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CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY: TRANSFORMATION OF VISUAL CODES IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract. The article discusses how photography can be used to build, maintain and alter cultural identity in an era of globalization. The paper seeks to understand how photography influences cultural identity and visual techniques that will make the local images globally acceptable and to create a classification of cultural codes in the modern photography. The research method involves the use of semiotic analysis of the images in photographs, phenomenological study of visual perception and evaluation of the works of photographers of different cultures. The paper draws on such instances of documentary and art photography as the works of indigenous photographers who take back visual stories that were previously under colonial control and how digital technology alters the way of movement of cultural symbols. The results indicate that photography acts as both a means of maintaining a culture and a means of changing identity. Visual symbols combine local traditions with international visual language to create new cultural expressions. The study identifies three main cultural code types used in modern photography which are archived memorial and performative-ritual and dialogical-transcultural. Globalization makes photography more than a recording tool because it transforms photos into cultural identity builders who use their space to connect local elements with worldwide influences.

Key words: cultural identity, photography, globalization, visual codes, representation, semiotics, indigenous photography, visual culture.

Introduction. Shooting a picture is not anymore a tool to record reality. The way communities express their self-awareness and views to other people in life today is through photography that creates powerful identity building tools. According to Stuart Hall in his seminal publication on representation, meaning is created in various locations as it is transferred through various activities with visual images being among the most decisive systems of signification (Hall, 1997). This idea is extremely applicable when we see how photography intervenes between the traditional culture of the area with the universal visual trends in the present day world that are linked.

In the last few decades, cultural identity in photography has become an increasingly popular topic among scholarly researchers. Existing analysis explores the way photographic images create national identity (Schwartz & Ryan, 2003) and the way indigenous groups use photography to take back their visual representation from colonial control (Wilson & Stewart, 2008) and the way the worldwide exchange of cultural symbols happens through globalization (Appadurai, 1996). The existing research has established a complex academic debate but researchers are still required to do an organized investigation about visual codes which connect local culture to worldwide contexts and the way these codes transform during international cultural exchanges.

The study has three objectives. The research explores the way in which the contemporary photographs affect the perception of cultural identity. The paper discusses the techniques that have been applied with the native images to attain international fame and foreign visual designs to be applied to the local market. The study examines the 21st-century photography, which uses cultural codes to create a visual identity.

The study has been conducted due to the fact that numerous factors contribute to its relevance. Photography occupies a vital position in the contemporary visual culture because digital platforms generate billions of images which circulate throughout the world every day. The images possess the capability to modify the perception of individuals about themselves and their communities through their visual representation of reality. The encounter between cultures has become a common occurrence due to the fact that migration and digital communication and economic globalization have established a continuous stream of contact among them. The study of visual codes that facilitate the encounters between cultures has become a vital theoretical and practical field of investigation. The new indigenous photography movements which have emerged throughout the world present multiple serious questions regarding visual sovereignty and ethical representation and the potential for decolonizing visual perception (Smith, 2012).

Results. The theoretical framework of this study draws upon several intellectual traditions. Semiotic approaches to photography, originating in the work of Roland Barthes and subsequently developed by numerous scholars, provide tools for analyzing how photographic images produce meaning through codes and conventions (Barthes, 1981; Sonesson, 2011). The concept of the visual code is central here: it refers to systems of conventions through which visual elements acquire significance within particular cultural contexts. As Brian Curtin has demonstrated, the meanings we attribute to images are shaped by cultural ideas that we have learned, and visual representations are mediated by conventions that vary across societies (Curtin, 2007).

According to Hall's concept of representation, cultural identity is not something final, but an ongoing process of development which person receives through representational practices (Hall, 1990). According to Hall, identity emerges through the representation process rather than out of it. This understanding helps to show how the process of identity construction is assisted by photography. Photographic images create the appearances of identity through the selection by photographers of their frame, light and subject and context.

The concept of the global imaginary, developed by Manfred Steger, proves useful for analyzing the transformation of visual codes in the context of globalization. Steger defines the global imaginary as people's growing consciousness of belonging to a global community, a consciousness that is both expressed and reinforced through visual culture (Steger, 2008). Tommaso Durante's Visual Archive Project has documented how visual symbols circulate across national boundaries, creating what he calls a shared global visual landscape, while simultaneously retaining connections to specific cultural traditions (Durante, 2014).

To understanding the functioning of cultural codes in photography, it has to be accepted that photographs do not provide a neutral view of reality. Every photograph embodies choices about what to include and exclude, how to frame the subject, what moment to capture. These choices are shaped by cultural assumptions that the photographer may not even be aware of, and they communicate messages to viewers who decode them through their own cultural frameworks. Research in cross-cultural psychology has revealed significant differences in how people from various cultures perceive and compose visual images (Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005). Western viewers tend to focus on the important elements in the photograph, applying a logically based approach, whereas the East Asian viewers tend to focus on relationships in the photograph. These visual-perceptual distinctions affect the way that images are employed by photographers.

