print and electronic media. From a parallel perspective, Flew (2002) observes, it is the business of putting effective words and images on paper or air waves with the skill that can provoke and persuade a consumer to action. Many web designers lack the ability to integrate these values in their work and, so, hide their deficiency by creating polished, visually elaborate content (Lynch, 2009). This development has challenged designers and advertisers to create more appealing sites through an effective interplay of design and aesthetics in the digital environment. Rand (n.d.) sums up the correlation of aesthetics and design thus:

Without aesthetics, design is either the humdrum repetition of familiar clichés or a wild scramble for novelty. Without the aesthetic, the computer is but a mindless speed machine, producing effects without substance. Form without relevant content, or content without meaningful form.

Visual perception results from composite interfaces between external visual stimulus and prior knowledge, goals and expectations, and having an understanding of how things are visually perceived will help designers communicate better (Bradley, 2011). Hiebert (2009) notes that there is significant substantiation that visual images do play a critical role in learning. A picture is worth a thousand words, so the adage goes! This maxim intends to explain that a single image can be used to give support to the user's visualization, leading to a better understanding of the material (Glore, 2010; Hauske, 2007; Mupringa, Nora & Yaw, 2006) and in combination can convey ideas more easily than textual descriptions alone (Mupringa et al., 2006).

To comprehend the interplay of design and aesthetics in the digital environment, brief definitions of aesthetics and design become needful. Aesthetics, according to Zhang (2009), is a branch of philosophy associated with art and beauty and, as viewed by Anderson (2009), is concerned with how individuals perceive objects or make judgments based upon information received as five human sensory inputs. Aesthetics is also associated with "affect or mood, emotion and feeling" (Zhang, 2009). This perception and the affective/emotional connection make aesthetic concerns very significant. Fundamentally, aesthetics operates as the link between a product and the consumer's emotion and feeling. Research has revealed that aesthetics plays a significant role in shaping the responses of consumers to products and the digital environment. These provisions, as observed by Sampson (2013), "help to simplify the use of the media by virtually anybody, and are the practical players in the digital interactive media".

Design, on the other hand, is a work plan and process which has a user perspective and drives development based on specific customers' needs. The design process varies between different projects and design fields. According to Cambridge Dictionary of American English, design is the creation of a plan or convention for the construction of an object, system or measurable human interaction. Designing often necessitates considering the aesthetic, functional, economic and socio-political dimensions of both the design object and design process. It may involve considerable research, thought, modelling, interactive adjustment, and re-design.

Design and aesthetics in a digital environment are not just photographs or graphics that are displayed on a screen. In point of fact, they are the technique of consciously organizing components to appeal to the senses or emotions of the consumer. Batiha, Al-Slaimeh & Besoul (2006) observe that it is, as well, "the act of creating something that has not or does not exist". However, as part of the design process, both the design and aesthetic concerns need to be appraised, and this, according to Brinkkemper (1996), requires significant research, consideration, modification and redesign.

Nielsen (2000) reveals in his study that large graphics may not attract gaze fixations (78% of users looked at textual content first). Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Standord and Tauber (2003), in their study, found that over 45% of consumers made judgments about the credibility of websites based on the site design, "including layout, typography, font size, and colour scheme". Studies have also shown that users make these judgments about visual stimulus in a very short amount of time (Alsudani & Casey, 2009). Robins and Holmes (2008) found that subjects judge the credibility of the content of a website based on its appearance in 3.42 seconds. Several studies have demonstrated that aesthetic judgments also affect a system's perceived usability (Mbipom & Harper, 2009; Tractinsky, Katz & Ikar, 2000). These studies have demonstrated that from the user's perspective "what is beautiful is usable" (Tractinsky et al, 2000, p.129).

## 6. Conclusion

Visual imagery is quite important in global communication, among other things. Evidently, images can communicate multifaceted concepts in a concise way, and visual tools and technologies can improve comprehension and promote patronage. Design and aesthetics have an intense impact on how consumers of online advertisements perceive information, learn, judge credibility and usability, and ultimately assign value to a given product. However, not many designers of the digital environment give much consideration to how design and aesthetics could be effectively amalgamated to avoid clutter and attract patronage.

Every commercial product (vis-à-vis graphic design) must of necessity, attract consumption potentials; anything short of that would be an effort in vainness. Thus, it becomes pertinent that in designing the digital environment, adequate attention must be given to its patronage possibilities. Misapplying the design principles and elements, and placing too much emphasis on aesthetics, or vice versa, can blight the visual content of the digital environment rather than enhance it. When this occurs, advertisements placed therein are subdued and, inadvertently, insipid and inconsequential. There will, as a result, be the likelihood for potential consumers of the advertisements to be dissuaded from patronizing the site and, of course, the product so advertised. For that reason, graphic/web designers should reconsider the most appropriate means of combining the principles and elements of design with aesthetic ingredients when designing a given site if that digital environment is to be an efficient channel for placing advertisements. They should also consider potent creative criteria, and play down on the aesthetics while emphasizing the communication capacity for development. A balance in the application of aesthetic standards and communication indices to the visual content can ultimately improve both the visual appearance of the digital environment as well as how potential consumers of advertising respond to, and interact with, the advertisements and the environment in general.

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