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“I love getting to share my art with other people:” Undergraduate Studio Art Student Perceptions of Visual Culture

Abstract
While previous literature has extensively explored the research habits and information needs of art students, little attention has been given to their relationship with the broader landscape of visual culture. This qualitative study explores first-year studio art student attitudes and self-perceived roles as creators and consumers of visual culture. Study findings reveal heightened awareness of their visual surroundings as well as multiple modes of engagement, including through social media platforms. These insights point to the ever-evolving nature of art education and the opportunities that instruction librarians have for incorporating relevant content into information literacy instruction through critical visual literacy.

Keywords
Library science, studio art, undergraduate students, survey, visual literacy, art and design, education, critical visual literacy.

Author Bios
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As the Visual Literacy and Resources Librarian at Indiana University, Jackie Huddle (formerly Fleming) leads visual literacy instruction sessions and teaches workshops out of the Scholars’ Commons related to visual resources topics. She also holds consultations with faculty and students about their image research needs.

Introduction

While existing literature examines studio art students' research habits and information needs[1] as well as the level of visual literacy skills of students at large,[2] researchers have not yet fully explored the relationship student artists have with visual culture. As artists, students are looking to aspects of our visual culture – specifically social media – as platforms for sharing their own work as well as places to gain artistic inspiration. However, not all student artists enter their higher education with the necessary visual literacy skills to create artwork and contribute to our shared visual landscape in ethical and impactful ways. This paper seeks to comprehend how first-year studio art students understand their relationship to visual culture as artists. Additionally, this article explores the ways in which students understand their roles as contributors to, and consumers of, visual culture. A qualitative study using grounded theory was employed to gather data from 208 students enrolled in foundational studio art courses at Indiana University over the course of two semesters during 2021 and 2022.[3]

Literature Review

While cultures across the globe have various visual literary theories, this literature review is situated in a Western perspective. The term "visual literacy" was popularized by John Debes, Eastman Kodak Company's Coordinator of Education. Debes organized the first National Conference on Visual Literacy which helped establish the creation of International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA).[4] Debes described visual literacy as a set of "visual-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."[5] While Debes was one of the first to help establish visual literacy within higher education, his definition was too broad. The central premises from this work are that visual literacy skills can be learned and they work in tandem with all of our senses. Since Debes's initial work on visual literacy, there have been numerous attempts at furthering his original definition of visual literacy, but no single definition of

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[1] Cheryl Claridge, "'So what I do is bang in the search term and see how I go:' The Information-Seeking Approaches of Arts Academy Students" (master's thesis, Federation University Australia, 2015), https://researchonline.federation.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/vital:10243?site_name=Default+Site&f0=sm_type%3A%22Masters%22&sort=sort_ss_sm_creator%2F&f1=sm_creator%3A%22Claridge%2C+Cheryl%22; Caroline M. Eckardt, "Meeting the Information Needs of Studio Art Students in the Academic Library: A Survey Conducted at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, January 2015), https://doi.org/10.17615/4jq9-eq12; Patrick Lo and Wilson Chu, "Information for Inspiration: Understanding Information-Seeking Behaviour and Library Usage of Students at the Hong Kong Design Institute," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 46, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 101-120, https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2015.1019604; Elize du Toit, "Personal Influence in Information-Seeking Behaviour of Art Students," *Journal of Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa* 2018, no. 56 (June 2018): 71-90; Caroline Brett, "The Image Seeking Behaviour of Art and Design Students in Further Education" (master's thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2013), http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1013.1316&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

[2] Eva Brumberger, "Visual Literacy and the Digital Native: An Examination of the MillennialLearner," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 30, no. 1 (2011): 19-47; Richard Emanuel and Siu Challons-Lipton, "Visual Literacy and the Digital Native: Another Look," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 32, no. 1 (2013): 7-26.

[3] The authors would like to clarify that this study was conducted before awareness of generative AI and artwork was made mainstream.

[4] Maria D. Avgerinou and Rune Pettersson, "Visual Literacy Theory: Moving Forward," in *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*, eds. Sheeree Josephson, James D. Kelly, and Ken Smith (New York: Routledge, 2020), 435.

[5] John L. Debes, "The Loom of Visual Literacy–An Overview," *Audiovisual Instruction* 14 (Oct. 1969): 27.

visual literacy has been agreed upon as the correct definition.[6] Maria D. Avgerinou explains that the various existing definitions have more commonalities than differences. All definitions have visual literacy "referred to as either a *skill*, a *competency* or an *ability*" (emphasis original).[7] It has been argued that numerous definitions of visual literacy exist due to the interdisciplinary nature of the concept.

Scholars have continued to attempt to define what constitutes a visual literacy skill set. In a 2001 research study, Avgerinou identified eleven visual literacy abilities: "(1) visualization, (2) critical viewing, (3) visual reasoning, (4) visual discrimination, (5) visual thinking, (6) visual association, (7) visual reconstruction, (8) constructing meaning, (9) re-constructing meaning, (10) knowledge of visual vocabulary and definitions, and (11) knowledge of visual conventions."[8] This work helped to more concretely define what is encompassed by a visual literacy skill set. In a similar but more recent study, Joanna Kędra analyzed commonly used definitions of visual literacy within higher education to further explore what makes someone visually literate. They further defined the components of a visual literacy skill set by grouping commonly discussed visual learning skills within three groups: visual reading (i.e. translation, evaluation, visual perception, interpretation, analysis, understanding, and knowledge of grammar and syntax); visual writing (i.e. visual communication, visual creation and image production, and image use); and other visual literacy skills (i.e. visual thinking, visual learning, and applied image use).[9] Both of these studies have helped develop and focus the elements of a visual literacy skill set and define what it means to be visually literate in the twenty-first century.