Photographers who operate in multiple cultures need to be aware that their images will be interpreted differently by different cultural groups. One image has the potential to seem like a respectful documentary photo to one individual, but that exact image might seem stereotypical or unwelcome to another individual. This problem becomes even more severe when it comes to indigenous photography because colonial representation has established long-lasting visual stereotypes which affect the way indigenous people are viewed by others and how they view themselves.

The history of photography's relationship with indigenous cultures is troubled. From its earliest days, photography was used as a tool of colonial knowledge production, documenting supposedly vanishing peoples and creating visual archives that served the purposes of empire (Edwards, 2001). Edward Curtis's famous photographs of Native Americans exemplify this approach: while technically accomplished and now valued as historical documents, they were staged according to Curtis's romantic vision of pre-contact indigenous life, erasing the contemporary reality of Native peoples and fixing them in an imaginary past (Farrell Racette, 2011). This colonial visual legacy continues to influence how indigenous peoples are represented and how they represent themselves.

Since the 1980s, indigenous artists have been supporting a worldwide indigenous photography movement, and they have begun to control their visual representation (McNally, 2018). Indigenous photographers employ their indigenous perspective to oppose the colonial perspective, and they take back control of the visual representation. In photography, the pictures show that it serves as a powerful tool of cultural domination, and it also functions as a tool of cultural renewal, and a tool of resistance.

Patterns of Connection were created by Leah King-Smith. It is made by her through the overlay of old pictures of Aboriginal people on the pictures of the Australian countryside (Marsh, 2003). King-Smith salvages Aboriginal people out of the colonial archives and she situates them in a sense of spiritual relationship to the land. This way she goes against the depersonalising view of anthropological photography and gives a fresh emphasis on the indigenous bond to the land. This is how the artist's work allows us to see how we could talk about an archival-memorial method of cultural coding using historical images to produce new identity stories.

His professional experience has demonstrated other areas of work that the Onondaga photographer, Jeff Thomas, has completed. The stereotype that indigenous people live in the past or on rural reservation land gets challenged through the fact that Thomas has spent multiple years photographing indigenous individuals who reside in contemporary urban spaces (Thomas, 2012). His series called Corn Husks documents elderly individuals from Six Nations of the Grand River while they perform their traditional practices to show how physical memory enables cultural knowledge to survive throughout time. Thomas selects to record the making process instead of the completed artwork because he wants to demonstrate that culture exists as an ongoing process rather than a fixed historical record. This approach demonstrates a performance-ritual mode of cultural coding, or the way cultural identity is presented by recording a bodily practice.

The photos of photographers who present mixed identity and multiple cultural contacts show the third type of cultural coding. Through photographs Zimbabwean-Australian artist Chris Bryce-Watt explores her mixed identity which includes Indian and Dutch and German and African roots (Bryce-Watt 2025). Through the hybridity theory of Homi Bhabha and meshworks framework of Tim Ingold the artist shows identity as a complex cross-continental network of connections instead of a single binary structure that continues through family generations. The field of cultural photography receives one of its major advancements through this dialogical-transcultural approach which shifts the current emphasis on cultural heritage from basic record-keeping to creative representation of how individuals form their identity through social exchanges.

The transformation of visual codes in globalized photography can be observed across multiple dimensions. Visually one can note a mixture of various cultures in visual languages. As an illustration, a photographer based in Lagos would be able to combine the Yoruba visual culture with fashion photography techniques in international fashion, and a photographer based in Tokyo would be able to combine the traditional Japanese composition with American street photography styles. These combinations are not indicative of the fact that culture is lost, but is a creative process that gives photographers a possibility to create visual languages that depict the complex modern experiences. Digital technology has transformed the way in which culture distributes images through radical distribution. Photographers who are marginalized have the opportunity to exhibit their work to a global audience

through Instagram, without having to go through the traditional distribution procedures that are normally required (Manovich, 2017).

Globalization is driving the development of cross-cultural visual understanding and the way pictures are interpreted is facing a new opportunity and challenge. The pictures that are distributed in foreign markets are seen to undergo an entirely different context-based evaluation process, which is based on the context that is entirely different. In other cultures, Tech images can be interesting and in other cultures, Tech images can be stereotypical according to the photographer, who wants to discourage such stereotypes. The way images are understood shows why we need to be taught about the images and why we need to provide background information to the images as we share them around.

These changes have practical impact in different areas. Based on the findings of this study, photographers are recommended to be self-reflective by knowing their cultural background and analyzing the context in which their work is going to be evaluated and participating in the communities that they depict. According to Brown & Nicholas (2012), indigenous photographers have established ethical protocols which advocate for collaboration between photographers and communities and consent of communities prior to photographing them and returning the photographs to the communities being photographed.

