

Balancing Effective Visual Communication and Anti-Stereotype in Women's Empowerment Visuals

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Abstract. Visuals have been increasingly preferred as a means for advocating for feminism. Visual content creators with such ends design visual content in particular ways to attract and create resonance with female audiences. However, in doing so, visual creators may be contributing to the social construction of "female", potentially undermining their efforts. The current study provides an explanation of the components of effective visual communication and anti-gender stereotypes, identifies their connection and a dilemma for visual creators, and suggests possible solutions as to how to balance the two. There is no one solution that is capable of solving the problem entirely, and the efficacy of the solutions varies based on the particular visual communication method and/or the circumstances and viewpoint of the affected group, indicating the necessity for customized approaches.

Keywords: Visual communication, stereotype, gender nonconformity, women's empowerment.

1. Introduction

The public's information-gathering process has changed significantly in the current new generation due to advancements in technologies that allow access to digital content. One among the plethora of changes related to technological advancements is the change in people's attention span. Particularly, the faster communication provided by technologies has caused people's attention span to decrease [1], which in turn prompts information senders to put effort into increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of their communication to compete for receivers' attention [2]. Visual aids are incredibly useful for delivering information; studies show that presentations containing visuals are 43% more successful in influencing people [3]. Advocates for social change have often preferred using graphics to convey their message, partly due to their persuasive power. Empowerment visuals are one type of these images; as the name implies, they are made to empower a particular group. Influential companies like Dove have been utilizing visuals, especially commercials, to develop female-empowering campaigns in response to the ongoing focus on feminism [4]. At the same time, there has been increased popularity to the argument that gender is socially constructed to the extent that it is adopted by international organizations such as the World Health Organization [5]. The notion of gender being socially constructed raises essential questions of what is female and whether there should even be such a definition. As it is related to gender, female-empowering visuals are also inevitably constructing the concept of female for that they engage in a process of defining female in order to target the audience they want to empower. Therefore, in attempting to empower females and dismantle gender stereotypes, female-empowering visuals also reinforce some other gender stereotypes, resulting in a potentially self-undermining process. Limited literature has investigated the intersection of feminism, visual communication, and social constructionism, let alone provide a solution to the aforementioned problem.

2. Components of the Problem

2.1. Effective Visual Communication

Visuals have the power to "make arguments" based on how they relate to the cultural and historical contexts of their viewers [6]. When a visual design anticipates and uses social connotations to convey a message without explicitly stating it, it is considered effective [7]. In order for an audience to

perceive themselves as the target of empowerment when they are exposed to graphics that are meant to empower them, an identification process between the audience and the visual is required. Kenneth Burke asserts that identification is achieved when “individuals are united in substance” such as “shared activities, attitudes, and ideas”, and the stronger the identification the more influence an audience will receive from a source [6]. Visual appearance is among the substances that are useful for creating identification. Audiences associate more and respond more positively to figures with visual appearances that are similar to theirs and become disassociated when the appearance is different [6]. This theory holds true for gender associations, demonstrated by Brooks et. al’s [8] experiment on the impact of the gender of figures in education videos on teaching outcomes that found that female students who were shown female figures responded more positively. Stereotypical gender signals, such as hair length and attire, helped in the experiment by indicating change in the figures' gender and helping students identify their gender even when it was not stated directly. Thus, it may be said that gender stereotypes are important for effective visual communication.

Females have historically been and continue to be underrepresented in numerous professions. Aside from patriarchy being a factor, girls and women are also more likely disinterested in fields that they perceive to be masculine, such as science and engineering. Female empowerment visuals are thus of interest because successful ones can encourage women to participate in traditionally male-dominant fields [9]. Similar to most social campaigns, female empowerment contents usually utilize symbols to identify similarities among its targeted audiences, create cohesion, and ultimately achieve Burke’s identification. One example of such is the red lipstick worn by women suffragettes during the first wave of feminism [10]. Given the societal belief of red lips being only worn by prostitutes [11], the women suffragettes’ collective decision to wear red lipsticks symbolized their attempt to break the stigma and communicated their affirmation of women’s self-determination [10]. Symbols also differentiate between insiders and outsiders [12]. In empowerment visuals, symbols can be used to help identify and exclude people who are not the intended target of empowerment—that is, the insiders. This distinction is crucial for content that aims to empower underrepresented groups in particular, since if it does not, the content could end up resonating with and thus empowering the dominant group, hence accomplishing the reverse of its intended purpose. Socially created gender cues become useful symbols for identifying the target audience when it comes to gender-based empowerment. In the famous “We Can Do It!” poster used by the American government to recruit women into the workforce during the Second World War, multiple gendered symbols such as the red lips, head wrap, and nail polish were included to clearly communicate the fact that Rosie the Riveter is a female figure and that the “we” in “we can do it” refers to women. If “Uncle Sam” or any other character without these gender symbols were used in place of Rosie the Riveter, there would be significant confusion created as to what group the “we” addresses, and the affected audience of the poster would likely change from women to men. Clearly, in the absence of other aids (e.g. words), the choice of visual symbols in visual contents highly affects the effectiveness of its communication.