One widely respected definition of visual literacy is from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). The *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (*ACRL Standard*) from 2011 defines visual literacy as

> A set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture.[10]

This definition offers a more specific articulation of what visual literacy skills encompass and how these skills help to enhance an individual's relationship to visual culture. In addition to defining visual literacy, this ACRL document also shares seven standards – each with their own performance indicators and learning outcomes – for those teaching visual literacy skills. In 2020, Dana S. Thompson and Stephanie Beene conducted a scoping review focused on how the *Visual Literacy Standards* were being used within visual literacy scholarship. The authors found that education and librarianship both heavily utilize the *Visual Literacy Standards*. Thompson and Beene concluded that

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[6] Maria D. Avgerinou, "A Mad-Tea Party No-More: Revisiting the Visual Literacy Definition Problem," in *Turning Trees*, eds. Robert E. Griffin, John Lee, and Vicki S. Williams (State College, PA: International Visual Literacy Association, 2003), 29-41.
[7] Ibid; Maria D. Avgerinou and Rune Pettersson, "Toward a Cohesive Theory of Visual Literacy," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 30, no. 2 (2011): 7.
[8] Maria D. Avgerinou and Rune Pettersson, "Visual Literacy Theory: Moving Forward," in *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*, eds. Sheeree Josephson, James D. Kelly, and Ken Smith (New York: Routledge, 2020), 443.
[9] Joanna Kędra, "What Does It Mean to Be Visually Literate? Examination of Visual Literacy Definitions in a Context of Higher Education," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 37, no. 2 (2018): 67-84.
[10] Association of College Research Libraries (ACRL), "ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," October 2011, http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/visualliteracy.pdf.

the *Visual Literacy Standards* can be used to help "move the field towards a unified, organizing framework for its research."[11]

In April of 2022, the ACRL published the *Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education (Visual Literacy Framework)*. The purpose of this document was to create a more updated approach to visual literacy learning. While the *Visual Literacy Framework* does use the same visual literacy definition from 2011, it utilizes the concept of learning themes instead of standards. The four themes in this document include:

- learners participate in a changing visual information landscape,
- learners perceive visuals as communicating information,
- learners practice visual discernment and criticality, and
- learners pursue social justice through visual practice.[12]

Each theme contains its own knowledge practices and dispositions. That this document is rooted in identified trends and challenges in visual literacy today helps to further establish the concept of visual literacy and its relevance in our evolving world.[13]

There are several strategies that have been discussed within the literature for teaching visual literacy skills. These strategies, also referred to as methods, are designed to assist students with the critical reading of visual information. One popular strategy has been the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) Protocol. The VTS Protocol, sometimes called the VTS curriculum, was developed by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine. The VTS Protocol is led by a VTS facilitator, normally the educator leading the class, and is participation-centered in nature. The VTS facilitator chooses an image that is appropriate for the class and audience and asks the viewers three questions:

- "What's going on/happening in this picture? (asked once to initiate the discussion)
- What do you see that makes you say that? (asked whenever an interpretive comment is made)
- What more can you/we find? (asked frequently throughout the discussion to broaden and deepen the search for meaning)"[14]

The job of the facilitator is to start the conversation, not to lead the conversation. Participants benefit from sharing their observations in a low-stakes setting and learning from others' observations as well.

Additional methodologies used for visual literacy instruction include but are not limited to the Slow Looking for Comprehension (SLC) activity and The Digital Image Guide (DIG) Method. The SLC activity is an adaptable tool which educators and librarians may use in visual literacy instruction. The design of the SLC activity was influenced by "the Visual Literacy Standards, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), *The New York Times'* exercise 'What's Going on in this Picture?', and the

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[11] Dana S. Thompson and Stephanie Beene, "Uniting the Field: Using the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards to Move Beyond the Definition Problem of Visual Literacy," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 39, no. 2 (2020): 84, https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2020.1750809.

[12] Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), "The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education," April 6, 2022, https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf.

[13] Dana S. Thompson, et al., "A Proliferation of Images: Trends, Obstacles, and Opportunities for Visual Literacy," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 41, no. 2 (2022): 113-131, https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2022.2053819.

[14] Hailey Dabney, Alexa Miller, and Philip Yanewine, "Understanding Visual Literacy: The Visual Thinking Strategies Approach," in *Essentials of Teaching and Integrating Visual and Media Literacy: Visualizing Learning*, eds. Danilo M. Baylen and Adriana D'Alba (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 56.

Library of Congress' Visual Literacy Exercise for Photographs and Prints."[15] This is a scaffolded exercise with individual, paired, and class discussion. The activity includes:

- looking (writing down initial observations),
- analyzing (answering questions about the image),
- articulating (discussing observations with a neighbor),
- evaluating (the caption of the image is shown and students compare and contrast their initial observations with the caption),
- articulating (discussing the answers to the evaluation stage),
- contextualizing (more information is provided for the image), and
- comprehending (discussing the activity experience as a class).[16]

The DIG Method was developed by Thompson and "is based upon three sources: (1) questions found in an online research guide about how to evaluate digital images, (2) questions found in 'The Visual Literacy White Paper,' and (3) questions found in *Visual Literacy for Libraries: A Practical, Standards-Based Guide*."[17] The DIG Method was created with a journalism course in mind as a way to guide students through critically viewing images they encounter on social media. These types include shallow images (i.e. memes, visual quotes, stock photos) and deep images (i.e. news photographs, visual advertisements, infographics).[18] These methods and activities are useful for instructors and librarians who are interested in incorporating visual literacy within their instruction.