Visual codes are changing in cultural museums, archives and galleries and this makes them wonder how to select, arrange and display their items. The institutions are also wondering about how to display colonial era historical pictures in the present times. The institutions are equally willing to know the way that they are able to assist the photographic work drawn from the underrepresented groups to make it known and circulate it. What responsibilities do institutions have to provide contextual information that enables appropriate interpretation of culturally specific images?

This research indicates that teachers need to educate students on cross-cultural visual literacy concepts. Students need to learn how to read and create images and visual codes and their cultural background and how images affect their identity development. Cross-cultural education enables students to understand other cultures better and teaches them how to use visual representation ethically.

The nature of specific photo projects shows how these theoretical aspects are realized in practice. Black-and-white photographs of Salgado form strong visual links between different cultures using their universal human experiences to link different geographical regions. His work operates within what may be referred to as a humanist universalist framework that aims at surpassing cultural specificities by appealing to universal human experiences (Salgado, 2013).

A different approach can be seen in the work of those photographers who are members of Magnum Photos, and who have been more concerned with the ethical and political aspects of documentary representation. One of the Magnum Foundation projects called On Religion united photographers with different backgrounds to capture religious practices in various parts of the world and it explicitly addressed the question of insider versus outsider perspective as well as the question of how far visual cross-cultural understanding can be achieved (Magnum Foundation, 2016).

The present-day African visual arts are a diverse field of study on the basis of which one can analyze the evolution of the visual codes under the influence of globalization. Zanele Muholi and other artists have used documentary photography to record the lives of the LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa, and at the same time, their photography has been utilized in the efforts to promote visibility and to develop communities (Muholi, 2014). These artists reject the colonial exoticizing gaze and the Western visual norms and create original African visual languages that are rooted in the local cultures and political environments yet engage in the global discussions.

Photography is an important factor that needs to be examined as it influences diaspora communities. Photographs can be used by migrants and their offspring in order to retain their historical memories and identity and to retain links with their homeland when creating new identities in the communities they find themselves in. Family photographs also act as visual archives that preserve

cultural transmission and represent traditional visual elements across many generations. Diaspora photographers are now using their visual medium to investigate complex hybrid identities and the experience of the fact that people are living in two cultures simultaneously.

The present time is an era of technological development that alters the way individuals see and interact with visual images in the real world. Smartphones have made photography common since most people around the globe use smartphones to take photos. The people have the freedom to take photos anywhere they want to and use the photos. The questions are about the nature of images and how technology has modified real-world experiences through images.

Tech change will continue to alter the way photography interacts with the processes of creating and developing cultural identity, and researchers are just beginning to understand it.

The research analyzed over two hundred pictures which came from different cultures and it applied semiotic methods to determine the common patterns of visual representation of cultural identity. The analysis revealed that photographers use similar visual techniques to demonstrate cultural identity through costumes and adornments, in addition to filming culturally significant locations and environments, filming ritual practices, and demonstrating age relationships through the film. The method that photographers apply when demonstrating cultural identity varies according to their cultural background and the intent to document or create, as well as the audience they are aiming at.

Conclusions. This research paper examines the ways in which photography contributes to the development of cultural identity in the context of globalization. The study results show several distinct findings. The first finding demonstrates that photography operates as a cultural identity recording tool while simultaneously functioning as an active element in building cultural identity. Photographers establish cultural understanding through their subject selection and framing choices and composition methods, and their methods of presenting images, which determine how cultures view themselves and how others perceive them. Photography achieves maximum effectiveness in creating cultural identity when visual content moves across multiple cultural areas during the globalization period.

The study found three principal developments. Initially, there is the tendency of use of old pictures by indigenous artists who revive the colonial archives to produce new narrative forms. Secondly, there is the practice of documenting cultural practices by body-based practices in place of practices as static traditional heritage, now renders identity. Thirdly, there is an artist who deals with the hybrid identity and cross-cultural experience, inventing a new visual language to express the.

Thirdly, the visual code evolution in globalized photography can be seen in three aspects: iconography that generates new visual hybrid vocabularies, circulation facilitated by the digital technology-enabled distribution systems, and interpretation of the cross-cultural reading that produces misunderstanding and new meanings. There are changes which generate both opportunities and obstacles to cultural knowledge and visual representation.

This research benefits photographers as well as cultural organizations and educators in actual use. Based on the results, it is recommended that photographers should be self-reflexive and morally committed to the communities that they represent. Based on the findings, institutions can review their collections and curation and their method of presenting images in the proper context. Visual literacy education is recommended to the teachers based on the findings, and it should cover cross cultural concepts.

The study requires further exploration due to the fact that the outcomes are not supported by sufficient evidence. How does the technology of Artificial Intelligence influence the way the national or the community identity can be created by photography with visual content? How do the artists come up with new ways of creating visual content due to the challenges that they face in representing various cultural backgrounds? Researchers should examine both the theoretical models but also the real-life practice of photography in various cultural settings.

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