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2017 Elliot Eisner Award Invited Paper
 Crowdsourcing Global Culture:
 Visual Representation in the Age
 of Information

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In the age of information, imagery continues to be consumed and circulated at exponential rates, influencing and changing global flows of information that parallels Internet communication technology as it penetrates and gains ubiquity in new regions. To investigate the visual, media, and cultural phenomena that lie within these globalized pictorial exchanges, a flexible, visually based inquiry is essential. This paper provides an overview of a novel visual methodological approach to research, and reviews the most impactful findings from the 2017 winner of the Elliot Eisner Research Award. The qualitative visual-ethnographic study was conducted over the Internet and aims to help inform visually based literacy and media studies and further image-based research methodologies. The researcher collected over 1,500 drawings from 61 countries diverse in geography and culture. Through an interpretive and visual content analysis of the drawings, the researcher reveals fresh insights into the visual-textual relationship, identity, and representation in a globalized context, specifically looking at emergent tensions between local and global ways of interpretation and meaning construction online. The researcher also remarks on the perils of being visually ignorant in a visually dominant world, making connections between visual consumption, Internet giants, and the “filter bubble.”

Context

This international visual cultural study was initially developed from an interest piqued in a new technology called *crowdsourcing* via the artistic works of Aaron Koblin (2006). This networked global software platform seemed to hold great

potential for new methods of conducting research and gathering data online, asynchronously, in over 150 countries. This led to the launching of two pilot studies (McMaster, 2012, 2015) using the crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Each pilot collected three drawings from just under 30 participants around the world. The findings, while limited, displayed distinct patterns in visual representations across geography and culture, indicating that this method of inquiry had touched on a visual cultural phenomenon and was unquestionably worthy of more intensive study, developing into the main study detailed here. Of course, this examination likely could not have occurred without my background and positionality, formed over decades of visual arts training and engagement; living and traveling abroad (in Korea and Asia); and copious consumption, analysis, and enthusiasm for visual culture.

The study, although born out of an artistic and educative research paradigm, intersected with many large, complex, and intriguing concepts and contradictions that hold interest and implications across transdisciplinary domains. The main overarching categories and themes that helped drive my research questions and the focus of this study were visual methods, visual culture, information communication technologies (ICTs), globalization, and visual learning. All these streams of scholarship are in and of themselves worthy of study in isolation; however, in the context of this study, I focused on only the most salient portions that arose and made connections to my research questions:

What tensions emerge between local and global ways of interpretation and meaning construction when participating online?

To what degree does visual culture influence or change commonly accepted ideas specific to geography and culture into normative global ideals?

Visual research is nothing new, having been employed by anthropology for decades, yet it has not quite gained broad acceptance in the social sciences as an alternative method of inquiry that equals or rivals traditional text-based research (Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Rose, 2015). The studies and research that have been conducted, often with the goal of examining or understanding visual production, media, and visual literacy (Banks, 2007; Lutz & Collins, 1993; Mitchell, 2011; Pariser Kindler, & van den Berg, 2008; Pink, 2013; Prosser, 2007; Rose, 2012, 2015; Wilson & Wilson, 1984), are usually more narrowly focused and on a smaller scale, either in terms of participants or participating countries. Most have not attempted to study both the fixtures of visual culture and globalization, and I identified a clear gap, during the development of my study, for the use of crowdsourcing to unearth traces of underlying graphic phenomena, alluded to in my pilots, occurring at the intersection of visual culture and globalization propagated and propelled by communication technologies and media consumption.

Methods and Analysis

Identifying that there was a clear methodological gap in terms of both employing visual and technological methods in their design, data collection, and analysis was essentially the simple part. A fresh methodological framework was needed that could adhere to previously researched guidelines, while at the same time addressing some of the methodological conflicts that were found (Banks, 2007; Mayring, 2014), lack of universal procedures (Bell, 2001; Cho & Lee, 2014; Mayring, 2014), and deficiencies in analysis (Rose, 2012). This, in addition to the aspects of conducting research internationally, asynchronously, and at a distance, proved more harrowing.