While the understanding of visual literacy will continue to change and develop as technology and information formats advance, its importance as a skill set has already been firmly established. This is specifically true in the realm of art education. The National Art Education Association (NAEA) recognizes visual literacy as an imperative literacy skill for interacting in the world today. Specifically, the NAEA "supports visual literacy across disciplines and learning goals related to focus on close reading, logical evidence-based inferences, meaning-making through analysis and group discussions, and creating visual imagery."[19] The Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) further develops visual literacy standards within art education by defining the knowledge and abilities that student studio artists, both novice and expert, should acquire during their education. While the standards do not use the term visual literacy, they do embrace concepts related to the skill set, such as the impact of culture on artists and the potential of artwork to change our culture. The *ARLIS/NA Art, Architecture, and Design Information Competencies* recognizes that it is "critical for studio art learners and practitioners to understand the ethical considerations of their role as producers of cultural, visual, and myriad other types of information."[20] The discipline of art education at large understands that artists must develop critical thinking and visual literacy skills in order to thrive in their professions. Artists are meant to develop a deeper visual awareness and

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[15] Dana S. Thompson and Stephanie Beene, "Reading Images with a Critical Eye: Teaching Strategies for Academic Librarians," in *Teaching Critical Reading Skills: Strategies for Academic Librarians, Vol. 2: Reading for Evaluation, Beyond Scholarly Texts, and in the World*, eds. Hannah Gascho Rempel and Rachel Hamelers (Chicago: ACRL, 2023), 425.

[16] Ibid, 426.

[17] Ibid, 428.

[18] Dana S. Thompson, "Teaching Students to Critically Read Digital Images: A Visual Literacy Approach Using The DIG Method," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 38, no. 1-2 (2019): 111-112.

[19] National Art Education Association (NAEA), "NAEA Position Statement on Visual Literacy," adopted April 2014; last reviewed and revised March 2022, https://www.arteducators.org/advocacy-policy/articles/546-naea-position-statement-on-visual-literacy.

[20] Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA), "Art, Architecture, and Design Information Competencies," June 2018: 23, https://assets.noviams.com/novi-file-uploads/arlisna/pdfs-and-documents/research_and_reports/ARLISNA_artarchdesigninfocomp_2018.pdf.

consciousness of the impact of their work on audiences and society. Having visual literacy skills is a widely recognized way to achieve that level of knowledge.[21]

The concept of critical visual literacy within art education is in alignment with the importance of ethical considerations for those working with visuals. Critical visual literacy is "the ability to investigate the social, cultural, and economic 'contexts' of visual texts in order to illuminate the power relationships in society."[22] In other words, critical visual literacy skills require a questioning mindset that goes beyond looking and interpreting to analyzing the underlying context of visual information. According to this theory, the foundation of this skillset is rooted in the values of theoretical movements such as critical pedagogy, feminism, and critical literacy studies. This concept asks us to consider how we are interpellated by visual information through reading with and against a text (or in this case, image). Critical literacy scholar Hilary Janks utilizes Louis Althusser's (1971) theory of interpellation to support the importance of critically analyzing texts. According to this theory, interpellation means to be "hailed into a subject position."[23] As Janks explains, interpellation often happens unconsciously, causing the reader or viewer to become subjects to the text versus active and responsive to the information.[24]

To combat interpellation when interacting with visual information, a critical viewer needs to attempt to understand the creator's point of view and question the person's authority on the subject at hand. In order for this process to occur, viewers need to understand the use of visual signs within an image (i.e. subject, cropping, framing, body position and body language, composition and layout, gaze) and question the context and representation of an image.[25] Critical visual literacy skills include but are not limited to self-reflection, critical thinking, and questioning abilities. Anahit Falihi and Linda Wason-Ellam situate critical visual literacy pedagogy strategies as "the deconstruction of visual messages, dialogical processes to foster democratic learning processes, creative expression through visual representation, and teaching skills in the use of various approaches necessary for success in contemporary society."[26] Specific types of critical visual literacy instruction sessions can be further enhanced through critical lenses such as post-structuralist analysis, postcolonialist analysis, feminist analysis, and queer analysis.[27] Critical visual literacy skills taught through critical visual pedagogical strategies prepare learners to create and interact with visual information in ethical and responsible ways that contribute to our shared visual culture. These skills also prepare visual learners with the understanding that images are constructed and can express the biases and limitations of their creators.

The application of critical visual literacy and critical visual pedagogical strategies has been used throughout art education. Sheng Kuan Chung, art education professor at the University of Houston, focuses his teaching and research on critical visual literacy within the art classroom. His critical visual literacy instructional practices have included deconstructing visuals to uncover stereotypical tropes in visual culture, and deconstructing and reconstructing advertisements to

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[21] Deborah Curtiss, *Introduction to Visual Literacy: A Guide to the Visual Arts and Communication* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987).
[22] Sheng Kuan Chung, "Critical Visual Literacy," *The International Journal of Arts Education* 11, no. 2 (2013): 6.
[23] Hilary Janks, "Critical Literacy and the Importance of Reading With and Against a Text," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 62, no. 5 (2019): 561, https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.941.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ana Ferreira and Denise Newfield, "Critical Visual Literacy," in *Doing Critical Literacy: Texts and Activities for Students and Teachers*, ed. Hilary Janks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 83-100.
[26] Anahit Falihi and Linda Wason-Ellam, "Critical Visuality: On the Development of Critical Visual Literacy for Learners' Empowerment," *The International Journal of Learning* (2009): 415.
[27] Sheng Kuan Chung, "Approaches to Teaching Critical Visual Literacy," *National Art Education Association Advisory*, Spring 2018.