2.2. Anti-Stereotype

More people have realized that there is a stereotypical appearance of women that all females are required to follow to some extent as feminism has grown and inclusivity has generally advanced. In the workplace, women are frequently expected to wear makeup and skirts or dresses instead of pants solely for the reason that they are female [13]. Aside from being inconvenient, such norms also, as Judith Butler [14] suggests, create a definition of “female” that excludes females who do not comply with those norms. Individuals who present themselves in gender nonconforming (GNC) ways are harmed by gender-based appearance stereotypes through ways including but not limited to expressing identity crises, highlighting the need for anti-stereotype efforts.

The use of gender cues is essentially based on stereotypes; visual creators determine, based on the stereotypical picture of gender, what visual symbols would be effective for helping audiences identify a figure’s gender. Planned visuals such as stock images that are produced for demonstrating a certain scene/idea are different from unplanned visuals such as real-life photographs that capture the reality;

stock images are often designed, set up, and created with visual communication components that best depict their topic. Therefore, the difference between the role of stereotypes in unplanned visuals and in planned visuals is that for the former, stereotype is reflected in the way figures and objects may appear, while for the latter, stereotype is intentionally imposed on the figures and objects to achieve effective visual communication.

The phrase “women in (name of a field)” is often used to signify women’s representation in that field which is usually contrary to traditional gender roles and thus empowers women’s participation. To obtain a general understanding of how females are represented in female-empowering stock images, the author conducted Google Images searches of “women in (name of a field) stock” for three fields (science, business, politics). Notably, every female figure in the images resulting from the searches has at least one female gender cue such as long hair, wearing of lipstick, and nail polish. Moreover, for images that show art form figures of women, the gender of the figures is still identifiable despite them not having any facial features because of their long hair. The fact that no image featuring figures with GNC appearances proves the common habit of stock image creators (i.e. to use stereotypical figures of gender) and the lack of representation of GNC individuals in empowerment-aimed visuals.

Cheryan et al. [15] explain that broadcasted content about a group can convey stereotypes and thus discourage those who do not identify with the stereotypes from joining the group. This finding has dilemmatic implications for female empowerment visuals. While they may succeed in encouraging participation by showing women in counter-stereotypical settings, empowerment visuals may also fail to do so or even deter women who do not identify with the portrayed women's visual gender cues. Because they create the stereotypical picture of a woman, popular female empowerment graphics may therefore only be empowering some women while further alienating other women who do not fit the stereotypes.

2.3. Suggestions

As mentioned in section 2.1, identification between the visual and the audience through shared attributes is required for effective visual communication. However, in terms of visual appearance, shared attributes are often those that are gender stereotypical. Gender-based empowerment visuals therefore face a dilemma in designing themselves; essentially, there is a question of: how the effectiveness of empowerment visuals and anti-stereotype ideologies should be balanced. This section provides a discussion of possible solutions to the problem and assesses the limits of each solution.

2.1.1 Use of Texts

Visuals that are designed with strong intentions of communicating a message, such as advertisements, are rarely visual-only; most visual elements function in tandem with other elements of other modes of communication, such as text and sound. When it comes to helping viewers comprehend the context of stories, images, and other content—especially when the subject matter is contentious or unclear—textual explanations and the way they are written are extremely crucial. Empowerment visuals featuring GNC females can thus use texts to identify and affirm their female identity and hence mitigate audiences’ misunderstanding of the intended message. For example, a poster with a GNC female figure and the line “female in STEM” written out would attract audiences who have a stereotypical picture of females for its seemingly illogical design and in turn help them realize that GNC females are also female in STEM. Visual content designers could also compare and contrast the aforementioned design to a design featuring a conforming female figure, which would especially highlight the argument that conforming and GNC females are females regardless of gender expression.