When choosing a visual medium for data collection, drawing rose to the forefront due to its simplicity, accessibility, and ability to allow a participant's imagination to flow and his or her temporal reflection to shine through. Even though numerous research studies have indicated the benefits of drawing in exploring a number of topics from psychology (Rule & Harrell, 2006) to AIDS awareness (Mays et al., 2011), self-reflection (Mitchell, Weber, & O'Reilly-Scanlon 2005), and emotions (Bagnoli, 2009), essentially making it a universal form of communication (Eitz, Hays, & Alexa, 2012; Adoniou, 2014), there still exists no procedural or methodological guidelines to pursue a visual content analysis or any similar enquiries that employ drawing as the principal method. Therefore, this study also provides an additional visual methodological framework for future studies to build upon. This visual methodological framework will be fully detailed at a later date.

In total, over 1,500 drawings were submitted from 225 participants representing 61 countries. After a preliminary visual content analysis, I reduced the entire sample to only those participants from Asian countries, resulting in 106 participants from 14 countries for the final analysis. This was due to the richness of the image data and my familiarity with the region. Once an image and survey were fully prepared, coding and intensive visual content analysis were carried out. Codes were derived from the manifest content in the images as well as the demographic survey data and open question responses. The more rigid visual content analysis was then followed by several iterative and open visual analyses in various forms. The original seven-word prompts functioned as the categorical placeholders, allowing for a logical structuring of the data, which led to the focus on three of these words: *meal*, *marriage*, and *home*.

The formatted image and survey data were imported into NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) capable of analyzing both image and textual survey data and uncovering the relationships between the two. This allowed for forays into the data that may have been overlooked if done by traditional

analysis methods. A second database was also set up online (www.untitledartist.com/survey/) to peruse the data using other techniques (tagging and multi-level filtering) and to allow dissemination of the study in a more interactive manner where viewers could explore the imagery in an accessible and nonlinear fashion.

Findings

Participants' Profile

The final analysis consisted of a reduced sample of 106 participants from South, South-East, and East Asia and over 700 drawings. The following is a summary of the profile of a typical participant derived from the survey:

- *Tech-Savvy*: Participants are familiar with networked computers beyond basic functions, able to use digital drawing tools and scanners, and are probably accustomed to more complex and technical tasks than the ones completed for this survey.
- *Educated*: Participants have more than a high school education, a majority possessing a college degree, some with postgraduate and some with college experience; many are either students or recent grads.
- *Young*: Most participants are younger than 29, and only a handful are over age 40.
- *Multilingual*: Nearly half of the participants reported being able to speak two or more languages, not including English; only 38 reported speaking just one language.
- *Urban*: Only seven participants live outside major urban areas (population < 200,000).
- *Networked*: Participants reported spending an average of 8 hours each day online.
- *Visual Consumers*: Participants reported engaging in foreign visual culture via the Internet and often consuming foreign TV show programs from their region and abroad.

The three open questions on the survey asked participants which sites they used most frequently while on the Web, what they believed the source for their drawings to be, and if they consumed foreign TV broadcasts. Regarding their “Top Three” most visited sites, many participants reported Western-owned or operated sites such as Google and Facebook with far more frequency than localized sites. Most participants also reported consuming foreign TV programs, which included regional programs from Korea and Japan as well as many Western programs such as CNN and the Discovery channel along with various sports channels. These details, although not definitive, led toward some interesting discoveries.

Well over two-thirds of participants answered that “memory” was the source for their drawings, while a few noted the Internet, TV, and books, with handfuls who reported that culture was also a source. Of course, this does not preclude memory of things seen on the Internet and TV, which is what the other questions gathered information about, with participants reporting that they spent, on average, 8 hours a day online and mainly frequented Western-affiliated sites like Google, YouTube, and Facebook, all of which provide a wealth of still and moving imagery. Memory also does not exclude memories of television programming, which most participants reported consuming, including American sitcoms, dramas, news, sports, and regional drama and music shows.