uncover implicit messaging.[28] Chung often looks to other theories when leading students through critical visual analysis. For example, when discussing ways to deconstruct harmful stereotypes of women in hip-hop music videos, Chung looked to Judith Butler's Gender Performance Theory and feminist rap videos for comparison. Gender Performance Theory serves as "a pragmatic approach to deconstructing hip-hop's sexist portrayals" and leads students through deconstructing the visual elements included in the videos.[29] Comparing and contrasting mainstream hip-hop videos with feminist hip-hop videos allows students to see an approach challenging sexist portrayals of women and encourages students to think critically about the differences in what they are seeing. Chung has also used deconstructing and reconstructing cigarette ads with students as a way for them to understand techniques of visual persuasion used by advertisers and graphic artists.[30]

Another movement within art education that can potentially fall under the heading of critical visual literacy is visual racial literacy. Joni B. Acuff and Amelia M. Kraehe define visual racial literacy as "a capacity that enables a person to recognize, critically interpret, and respond to visual codes, conventions, representations, and technologies used to prop up the myth of race and racial hierarchy."[31] Central to this type of literacy is racial literacy, "the capacity to recognize, decode, and critically interpret the various forms and methods by which racism is communicated."[32] Having visual racial literacy skills includes understanding the history of racism and racial iconography. Visual racial literacy skills can assist art students in identifying racism within their research process for artmaking, labeling online racial discrimination, and avoiding recruitment by supremacist groups.[33] Acuff and Kraehe describe a lack of knowledge at large within the art education classrooms of our current visual landscape. The authors state that the role of art educators is to educate themselves in visual racial literacy so they can help their students obtain this imperative skill set.[34]

Within the field of academic librarianship, critical visual literacy is an emerging topic. In the article "Break the Stereotype! Critical Visual Literacy in Art and Design Librarianship," Stephanie Grimm and Amanda Meeks situate critical visual literacy within library instruction "as a means of engaging art and design students in conversations concerning social justice within the context of their profession, education, and personal creative practices."[35] They look to the relevant library literature, critical information literacy, and critical librarianship, as well as different critical pedagogies, to build a foundation for their understanding of critical visual literacy.

Grimm and Meeks taught a visual research and character design workshop at their institution as part of a comics forum. The authors co-led the workshop with Brooke Allen, one of the original creators and illustrators of the *Lumberjanes* comic series. Allen was seen as a natural partner for the workshop because of the inclusive subject matter of the comic series. This two-part workshop not only engaged student artists in a new mode, but it allowed the students to understand how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion may impact their future careers in the world of art. While both

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[28] Sheng Kaun Chung, "Media/Visual Literacy Art Education: Sexism in Hip-Hop Music Videos," *Art Education* 60, no. 3 (2007): 33-38; Sheng Kaun Chung, "Media/Visual Literacy Art Education: Cigarette Ad Deconstruction," *Art Education* 58, no. 3 (2005): 19-24.
[29] Chung, "Sexism in Hip-Hop Music Videos," 36.
[30] Chung, "Cigarette ad deconstruction," 19-24.
[31] Amelia M. Kraehe and Joni B. Acuff, *Race and Art Education* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Davis Publications, Inc., 2021), 42.
[32] Ibid, 43.
[33] Ibid, 60-71.
[34] Joni B. Acuff and Amelia M. Kraehe, "Visual Racial Literacy: A Not-So-New 21st Century Skill," *Art Education* 75, no. 1 (January 2022), 14-19.
[35] Stephanie Grimm and Amanda Meeks, "Break the Stereotype! Critical Visual Literacy in Art and Design Librarianship," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 36, no. 2 (September 2017): 173-190, https://doi.org/10.1086/694238.

authors see professional standards as a good starting point for critical visual literacy instruction, it is the implementation of critical and feminist practices as well as student artist information behavior that creates the most effective critical visual literacy pedagogical strategies in the library classroom.[36]

Intervention Design

The IRB-approved study carried out by the authors of this paper invited students who enrolled in two of the Indiana University Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture, and Design's foundational "Creative Core" courses – Color and 2D Design – to contribute their thoughts about visual literacy. Content was delivered through two Canvas modules which provided two unique lessons related to visual literacy. 208 students consented to join and completed the modules. The authors chose to incorporate aspects of critical visual literacy within the modules when possible.

The first module presented the definition of visual literacy as well as the competencies of a visually literate student as set forth by the *ACRL Standards*. The module then provided one example of visual literacy skills related to consumption via the analysis of a historic photo, as well as specific details of the photo. The authors focused the lesson on the iconic photograph *V-J Day Kiss in Times Square* (Alfred Eisenstadt, 1945) for this portion of the module. Review of the photograph incorporated discussion of techniques such as observing cropping and composition as well analyzing historical context to understand our role as modern-day viewers. Analyzing the historical context of this photograph revealed an opportunity to incorporate critical visual literacy within the exercise, specifically through the observation of different versions of this famous photograph as well as an examination of the context of the image.

Module one also focused on being a competent contributor to visual culture by showing examples of visual literacy skills in relation to the creation of work within different fine arts, fashion, and merchandising contexts. Example ideas included skills needed to align and caption images for an artist's promotional card, finding reference images and creating meaningful interpretations of another artist's work when designing a piece for the Met Gala, and working with stock photography companies to license images for a merchandising campaign. All of these examples addressed the major areas of undergraduate study within the Eskenazi school – fine arts, fashion, and merchandising. The goal of this portion of the module was to illustrate how contemporary artists, graphic designers, advertisers, and fashion designers utilize visual literacy skills in their daily work.

