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CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS IN MEETING VISUAL AESTHETICS STANDARDS: A STUDY OF STARLITE AND GOOD SHEPHERD NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

This study examined the aesthetic issues facing community newspapers, with a particular focus on Starlite and Good Shepherd, in the Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria, with a research population of 210,049. The study looks at material limitations, staff design proficiency, and readers' opinions of visual presentation through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with readers and production personnel. The study uses Visual Rhetoric Theory to show how poor visual components reduce the newspapers' professional and persuasive appeal, while Gatekeeping Theory explains how infrastructure constraints influenced design choices. The results show that the newspapers' capacity to satisfy professional visual aesthetic standards is severely hampered by antiquated machinery, restricted access to contemporary design tools, and a lack of formal training in visual communication. Readers criticised the publications' visual quality even though they appreciated the grassroots reporting. According to the study's findings, enhancing aesthetic quality necessitates focused investment in production tools, staff capacity building, and audience-informed responsive design. It also suggests formalised training programmes, technology advancements, and institutionalized audience-centered design reviews. The researchers recommend that both newspapers should provide graphic design and visual communication training to their employees. In order to direct design improvements, stakeholders should support feedback channels and provide funding for equipment upgrades.

Keywords: challenges, community newspapers, aesthetics, standards.

Background of the Study

Newspapers play a vital role in informing, educating, and entertaining the public. In Nigeria, newspapers—whether published daily, weekly, or fortnightly—serve as essential sources of information for the populace.

To remain relevant, newspapers must not only gather and disseminate news but also present it in a visually appealing manner. Aesthetic elements are crucial in achieving this goal, as they

enhance the layout and design of newspapers, attracting and retaining readership (Alom, 2018).

The level of traffic, sales, or clientele a newspaper enjoys is largely determined by a well-articulated blend of aesthetic elements (Alom, 2020). A poorly planned newspaper, regardless of its content quality, risks being overlooked by readers.

Udo (2011) explains that aesthetics relates to what appeals to people's senses and enables them to perceive the beauty of a work. A well-designed newspaper not only enhances readability but also evokes emotions and creates a shared experience among readers. Alom (2018) highlights that aesthetics has the power to draw readers in, allowing them to engage deeply with the content. Similarly, Effiong (2004) argues that when readers are affected by the same emotions as the artist or designer, communication becomes more impactful, fostering a connection between the newspaper and its audience.

Zettl (2005) further explains that when design elements—including headlines, images, and other graphic devices—are carefully arranged using elegant typefaces and eye-catching colours, they enhance both readability and beauty.

However, the poor aesthetic presentation of many community newspapers poses a challenge to their sustainability. Holmquist and Wartenburg (2005) identify newspaper design elements such as size, positioning, object arrangement, and photograph axiality as factors that influence readers' visual behaviour and content perception.

As Udoakah (2010, p. 11) points out, the front page of a newspaper serves multiple roles: it is "an attention-grabber on the newsstand, an attention-seeker on a desk or coffee table, a curiosity-arouser tempting one to look inside—a showcase for the product." This highlights the importance of aesthetics in ensuring newspapers capture and maintain the interest of their audience.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite the fact that community newspapers are crucial for educating and involving local communities, questions have been raised concerning their aesthetic value. Material limitations like inadequate printing facilities, subpar paper, antiquated software, and a lack of technical tools may make it difficult for *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* to present their work visually. The degree to which production employees have sufficient design knowledge is also unclear because there is little information on their education or inventiveness in converting content into eye-catching layouts. In addition to these production problems, little is known about how readers view the visual presentation of the newspapers and whether these opinions affect reader satisfaction and retention. This disparity emphasizes the necessity of investigating the interactions between audience viewpoints, staff competencies, and material resources in order to enhance the newspapers' overall efficacy, legitimacy, and aesthetic appeal.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. identify the material constraints affecting the visual aesthetic quality of *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers.

2. assess the level of design expertise available among the production staff of *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers.
3. ascertain readers' perceptions of the visual presentation of *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers.

Literature Review

Starlite Newspaper is an Enugu State-based community-oriented newspaper with close links to Nsukka. Although found in the year 2,000 the newspaper has been in operation with noteworthy events being reported as early as 2009. It was established by an individual known as Harrison Ogara, publisher and Chief Editor, and has drawn attention for its yearly *Starlite Awards* and Lecture Series at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). In addition to honouring prominent members of the economic, academic, and political communities, the event promotes regional development conversations. For example, the lecture series in 2021 with the theme "Economic Diversification and Self-Sustainability Options for Enugu State" drew in UNN scholars like Prof. Osita Ogbu as well as dignitaries like Governors Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi (Enugu), Willie Obiano (Anambra), and Yahaya Bello (Kogi). The publication provides a forum for discussing socioeconomic concerns impacting the area with the public and officials (Ogara, n.d.; The Starlite Newspapers, n.d.; The Sun Nigeria, 2021, September 12; Vanguard News Nigeria, 2021, September 11)

While also at Nsukka, the phrase "Good Shepherd" refers to the Good Shepherd Major Seminary, a Catholic establishment devoted to training future priests. The newspaper which is owned by the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka publishes issues that are important to the work of the Church and the reality (Diocese of Nsukka, 2013; The Shepherd Nsukka, n.d.)