The Internet provides a multimodal and nonlinear form of information delivery and knowledge-gathering for consumption. As mentioned by Webster (2014), much of the Internet’s expansion revenue is driven by marketing and targeted advertisements. The Internet behemoths Google and Facebook have both built their success upon pilfering their users’ personal information shared through social media and emails and then monetizing preferences to sell ad space in every nook and cranny they can find on our screens. Ads have become so ubiquitous that software written to block these ads from showing up in your inbox and on Facebook pages is now so popular that “ad-blocker blockers” have been created. This has also forced companies to come up with other methods of presenting consumers with new ads that won’t be blocked. Enter “native ads,” which disguise themselves as news or personal interest articles, with many viewers unable to differentiate between the two (Oliver, 2014). Hassan (2004) claims that enough exposure to ads in our media creates doubt and leaves one with a feeling of loss, that they may have missed out on something. Castells (2010) further confirms that the media’s pervasiveness helps to shape identity and daily existence of our collective cultures without past constraints of physicality (Barney, 2004). He also points out the correlation between globalized multinational corporations and increased embeddedness in national agendas as an essential part of their survival strategy (Castells, 2010). Considered in the context of my participants’ “Top Three” most visited websites, this pervasiveness becomes more clear under the ad-driven nature of foreign stakeholders and their self-referential, visually dominant systems. It is worth noting here that participant reporting closely parallels the space each of these behemoths controls in the Internet Galaxy (see Figure 1).

Another significant factor when examining the Internet was the role of language, as the browsers we use to access the content on the Web (Chrome, Firefox, Safari) and the cookies they store are used to tailor information delivered to us, primarily organized according to language and location. English continues to dominate the online world (Graham & Zook, 2013) with over 30% of all sites (Young, n.d.), and Graham (2014) claims that large nations define themselves on-

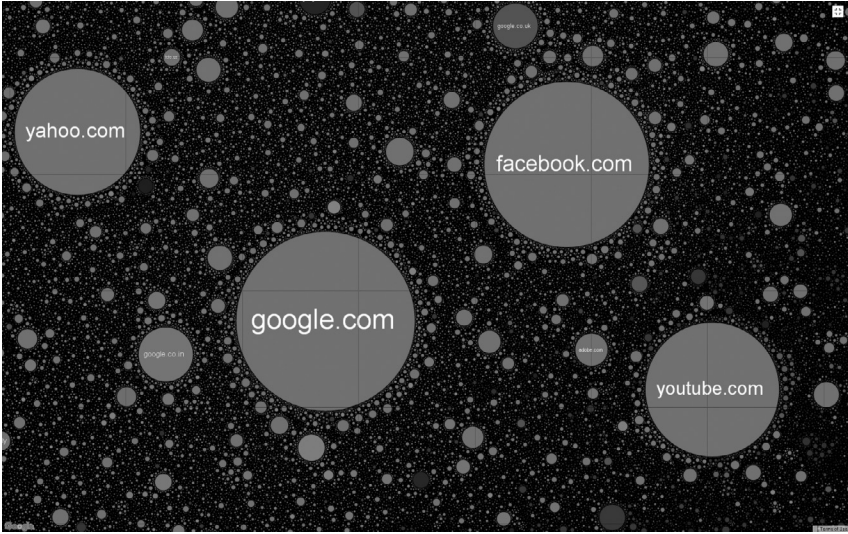


Figure 1. Screenshot of the largest networks from <https://internet-map.net>.

line in their native language, while small nations are defined in the dominant language of the region. This urged me to examine other data I had gathered, tracking the analytics of visitors to my website where the surveys were performed. I noted that many participants, despite receiving my survey auto-translated into their local language (detected by browser install), still completed answers in English. Looking at all the visitor data suggested that many people (including participants) actually visited my website with an English browser (mostly Google Chrome); this assertion is backed up with over four times as many visits in English than in regional languages. Slowly, I began to make connections between multinationals, ads, and language dominance as important factors in shaping how and what we can see or find online. This reminds us of Vaidhyanathan's (2011) worries about the "Google-ization of everything" and Pariser's (2011) observations on the "filter bubble," an Internet that delivers to us a mirrored, cocoon-like version of the world, reinforcing that which we already subscribe to.