At the end of this module, students were asked to complete a survey sharing their personal understanding of how they contribute to or consume visual information. The survey also queried their interest in further learning about visual literacy. The researchers explained that they would be designing an additional Canvas lesson based upon student interests. One of the goals of incorporating student input into the design of the second module was to tailor the visual literacy instruction not only to each course but also to student interests. Another goal was to avoid the static nature of a learning module; specifically, the authors wanted to avoid Paulo Freire's "Banking Model of Education" in which teachers dispense information and students passively receive it without much interaction.[37] Instead, the authors sought to incorporate student choice in what they learn in an attempt to include active learning and increase student interest in visual literacy. Students chose from a list of eight topics, indicating up to three ideas they were interested in learning about.

[36] Grimm and Meeks, "Break the Stereotype!".
[37] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsburg, 2013).

Topic	Total
Images for Inspiration/Creativity	158
Images and Social Media	118
Moral/Ethical Issues	114
Intangible Nature of Image Ownership	68
Image Research Strategies	66
Image Licensing	63
Research Tools for Images	54
Image Appropriation	36

Table 1: Total student votes for visual literacy lesson topics

Student interests coalesced around three topics, with “Images for Inspiration/Creativity” as the leading topic, followed by “Images and Social Media” and “Moral/Ethical Issues.” Based upon this data, the authors created two additional Canvas modules tailored to student interests and aligned with the course learning objectives. The Color course sections received a module designed to address the topic of finding and using images for inspiration and creativity, titled “Creative Research Strategies for Image Searching.” Students enrolled in 2D Design course sections completed the Canvas module titled “Image Search Strategies for Portrait Inspiration.” After reviewing the contents of both the first and second modules, each student was asked to respond to two prompts:

- “Give an example of one way you are a critical consumer of visual culture.”
- “Give an example of one way you are a competent contributor to a shared body of visual culture.”

Data gathered from these prompts were used to interpret students’ understanding of their individual relationships with visual content in the world around them.

Data Analysis

208 unique students responded to the prompts and submitted a total of 347 responses in a free text field. The authors cleaned the data set to eliminate duplicate answers and invalid answers. Duplicate answers were defined as one respondent giving the same answer for more than one question, or answers by the same respondent that had no discernable difference between them. Invalid answers were defined as those that did not address the question as well as those who responded that they did not understand the question, and those who typed a binary answer – such as “yes” or “no” – in response to an open-ended question. Both inductive and deductive coding were used to develop a shared codebook.

First, responses from a small sample of data were examined simultaneously by both authors. Based on this, an initial codebook of eleven codes was created and uploaded into Taguette, an open-source qualitative data analysis tool. Another batch of data was then coded independently by each author, wherein new codes were deductively identified before reviewing the data for intercoder reliability. During this process, the authors discussed shared coding strategy, prevalent codes, and the relationships of individual codes to others. Ultimately, the authors developed an additional twenty-five codes through deductive coding. The resulting codebook (Appendix A) was uploaded to Taguette, and all data was re-coded by each author independently.

All codes were reviewed in relation to the research question before memos were created to detail the nature of research results and better determine the relationship between concepts. The

authors used written memos to understand developing concepts and then created Google Jamboard memos to define relationships between concepts. Some codes were discarded due to being irrelevant or incidental to the research question. The coding process identified modes of student artist engagement with visual material through the different objects and actions participants used to describe the ways that they contributed or consumed visual content.

Results

Analysis revealed a variety of modes in which participants understood their relationship with visual culture. Both consumer and contributor data revealed patterns of engagement through their actions at various sites of interaction. In addition, data revealed that while students possessed an awareness of their role as consumers, little awareness of their role as contributor was present. In fact, it seemed as if students described themselves as consumers with contributor characteristics, such as publicly sharing their work with others and providing feedback in class critique.

Consumer

Survey data indicated a varied range of engagement of students as consumers. Student actions include looking, evaluating, and purchasing. They described their sites of interaction with visual culture more broadly, including advertisements in many formats, artwork, university coursework, materials for inspiration, a wide variety of visual media, and personal style. In addition to defining the sites and actions that they identify as visual culture, students also commented on the ubiquity of visual culture in their lives.

Consumer: Awareness

Students frequently reported that visual information was embedded into their daily lives. A portion of the students specifically mentioned how they view art daily. One respondent stated, “I am a critical consumer every day in different ways wether [sic] that is seeing an ad on the highway or on my phone scrolling through social media.” Additional examples of consuming visual culture every day include phrases such as “notice small things throughout the day,” seeing “landscape, architecture,” and visuals that are “all around me.” Students used words such as “all the time,” “daily,” “often,” and “frequently” to describe how much they consume visual media in their lives. One student wrote, “In a media-rich world, it’s difficult not to be a consumer of visual culture, and it’s hard not to form opinions and tastes on these aspects of society.” These comments suggest that students are somewhat aware of the persuasive elements of visual culture and how visual information impacts their thoughts, values, and perspectives.