Nana and Umor (2016) emphasise the importance of aesthetics in the print media, stating that all forms of aesthetics must be employed to attract and retain readers. Given the rise of global digitization and the crowding of mass media channels, newspapers must prioritize aesthetics to maintain and expand their readership. Design components like colour, form, and layout that arouse feelings in viewers and have a big impact on their perception are all included in visual aesthetics (StudySmarter, 2024; Fiveable, n.d.).

The approach to achieving aesthetics in the print media varies across media houses, yet certain fundamental principles ensure artistic designs. Baskette and Sissors (1977) identify Balance, Contrast, Proportion, and Unity as the core principles of print aesthetics. Nwanne (2011) highlights Page Planning, Sharp Print, Color Printing, and Pictorial Presentation as key factors, while Anim (2003) outlines essential elements such as Layout (Design), Balance, Contrast, Typography, Graphics, and Colour.

Layout/Design

Anim (2003) describes layout and design as the strategic arrangement of news stories, pictures, and advertisements to create orderliness and enhance readability. This aligns with Baskette and Sissors (1977), who stress that design exists primarily to facilitate readership. They caution against haphazard placement of content, as it can confuse readers and deter engagement.

Balance

Baskette et al. (1977) define balance as the editor's ability to ensure even weight distribution across a page, preventing sections from appearing overwhelmingly heavy or excessively light. Nwanne (2011) concurs, emphasizing that balance establishes equilibrium by harmonizing layout elements on opposite sides of the page, particularly between the top and bottom sections.

Contrast

Contrast, according to Baskette et al. (1977), involves the use of dramatically different elements on a page to create visual interest. For example, a light headline may contrast with a bold one, or small images may be juxtaposed with larger ones. Anim (2003) adds that contrast helps differentiate elements by placing them in opposition, enhancing the clarity of the design.

Unity

According to Baskette et al. (1977), unity in publication design ensures that all elements relate to one another, creating a cohesive impression. A page achieves unity when its stories contribute to a unified overall design rather than appearing as isolated fragments.

Colour

Colour plays a significant role in shaping human behaviour, emotions, and decision-making, as evidenced by research in both psychological and consumer behaviour fields. Elliot and Maier (2007) explored the psychological impact of the colour red, particularly in achievement-related contexts. The researchers concluded that colour was far more than a visual embellishment—it actively influences cognitive processes, motivation, and behavioural outcomes (Elliot & Maier, 2007).

In a related field of inquiry, Bellizzi and Hite (1992) examined the influence of environmental colour on consumer emotions and purchasing behaviour. They found that different colours evoke different emotional responses: blue environments tended to create a sense of calm and relaxation, while red environments elicited excitement but also tension.

Theoretical Framework

Gatekeeping Theory

The Gatekeeping Theory, originally introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1947 and later applied to journalism by David Manning White in 1950, explains how certain individuals or institutions control the flow of information within communication systems. In media studies, it describes how editors, reporters, and media workers make decisions about what content gets published and how it is presented. Pamela Shoemaker and Timothy Vos further expanded the theory in the 1990s and 2000s, emphasizing that gatekeeping is influenced not only by individual discretion but also by organizational constraints, routines, and socio-cultural values. In the context of this study—Challenges Faced by Community Newspapers in Meeting Aesthetic Standards—Gatekeeping Theory is relevant in explaining how editors and production staff of *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers determine the visual layout, choice of images, and overall presentation of the newspapers.

Visual Rhetoric Theory

The Visual Rhetoric Theory provides a complementary perspective by focusing on how visual elements communicate meaning and persuade audiences. Rooted in classical rhetoric but developed in contemporary communication scholarship by theorists like Charles A. Hill (1994) and Sonja Foss (2005), visual rhetoric explores how images, colour, typography, spacing, and layout function as persuasive tools in media messages. This theory is particularly relevant to this study, as it enables an evaluation of how the visual presentation of *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers impacts readers' perceptions of professionalism, credibility, and readability. It helps explain why poor visual quality—such as cluttered design, inconsistent typography, and low-quality imagery—may reduce audience engagement, even if the content is informative.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method, to explore in-depth the challenges faced by community newspapers in meeting visual aesthetic standards. This approach enabled the researcher to gather rich, detailed insights into material constraints, design expertise, and audience perceptions in a natural and interactive setting. The qualitative design was deemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the study and its focus on subjective experiences and professional practices.