The Drawings: Meal, Marriage, and Home

One of the most significant visual discoveries I made among the drawings collected was that of the representations of *marriage*, a pivotal life event, provided by participants from non-Western Asian countries. The images depicted show an overwhelming prevalence of Western-style dress, icons, and/or ceremonies, most pronounced in the form of tuxedos and white wedding gowns. This supports my earlier findings (McMaster, 2012, 2015) that suggested that a homogenization of visual imagery could be occurring, spurred by globalization and hastened by the

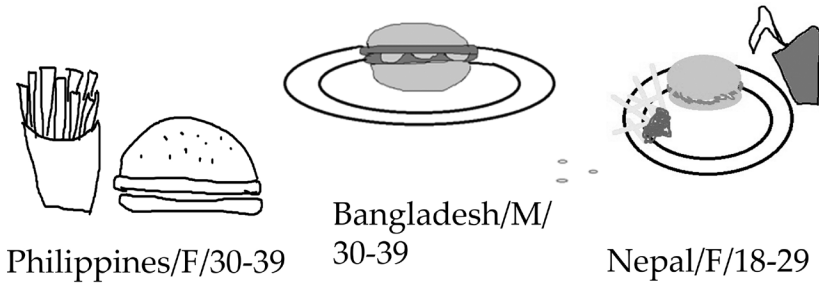


Figure 2. Hamburgers represented across different countries.

Internet. The other words, *meal* and *home*, also showed a similar frequency of non-localized iconography in their representations. Below, I discuss significant frequencies for each word that appear as both non-localized and transregional. This is because similarities between countries are important in making connections between distinct cultural milieus and flows of information and possible influence.

Meal Hamburgers were drawn as representations in all of the Asian countries except Vietnam and were drawn more frequently in Nepal and Indonesia.

The drawing of a plate setting (single plate with knives/forks) was most frequent in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, with India close behind. This is significant because most of the countries listed do not set individual plates with knives and forks; instead, many dishes are usually set up in a communal fashion with smaller plates for each person. Chopsticks or no utensils (meals are eaten by hand) are also more common.

Marriage The most significant codes attributed with the images drawn of the word *marriage* were associated with the code *Western wedding* (see examples in Figure 3), with almost half of all participants drawing this type of image. This is one of the more important discoveries, as all participants came from non-Western



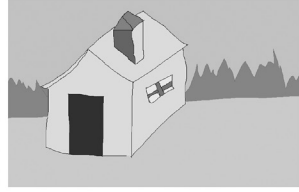
Figure 3. Prominent representations of marriage.



Hong Kong/
M/30-39



Indonesia/F/
30-39



India/M/18-29

Figure 4. Typical representations of home.

countries, all within South, Southeast, and East Asia. Also important are those drawings that depicted a traditional or localized wedding. Only three drawings did this, and they were all done by men, somewhat reflecting what Rose (2012) would deem “invisible opposites,” those visual representations that are underrepresented or not present at all. These types of outlying representations are discussed below.

Home Of all drawing prompts, the word *home* elicited the most homogenous results, with a single detached house represented across demographic categories and countries; 90% of all the drawings were of this type. The similarities across all categories were striking, although individual drawings did differentiate themselves in the number of details added to enhance the scene of the detached house. Examples of enhancements included gardens, chimneys, fences, colors, backgrounds, trees, people, and weather.