The limitation of this solution is that it provides an approach that prioritizes anti-stereotype and does not actually answer how anti-stereotype could be balanced with effective communication, if it could. Moreover, there are still situations where texts may be not accessible, either because the visual is supposed to be visual only (eg. a photograph) and would appear awkward if text was incorporated,

or because an audience is only shown the visual and not its accompanying textual explanation. Therefore, this solution would only apply to visuals that are appropriate for texts.

2.1.2 More Specific Representations

Practically speaking, GNC women have different problems than do gender-conforming women; hence, more specialized representations are required to address these distinctions. Different images of empowerment that highlight GNC and conforming women can be made to serve their respective audiences. Even while fewer viewers would be able to empathize with a visual in this way, this inability to do so would alert people to acknowledge that there are others in their industry who have experienced different struggles than they have. Nevertheless, this distinction would further reinforce the idea of there being a typical, “normal” woman which GNC women are not. The titles of such more specifically targeted visuals may be, for instance, “women in STEM” and “GNC women in STEM”, which still others GNC women and suggests that they are not representative of women in STEM but only GNC women. Some may go on to argue that merely by using the words “conforming” and “nonconforming”, society is affirming the existence of some standard that needs to be conformed to which GNC individuals fail to do. On the contrary, one could argue that distinguishing between conforming and nonconforming highlights society’s expectation of conformity to socially constructed concepts like femininity and that GNC individuals rejecting this expectation should be identified and applauded. Either way, the public would be committing benevolent discrimination, which is when relatively dominant groups use the weaker power of underrepresented groups to justify the act of othering them [16]. Benevolent discrimination may be net beneficial under a utilitarian framework in that it motivates people to help underrepresented individuals regarding their specific needs. In the context of this paper, creating visuals specifically for GNC audiences could be a form of benevolent discrimination as it does increase the representation of GNC females yet still fails on the theoretical level as it maintains an othered status of GNC females, as discussed previously. To answer the question of whether tangible impacts or theories should be prioritized would require another discussion. As for the case of this paper, it may be the most appropriate for the group in question (i.e., GNC females) to decide what they prefer.

2.1.3 Acceptance of Stereotype Usage

This solution essentially suggests a utilitarian approach and claims that the fact that stereotype usage contributes largely to creating effective visual communication should be accepted and visual designers should continue the usage regardless. While it is good to see changes in the use of stereotypes, campaigners and graphic designers may only have limited success in their unilateral efforts to do so if society's expectations for conformity remain unchanged. Stereotypes may have to be used by those who are under certain pressure, such as graphic designers who must meet customer requests, even if it goes against their moral principles. As for individuals who do have the ability and capability of initiating change, they could be the boundary-pushers of gender concepts and may do so by enhancing the representation of GNC individuals. In fact, the contrast created by what the general public is doing (i.e. conforming to stereotypes) and what advocating individuals are doing may be better at alerting society of a change happening than if the change all happened suddenly, should that even be possible. Similar to the limitation with 2.3.1, this solution only proposes that visual communication effectiveness should be prioritized and fails to balance it with anti-stereotype. The process of change would also require a long timeframe and likely result in chaos of disagreements. Nevertheless, experiencing the process would allow the public to critically engage with it and thus be more likely to come to a rational understanding.

3. Conclusion

The current study's discussion implies that there is not a perfect way to resolve the conflict between anti-stereotype ideas and efficient visual communication. In fact, rather than achieving a perfect balance, two of the three ideas under discussion suggest prioritizing one. Additionally, a solution

might be better suited based on the scenario and viewpoint of the group, or groups concerned, as well as the context in which a visual occurs. This inability to generalize a solution suggests that solutions to the problem in question may be more effective if different solutions were tailor-designed to address different scenarios. The current research contributes an interdisciplinary study to the topics of feminism, visual semantics, and media communication which previous literature has not explored. It identifies and confirms the existence of a connection between the three topics, providing an affirmation of the value of related future research. Further studies could discuss other possible solutions to the identified problem, especially surrounding methods of balancing the two components. Experimental studies could be conducted to test for the effects of reduced gender cues on visual communication effectiveness specifically for empowerment visuals, which could alternatively provide insight into if visual communication effectiveness or anti-stereotype should be prioritized.

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