Consumer: Sites of Interaction

Social media, and the use of media overall, was the most common way students understood themselves as consumers of visual culture. In addition to popular social media platforms, respondents also talked about a wide variety of legacy media, including magazines, television, and movies. Instagram was the most frequently mentioned platform. Respondents talked about evaluation most commonly when discussing their use of social media and consumption of ads. Students’ engagement with visual culture is likely being shaped by images designed for social media, which are often built to elicit strong emotional reactions in order to increase user engagement with posts. One person spoke of how they purposefully followed “accounts with people from different backgrounds.” This comment may indicate an awareness of filter bubbles or the effect that algorithms have on a person’s exposure to visual culture within social media.

Others mentioned physical sites of interaction, most commonly art museums. One student said, “I often go to art galleries to see the art on display and notice the techniques used,” while

another commented that they “try going to as many art fairs as [they] can so [they] can meet and support local artists, get art inspiration, and make connections with artists.” From this comment, we see that students are actively seeking in-person exposure to artwork as well as social connections to other artists like themselves.

Consumer Actions

Actions: Looking

Students most often discussed the action of looking in relation to viewing art. One significant finding is that data reveals a differentiation between looking at art in person versus through virtual mediation. Examples of looking at art in person include seeing art as they walk through campus buildings, going to museums and galleries, and viewing artworks made by peers in their studios. Online examples include viewing artworks, website graphics, and fashion images. Data revealed that many students engage in critical thinking during the act of visual consumption. One respondent wrote, “I am a critical consumer of visual culture by actively thinking and interpreting the information I see and therefore analyzing the work by contextualizing it to other events and drawing conclusions to why this is significant, what does it mean, and what is the impact.”

Another student said, “When looking at old buildings I imagine the planning and ideas that went into building them.” These comments reveal the students’ curiosity and questioning attitudes which evolve from the act of looking. Individual students typically responded about their engagement with art through either in-person or online modes but did not discuss both modes together.

Actions: Evaluating

Data revealed an aspect of evaluation involving a moral dimension. For students, part of consuming visual media involves the act of evaluating material to determine whether it aligns with their personal values: “I only contribute to creators who I agree with ethically. I also regularly show up and give audience to artists that I agree with on a moral and ethical level. Not even surrounding money, I try to promote artists that I believe are good representatives of things I believe.”

Students seek to determine which visual information is worthy of their notice. Ethical issues are also of concern, as seen in one student’s comment about being on the alert for visual culture which creates false representations: “. . . its [sic] important to remember to be critical of art that claims to be of one culture, but is created by another. I try to be aware of and critical of those that misrepresent others’ culture through pieces of art.” This student places value on images which are culturally accurate and honest.

Actions: Purchasing

Finally, students strongly correlated the act of consuming visual culture with the concept of purchasing material goods. Two recurring themes were the role of product packaging and retail environments. One respondent wrote, “There is also the matter of where I decide to shop because of it [sic] visual appeal. I like to shop at Target because there is a lot of red and warm light. The blue and cold light of Walmart makes me feel unwelcome and like I am in a dark and dingy place.” Students understood shopping as a method for consuming visual culture and were aware of the visual cues that influenced their behavior, both in-store and online.

Contributor

Contributor: Sites of Interaction

When making contributions to visual culture, students identified their coursework in a variety of media, expressions of personal style, and social media usage as the primary sites where

they engaged. Students understand what visual culture is and that they contribute toward it by means of engaging with assignments, both on an individual basis and through group discussion. Students knew that taking part in an art class meant they were sharing, creating, and contributing to a visual culture through assignments with classmates. For example, one student commented, “Within our class we are all contributing together, thinking of ideas, becoming inspired by others [sic] work, this helps us become contributors in a shared body of visual culture. Example could be when we all hang up our pieces and talk about them.” Students also perceived the ways in which they contributed individually to visual culture through their courses. One student noted, “I give my feedback publicly in class to other artworks and also online about certain visual artwork.”

When asked to describe their contribution to visual culture, some students gave specific examples of mediums in which they worked. One student mentioned contributing through the creation of graphics, drawings, and photography. Another mentioned videos, webpages, and video games. Other types of media mentioned included watercolor, lighting and costume design for theater, traditional and digital illustration, and wood sculpture. The student group showed a diversity of materials and processes which may be used to make visual contributions.

Students very clearly see their role in a cycle of trends and self-expression. In at least one case, the student recognized how they were influenced by visual culture when making choices about personal style. An example of this was, “I can see what any and all models and celebrities are wearing and understand and guess what might become a trend and partake in such.” Students do consider wearing the clothes of other designers as contributing to visual culture. The combination of pieces is the actual contribution, rather than the creation of the clothing. This shows that students see an association between consumerism/purchasing and contribution to visual culture. One comment that fully illustrates this thought process describes the role Pinterest plays in creating their own individual style. The student said

> I like to reference Pinterest [to] get inspiration and visualize my own ideas through the use of others [sic]. I interpret the photos how I want in order to effectively decide what look I’m going for. For instance, maybe I like the style of the shirt in one post, but the pants in the other photo. I take those two ideas and combine them how I’d want to.

Student answers frequently referred to their contributions to visual culture in terms of sharing their artwork on social media. The most commonly mentioned platforms included Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Pinterest, and Snapchat. Some gave examples of giving credit to other artists whenever they reposted someone else’s work. Students also talked about being aware of needing to consciously design a post to make sure their artwork is presented in a positive light. They were aware of their intention of posting for a general audience, as well as sharing posts with their friends and family members.

Contributor Actions

In addition to posting or sharing work on social media, students described their decisions to edit their work as a form of contributing to social media. Just as students are aware of the inspiration they receive when consuming visual culture, they view their own contributions as sources of inspiration for others. Generally, respondents recognized that their creative output was influenced by the visual content that they consumed. For example, one student spoke about “combin[ing] current trends with my own aesthetic” to create something new, while another said that they “often find reference images from the internet before starting my artwork.” One person also assumed that by contributing their visual content to the world, it was likely that their work was serving as inspiration for other creators.