Outliers

These last examples are significant not just for deviating from the normal representation but by providing localized cultural imprints or traditional representations in their drawings, which could be seen as “sites of resistance” (Rose, 2012). Their inclusion is vital, as we must consider not just what is being represented with most frequency but also what is underrepresented or not represented at all (Rose, 2012). It is simpler to speculate as to why participants from non-Western countries may have chosen to draw images containing many non-localized or hybridized/Western iconography—exposure to TV, food chains, or advertising both on and offline—but for this small handful of images (under 10%), the reasons may be more elusive. Was it a conscious decision to represent something familiar and ignore other ideas, or, as many remarked, did they come from memory, and it was simply the first image that came to mind?



Figure 5. Outlier representations.

The Korean Wave

Despite many visual representations pointing or hinting at Western influences, the Internet and media industry are very large spheres of operation, and one mode cannot dominate absolutely. Contrasted against the popular West–East flow of cultural capital, the Korean *Hallyu* (the “Korean Wave,” or the global increase in popularity of South Korean culture) example provides us with an alternative and viable secondary model of pan-regional influence. The rise in Korean visual cultural products since the late 1990s is a potent and fascinating case. A once-struggling nation rapidly transformed itself and surpassed Japan in popularity of its cultural exports, with growing fan bases in China, Singapore, Hong Kong (once a hub itself), and Taiwan: Kuotsu (2013), Ryoo (2009), Shim (2006), and Sung (2012) all note themes of shared “Asian” values not generally typified in U.S. exports. Kuotsu (2013) also provides a case study in Northern India that illustrates an eagerness for Korea’s version of “cultural adaptation” in adjusting to rapid modernization. In Kuotsu’s (2013) example, the locals displayed an active resistance toward the dominant Bollywood ideals via this external Korean pop culture consumption. However, examples of the popularity of Korean popular visual culture can also be found outside of these nations in transition to modernity in Taiwan, Japan, and even Austria. Sung (2012) found that Asians living abroad consumed Korean television programming to stay connected with friends and family back home who were also watching the same shows, and this sense of regional identity was strengthened through bonding over their favorite dramas and music videos.

Discussion

When looking at globalization and its effects, I began to see a complex intertwining of cultures, corporations, commodities, and consumption. Add to this

the intricate peculiarities of the Internet, and parts of the picture become more clear, while others remain shrouded as layers, pulled back only to reveal further substrate. As Hassan (2004) points out, networks could not exist without capital investment, and so, too, is the success and power of globalization not possible without ICTs. This brings us back to the role of monetary supremacy and the economics (ads) that currently occupy the driver's seat and do much of the steering of the Internet. Lieber and Weisberg (2002) describe significant veins of literature that point to the strain of culture under the weight of globalization's effects. Browne, Blundell, Law, & Whalley (2014) and Leach (1997) also comment on the effects of globalization as profoundly impacting identity, in part due to the "manufacture of desire" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001) constituted through things like visual cultural commodities, and, within these consumables, images are central to depicting "life as it should be" (Leach, 1997, p. 189). Considering my research questions in the context of global culture, hybridity, homogeneity, and visual imagery, what tensions are apparent from the study of the images provided by the participants? Arnett (2002) suggests that these tensions can spur a bicultural identity. When examining the images provided by my participants, these tensions may be manifest in the sites of resistance such as the minority of images that depicted local or traditional objects and scenes, or others that appear as if they are melding different cultural elements together into new hybrid visual forms.

Representation

As Hall (1997) argues, the systems that children learn to determine the symbols and codes of a particular culture are learned through the practice of representation. But what happens when those systems are infiltrated by foreign symbols and codes that cause tensions and break with social-cultural norms? Hall (1997) contends that these systems of representation are not just "in the head" but have practical real-world effects and applications. If we agree with Hall (1997) that meaning is not fixed and is frequently renegotiated, could the consumption of foreign TV programs in some ways be a search or journey of redefining traditional systems of representation? Could the drawings I received then be manifestations of new codes and symbols that have been internalized through regular consumption of foreign visual culture? Does the act of drawing elements of these external systems then create tensions, affecting the participant, between competing local-global systems of representation? If so, these tensions are further exacerbated through collective sharing, reproduction, and dissemination by individuals who have then become mediators and purveyors of new and hybrid cultural content on social platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Bowman (2013) argues that surely individuals are embodied in some form in the images that they create, so these participants' drawings

could, in fact, contain plenty of self-referentiality and vestiges of manufactured desires. Consideration of these effects in the context of the relentless bombardment of youth by global corporate marketing strategies (Webster, 2014) presents us with an interesting scenario that could produce what I found in the image data.

