Assessing Visual Literacy in the Consumers of New Technologies: A Cultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Since the appearance of the term visual literacy in the second half of the 20th century, many authors have spoken of visual competencies. These competencies are acquired through the use of visual language and an understanding that the use of human and cultural capabilities makes people free to create and interpret messages. Furthermore, since the incorporation of new technologies, any prosumer (producer and consumer) can generate visual communication. This research develops and validates a questionnaire proposal to observe visual literacy in users of new technologies to analyze the state of literacy of image prosumers. This questionnaire is composed of 61 items that are related to habits in the reception, consumption, and production of images; the capacities of perception and visual interpretation; and the cultural aspects of the people who use images as a communicative vehicle. The purpose of this proposal is to facilitate the analysis of common characteristics that explain the moment in which people live from the point of view of visual communication and the cultural differences that are related to this field.

KEYWORDS

Experts, Questionnaire, Validation, Visual Literacy

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of visual literacy first appeared as a term and field of study around 1969 (Debes, 1969). The term “visual literacy” appeared previously on another occasion, but the appearance in 1969 is considered foundational for the academic field of visual literacy, as it is the most relevant manifestation in terms of results generated after its incorporation (Peña, 2017; Peña, Brown, & Dobson, 2014).

The term visual literacy was introduced by (Debes, 1969) and extended by (Fransecky & Debes, 1972, p. 9), who defined the term (according to the International Visual Literacy Association’s website) as the following.

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Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication.

On the other hand, (UNESCO, 2017) argues that “literacy is a human right, a resource for personal autonomy and a factor of social and human development.” Following these arguments, this article aims to initiate research in which to understand and reflect on the importance of the concept of visual literacy in a world composed of images. Therefore, the analysis of how one is to be able to create and understand these images will help generate personal autonomy and critical capacity to address visual messages.

As described above, the term visual literacy was introduced to the theoretical panorama around the 1970s, although we could build the beginnings of this reflection starting with the invention of photography in the middle of the 19th century. Similar to the social phenomenon that occurred with the appearance of the printing press in the 15th century, when the written language began to be accessible to the general public, visual language began to appear with people who “prosume” (produce and consume) images multiplied through multiple visual media. These prosumers (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972) began to produce images thanks to the development of technology (Gómez Cruz, 2012), and they exponentially multiplied that way because now “everyone with a mobile phone with [an] integrated camera automatically becomes a photographer” (Manovich, 2015, p. 16). The origin of this global prosuming expansion can be traced to around 2007, when Apple introduced the first iPhone, which included a 2-megapixel camera. Since then, mobile devices have become increasingly advanced, and the standard now is what is classified as a “smartphone.”

One consequence of this technology (and mobile phones as ubiquitous devices with a camera), as (Prensky, 2001) explains, is digital “natives” who grow and develop in association with new technologies and think differently than “digital migrants” (those that come from a mainly analogical culture). These so-called “natives” can process up to three different information screens simultaneously and have multidimensional visual-spatial capabilities for the processing of images and three-dimensional representations, mental maps or interactive figures, responding quickly to expected and unexpected stimuli with dimensions of astonishing selective attention (Hernández Serrano & González Sánchez, 2011, p. 56).

The change that has occurred in recent decades in methods of communication also includes new codes and languages. These communicational changes cause the inclusion of new codes and languages and are typical since the appearance of the so-called information society (Expósito Ortiz, 2013). Thanks to this communicational growth generated in the shelter of the information society and technologies of information and communication, today, almost all individuals manage images in their everyday lives (Manovich, 2015). It is now common to find thousands of images included in media, social networks, or our phones daily. In this way, tasks that previously were not part of communication have been included in daily communication and consumption habits, such as generating images or videos instantaneously.

To carry out this communication, actors already known in the field come into play thanks to verbal communication, like the standard schema of sender—message—receiver (Watzlawick & Watzlawick, 1976). In the case of visual communication (Dondis, 1974), when a visual message is generated, the essential elements for the generation of the significative messages are used, too. But, in turn, new shared perceptual mechanisms are created. To define these mechanisms, Dondis refers to the existence of visual perception, which physiologically can place the human being in a relationship with others, but sometimes it can also separate them due to dysfunctions in the process of decoding the message.
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