Actions: Sharing

When it came to sharing their work online, students discussed the importance of sharing visual information ethically and responsibly on social media platforms. Specifically, they noted strategies they used to respect the original artist of the work they were sharing and/or gaining inspiration from in their own work that they shared. For example, one student commented, "I always cite my source with a link or author/creator title when reposting images on Instagram or other social media platforms to educate my followers and assure credit will not be lost or stolen from its original maker." In a different context, another student described an experience of working on a team project for a class where they had to give a presentation with images. The student shared that the group made sure "to cite all of the images and the slide templates" used in the presentation to make sure they used these visual resources fairly.

While this quote does illustrate a basic understanding of ethical image use, it also shows a lack of depth in understanding of image copyright. There was no indication in student responses that showed the need for reaching out to the copyright owner and asking for permission to use an image. Students also commented that while it is important to be a competent contributor on the internet, not everyone is. However, in today's visual landscape, everyone has the ability to be a contributor, whether they are competent or not. A particular example of this concept was described by a student who explained how they shared their artwork through social media platforms which they described as a shared space. They explained that, "Anyone who engages on these social platforms contributes to a shared body of visual culture, but not everyone may be classified as 'competent.'" This comment is evidence of the students' understanding that not everyone interacting on the internet is contributing ethically.

Actions: Selling

Students also discussed posting and sharing their work online in terms of selling or promoting their art. They mentioned different platforms they used to host their artwork and how they meet the requirements of each platform to ensure their work is seen and purchased by others. One student described how they used Redbubble to host and share their work. The student explained, "I have to make sure that they are properly sized and printed in a high-quality manner onto the possible products. This makes sure that the consumer will be pleased and not have a skewed view of what I created." Students also explained how they promote the artwork they are selling on social media platforms and how they work with others to sell their work online. One student said, "I make jewelry that I am preparing to sell along with my sister in our own online shop." Another said

> There exists an app called Lofter, which is a social platform where people can post their artworks. (The majority of the content is drawings and stories as fan fiction). In this case, I frequently post some fanfiction, which enriches the content within specific tags and potentially attracts more people there.

Actions: Building Relationships

In addition to sharing their work on social media platforms and promoting as well as selling their work online, students also described how they used social media to interact with communities of other artists. One student said

> I participate in the Instagram art community. I put out visual art that I produce. I have followed and I am being followed by fellow artists who are around my age, share an interest

> in mediums, or share an interest in particular artistic styles. We support each other’s artwork over Instagram, and intermingle within a community of artists.

Another student described how they post their visual work on Instagram hoping to get others’ input. The student explained, “I participate in meme culture and frequently post on Instagram inviting people to respond. By creating a conversation around a post I feel capable of creating work and contributing to visual culture.” These comments illustrate how relationships are built by artists through social media and how students use platforms to learn from other artists and improve their own artistic practices.

Actions: Editing

When describing their processes for sharing their work online, students often mention editing. Some students described how editing played a role in their individual process for sharing their work online. When discussing editing, all of the students mentioned ethical concerns and how they addressed those concerns if they chose to edit. One student commented, “I post on social media relatively often, and I do edit a lot of my photos. However, I clarify in the caption that a photo is edited so that I don’t contribute to any unreasonable standards.” Another student described criteria they use when choosing to edit/leave out pieces of information. They explained, “I try my best to always portray all information. I do not like to leave out or alter things that could be important. Sometimes it is necessary to leave out certain things, but I will not if it alters the meaning into something that was not intended.”

Actions: Critiquing

Another theme that came up in the data was the role of feedback/critique. Students described how they desired feedback from their peers as well as how they gave critical feedback to their peers. Feedback was discussed inside and outside of the classroom setting. One student said, “I love getting to share my art with other people, specifically my friends, who are nearly all artists. We like to get together and do art parties, where we make each other things, work on our own art projects, or critique each other’s work.” Students also described how they enjoyed critiquing others’ work for the purpose of helping the creator grow as an artist. This is illustrated well by the quote, “I am able to give my input of how I feel about a piece of visual culture and let that producer know what they could do better or change, or even keep the same.”

Discussion

Student data revealed an understanding of roles as both consumer of and contributor to visual culture, but comments about being a contributor were more detailed and better articulated a deeper understanding of their actions and the objects through which students interacted with visual culture. This deeper understanding was specifically observed in relation to comments about posting to social media and through coursework. It is clear that students do possess a level of visual literacy skills within the realm of using social media platforms. These skills were evident through many mentions of sharing images while attributing them to the original creators and understanding the contextual importance of sharing their artwork on social media. Students identified different modalities of contribution, such as providing critique to fellow classmates in class and personal style choices. It was interesting to see students think about the variety of ways they contribute to their understanding of visual culture, whether material or non-material contributions.

This study revealed that students have a more abstract understanding of their role as consumers of visual culture. Comments about consuming visual culture tended to emphasize a general awareness of types of visual media to which they were exposed, without as rich of a

discussion of personal decision-making around using materials. Over half of the students surveyed expressed an interest in ethical image use, and while some respondents described their approach to using images ethically, more opportunities exist for targeting information literacy and critical thinking skills. The students' skill levels in relation to ethical image use ranged from providing credit when they shared another's work to disclosing when they had altered an image that they posted. There is, however, an opportunity to incorporate critical visual literacy skills into coursework and discuss the different ways to ethically use images.