Summary of Findings

The participant profile indicates a youthful demographic open to global trends and interested in spending large portions of their days pursuing international information and cultures online and interacting with many large social media platforms that many of us are intricately familiar with in our daily lives. The images simultaneously confirm yet also conflict with Frosh's (2003) idea of "privileged production" and the circulation of cultural products online. The drawings revealed striking patterns and themes of Western and hybrid social-cultural symbols, icons, and forms as well as tensions when those images are contrasted against local-traditional imagery that deviated from the majority. The importance of the words chosen reflect near universal concepts that are found in each culture and represent fundamental daily and once-in-a-lifetime events that are usually, or at least used to be, handed down from the local culture and deeply ingrained.

The Internet unsurprisingly was extremely important for my research, my participants, and the results of my analysis. Internet browsers such as search engines appear to have been mitigating factors influencing behaviors and mediating what and how people access information. The language in which one surfs the Internet also shows large discrepancies between the languages available or represented, with English dominating and impacting delivery and access to knowledge and information. In this sense, the Internet is seen as both mediator and ultimate medium, controlling the delivery and flow of information and creating hubs of attention. This is done in part by collecting users' data in order to analyze their habits and preferences, thereby providing them with information and options that tend to reinforce those habits that benefit advertisers, another factor that carries influence. Economic factors such as the multinational corporations, alluded to in some of the participants' drawings, facilitate, sponsor, and manipulate our usage of the online world and can also be seen in the physical world.

Conclusion

To recap, here are what I believe to be the most salient points I have tried to put forward with this study. First, textual and numerical research and analysis are far from sufficient for studying visual-based and multimodal phenomena, and will result in an incomplete understanding of a problem. Second, the impact of the

information communication technologies on us as individuals, as distinct nations, and as a global community grows exponentially each year and spells profound changes for every facet of our sociocultural lives on many levels, and these impacts are no longer confined by borders, geography, or nation-states. This is why it is important to more thoroughly integrate the study of ICT in art, culture, and geography into our schools at all levels as a mode of understanding with which the world has not yet fully come to grips. Third, without understanding how visual cultural information flows and influences us, we are leaving personal, scholastic, and political decisions to be highly impacted by corporate interests and their economic ad-driven imperatives. Graduating from school without studying visual cultural information or having an understanding of how the visual impacts our lives—intersecting technology, culture, and commerce—leaves individuals incompletely educated and unprepared for the tremendous changes that lie ahead. Finally, the dissipation of cultural practices, some hinted at in my findings, through hybridity and homogenization driven by the “Internet of things” and propped up by consumerism, will continue paralleling the dissolution of minority languages due to the strength of the Roman-alphabetized organization of the Web and its corporate benefactors. Although the end results of this trajectory cannot be assured, this could spell disastrous effects for the unique and sometimes fragile cultures surrounded by dominant cultural forces that may not readily recognize what they are swallowing whole as we propel ourselves ever forward into the age of information.

At the onset of this study, I began with the idea that the visual was the epicenter of this research, and for the most part, it was. Still, as I progressed through the various stages and began to see all the intersections of the visual with technology, globalization, culture, and meaning making, I was pulled in many directions of further inquiry, seeing not just the impact of the visual on these elements, but also the influence of these elements on the visual—a complex reciprocation that warrants more attention. All things being equal, it is really about representation interacting in transmodal forms—changing, evolving, innovating—and what it means to experience and learn in our pluralistic and multifaceted world.

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