Population of the Study

The staff and readers of the *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers made up the study population. Despite the lack of audited circulation data, their readership was estimated using industry estimates and operational indicators. It was estimated that *Good Shepherd*, with 30 employees, produced 4,500 copies per issue, while *Starlite*, with 19 employees, produced roughly 2,500 copies. The combined estimated readership for *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* was roughly 7,500 and 13,500, respectively, using a conservative pass-along multiplier of three readers per copy. This translates to a potential audience of about 21,000 readers plus 49 staff, giving 21,049 persons. The planning and participant recruitment for the FGDs were guided by this estimate.

Sample Size

There was no statistical formula used to determine the sample size, rather, it adhered to the guidelines of qualitative research, which emphasize rich conversations over big data.

However, there were 64 participants in total across six groups in the FGD plan. A total of 24 readers participated in the two FGDs that were arranged for *Starlite* newspaper readers, with each session holding 12 participants. Likewise, two FGDs were organized for *Good Shepherd* newspaper readers, with 12 participants per group, for a total of 24 readers. An FGD was organized for the staff component, with 8 participants for *Starlite* staff and 8 for *Good Shepherd* staff, for a total of 16 staff members.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct experience in newspaper production and those who actively engage with the content. Participants varied in gender, age, education, and professional roles to ensure diversity of opinions.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was an FGD guide developed in line with the study objectives. The guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' views. The guide was reviewed by experts in Mass Communication Department, University of Nigeria, Nsukka to ensure content validity and alignment with the research questions.

Method of Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in neutral, quiet environments conducive to open discussion. Each focus group lasted approximately 60–75 minutes and was moderated by the researchers. Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and supplemented with note-taking. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent were strictly observed.

Method of Data Analysis

The recorded FGDs were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. Responses were organised into themes aligned with the study objectives. Recurring patterns and ideas were coded manually, and illustrative quotes were extracted to support the analysis. The findings were presented descriptively.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretations

The study involved six focus group discussions (FGDs) with 64 participants, including both the production team and readers of the *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers. To ensure that both younger and older stakeholders had their opinions, the group included a mix of male and female participants from a variety of age groups, including 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, and 50 years and older. A wide range of academic backgrounds was also represented by the participants, including secondary school, OND/NCE, bachelor's, and master's degrees. In terms of affiliation, 48 readers—24 from each newspaper, divided into groups of 12—contributed to the discussions, and 16 staff members—eight from *Starlite* and eight from *Good Shepherd*—participated, guaranteeing that the data recorded a thorough and balanced range of experiences and insights pertinent to the study.

According to focus group discussions, maintaining professional design standards is a significant challenge for both *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd*. Production is hampered by antiquated computers, out-of-date software, shoddy printing supplies, and unstable electricity, which results in hurried layouts, inconsistent designs, and poor visual appeal. Due to their lack of formal design training, the production team mostly relied on peer learning, online tutorials, and improvisation. Page layouts were created by whoever was available because there were no trained designers, which led to shoddy image placement, crooked typography, and designs that fell short of contemporary standards.

Despite their loyalty because local content was relevant, readers consistently pointed out issues with small fonts, blurry photos, and cluttered layouts. Poor graphics, on the other hand, decreased satisfaction and threatened sustained participation and competitiveness. According to Visual Rhetoric Theory, poor design literacy reduces persuasive impact, while Gatekeeping Theory emphasizes how structural and skill limitations restrict aesthetic choices. As a result, while the content is still valuable, the newspapers' visual appeal is compromised by a lack of

resources and experience, endangering their credibility, audience loyalty, and commercial success.

Findings

Based on data gathered, the following make up the findings:

1. Material constraints such as outdated equipment, limited software, and poor printing quality restrict the aesthetic output of both *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers, acting as structural gatekeeping barriers that diminish their visual rhetoric.
2. The lack of formal design expertise among production staff weakens their gatekeeping capacity in making informed aesthetic choices, resulting in unprofessional layouts that fail to visually persuade or engage readers.
3. Readers perceive the both *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers' visual presentation as unattractive and disorganised, indicating that the ineffective use of visual rhetoric—shaped by upstream gatekeeping limitations—undermines audience satisfaction despite relevant content.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers conclude that:

Outdated equipment, a lack of design experience, and a lack of investment in visual communication are the main causes of the aesthetic deficiencies that both *Starlite* and *Good Shepherd* newspapers face. Despite having strong, locally relevant content, these structural barriers weaken visual rhetoric and undermine gatekeeping, which lowers credibility, reader satisfaction, and advertising appeal.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of this research, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. Both Organizations should periodically arrange training or workshops with certification programmes in graphic design and visual communication for production staff to enhance their layout skills and understanding of visual rhetoric.
2. Stakeholders and media-support organizations should provide targeted funding or subsidies to community newspapers for upgrading computers, design software, and printing equipment to improve aesthetic standards.
3. The two newspapers should establish structured feedback mechanisms (e.g., reader surveys or visual focus groups) to regularly assess audience preferences and perceptions, ensuring that design improvements align with community expectations.

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