Next Steps and Recommendations

The data revealed attitudes and understanding of visual literacy among recently matriculated college students studying art. One opportunity for future research is a study which examines the same topic among more advanced studio art college students, including those who are pursuing thesis or capstone research. The study revealed a strong student interest in ethics related to visual culture which was not fully examined within the data gathered. A future study could determine how students construct their understanding of ethical use of visual information and the decisions they make when consuming and contributing visual information during their college studies.

Initial review of the research study data revealed that the tutorial did not adequately define visual consumption as the use of creative and intellectual capital, and as a result, respondents made a strong correlation between their decisions to purchase items and visual qualities that influenced their decision. This speaks to the high number of students enrolled in the Eskenazi School's program in merchandising. Since the topic of commercial consumption is readily understood by students, in the future, this advantage could be harnessed to develop lesson plans about critical visual literacy concepts.

The authors recommend that practitioners consider incorporating additional visual literacy lesson plans into their classroom instruction.[38] Specifically, more primary and secondary education around visual literacy skills will better prepare students in higher education to achieve more advanced outcomes. Librarians can look for opportunities to partner with K-12 teachers as well as museum education personnel to emphasize the foundational skills students can develop as children. Educators in particular have an opportunity to engage students in conversations about the ethical use of images on social media. 68% of preteens use at least one social media platform.[39] One study found that the average teen spends an average of 4.8 hours on social media each day.[40] These statistics demonstrate the prevalent use of social media within the current generation, and this study's findings emphasize students' desire to learn how to create and use visual information ethically. Published visual literacy activities, methods, and curriculum – as described in the literature review – can be further adapted by educators and librarians to emphasize ethical learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This article presents qualitative data which describes the ways in which first-year studio art students are aware of the visual culture in which they exist, and the extent to which they see themselves as contributing to and consuming visual culture around them. The student-centered approach used to design modules illustrated that students respond well to lessons structured around

[38] Visual Literacy Today, "Teaching Resources," accessed November 9, 2023, https://visualliteracytoday.org/teaching-resources/.
[39] Statista, "U.S. Pre-Teen Social Media Reach 2022," September 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1417175/us-preteens-social-media-reach/.
[40] Jonathan Rothwell, "Teens Spend Average of 4.8 Hours on Social Media Per Day," Gallup.com, October 13, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/poll/512576/teens-spend-average-hours-social-media-per-day.aspx.

contemporary topics that are relevant to their lives. Librarians can and should look to broader topics when developing their lessons rather than relying solely on canonical artists and designers as examples for information literacy instruction. Contemporary fashion designers and social media posts are rich areas of exploration for instruction librarians. Librarians may also strive to further engage studio art students in conversations about ethical use of images throughout their undergraduate studies, since that is a strong area of interest. Studio art students are immersed in a rich visual world with everyday experiences of consuming and contributing to visual culture, and librarians have many opportunities to engage with them to increase their critical visual literacy skills.

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Appendix A: Data Codebook

Tag	**Description**
Interesting	Further review required.
Creator	In which a respondent identifies themselves as a creator or speaks about the act of creating.
Engagement	The state of being involved with an activity or idea.
Uncertainty	Indicates uncertainty about a contributory relationship with visual culture.
Specific example	Provides an example of a specific object (artwork, movie, brand, etc.) when speaking about visual culture.
Ads	Refers to seeing or creating imagery related to the promotion of goods or services. Includes branding.
Context	Reference to background or historical information of a variety of natures (economic, social, political, etc.).
Collaboration	One or more individual engaged in an activity.
Environment	Refers to surroundings such as the built environment, nature.
Job	Refers to visual culture in relation to an individual's employment.
Looking at art in person	Refers to seeing artwork in a physical space; inclusive of museums.
Looking at art online	Refers to seeing artwork through an electronic device such as a laptop, tablet, phone, or virtual reality.
Media	Pertains to print & time-based media such as movies, TV, photography, video games, and magazines.
Personal Style	Refers to seeing others' style or creating an individual's style; inclusive of fashion, hairstyles, make-up, tattoos, and overall bodily expression.
Cultural norm	Refers to socially-constructed behaviors which are acceptable within a culture.
Purchasing	Refers to buying goods or services.
Evaluate	The act of reviewing an object or idea based upon one or more criteria.
Selling	Refers to selling goods or services.

Access	Having the ability to obtain or use something (information, spaces, objects, etc.).
Fiction	Imagined ideas not based in fact; shows creativity. May refer to storytelling, literature, moving images.
Social Media	Refers to platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok.
Affect	An emotional response (positive, negative, neutral).
Body image	Refers to the way individuals perceive and evaluate their individual body.
Frequency	Referring to the number of times an individual takes an action (several times a day, daily, rarely).
Cultural	Shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices (from Merriam Webster).
Ethics	Intellectual property.
Printed works	Visual culture in a physical format, such as printed artworks or advertisements.
Inspiration	Visual culture materials which are used as references for a creative process.
Searching	Refers to discussion of finding images using specific techniques.
Coursework	Refers to being enrolled in classes, being a student, and doing assignments.
Everyday living	Refers to the concept that visual culture is all around an individual.
Design elements	Lines, shapes, color, typography, texture, and space. Also refers to design elements of visual media, including character, landscape, etc.
Fashion or apparel	Mention of clothing, accessories, fashion designers.
Trust	Referring to belief in something, reliability of visual information, lack of deceit.
Visual learning	Infographics, illustrations, drawing or sketching, diagrams.
Not a consumer	Respondent states that they do not identify with the act of consuming visual culture.