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PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF AESTHETICS AND RELEVANCE OF BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE CONTEMPORARY AGE

ODO, HYGINUS CHINEDU[1]
chinedduh22016@gmail.com (+2348061218456)
&
Corresponding author:
OJONTA, PEACE NWAMAKA[2]
peace.ojonta@unn.edu.ng (+2348039591617)

[1, 2] Department of Mass Communication
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

This study examined how people in South-East Nigeria, specifically in the states of Enugu, Anambra, and Abia, perceived the beauty and current significance of black-and-white photography. The study used a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design and employed both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire) tools with the combined estimated population of 15 million from three states that were chosen according to CityPopulation.de (2024). A multistage sampling procedure was used to choose a sample of 384 adult media users. Descriptive statistics were used to assess quantitative data, while thematic content analysis was used to examine qualitative replies. The study, which has its roots in Aesthetic and the Reception Theories, shows how subjective interpretation, cultural background, and personal experiences all affected how much media was appreciated. The findings show that although colour photography was still commonly utilized, black-and-white photographs were deemed aesthetically pleasant by 65.6% of respondents, relevant in contemporary media by 59.6%, and preferred over coloured images by 51.6%. It was also found that the public attributed the popularity of black-and-white photography to its emotional and creative potency, which is fueled by nostalgia, history, simplicity, and its ongoing relevance in documentary, art, and journalism practices. To increase visual literacy and inspire photographers to experiment with black-and-white photography creatively rather than nostalgically, researchers recommend teaching it in art schools. Additionally, they recommend more research on how Artificial Intelligence and generative tools affect audience perceptions of black-and-white aesthetics, as well as standard black-and-white filters on digital platforms.

Keywords: Public Perception, Aesthetics, Relevance, Black-And-White Photography, Contemporary Age.

Background of the Study

In a time when digital images are high-definition and full of colour, the continued use of black-and-white photography creates a special conundrum. Even though colour photography has become widely accessible and image-making, technology has advanced dramatically. Black-and-white photography seems popular and may be found in photojournalism, art galleries, social media, and advertising campaigns.

The deliberate usage of black-and-white implies that it continues to appeal to some audiences who find it to be elegant, poignant, or ageless (Franklin, 2020). In contrast to the perceived realism of colour photographs, studies have shown that black-and-white images are frequently linked to memory, nostalgia, and artistic authenticity (Griffin, 2022).

Monochrome images draw more attention to contrast and facial expressions, which frequently results in more intense emotional responses, claims Kumar (2019). Distractions are lessened with black-and-white photography, enabling a more focused interaction with the subject.

Black-and-white filters are a part of the aesthetic arsenal of apps like Instagram and Visual Supply Company (VSCO), indicating a sustained interest in monochromatic visual styles (Chandler & Livingstone, 2022). The popularity of black-and-white pictures in modern digital communication is further supported by social media trends that bring back classic aesthetics (Jenkins, 2022).

In an effort to recover historical representation and challenge colonial myths, the modern African photographers are going back and reinterpreting monochrome archives (Obasi, 2021). This approach broadens the public's understanding of black-and-white photography by presenting it as a cultural and political statement grounded on decolonial philosophy, rather than just an aesthetic choice (Mbaye, 2020).

Furthermore, black-and-white exhibitions are still promoted by galleries and photographic festivals, underscoring the artistic value of the medium (Griffin, 2022). As part of a wider artistic investigation made possible by reasonably priced editing tools and online photography classes, amateur photographers are experimenting with black-and-white techniques outside of professional circles (Zhao, 2021).

To communicate elegance, legacy, and authenticity, black-and-white images are commonly employed in luxury ads, high-end apparel, and minimalist product campaigns (Thompson & Akintola, 2022). Targeted audiences looking for significance in an overly visual environment are drawn to the intentional lack of colour because it conveys restraint, control, and timeless traits.

Demographic characteristics like age, education, cultural background, and exposure to visual media which frequently influence these divergent opinions (Lopez & Henry, 2023). For example, older generations may link monochrome with analogue photography and historical record, while younger generations may associate it with styled Instagram aesthetics.

The public's impression of black-and-white photography is significantly influenced by visual literacy, or the capacity to decipher and understand images. Digital platforms have made photographic equipment more accessible, but they haven't always enhanced critical visual comprehension, as Zhao (2021) contends. As a result, different people may view monochromatic photos differently; some may find them to be important, while others may find them to be out of date or uninteresting.

Understanding black-and-white photography as a component of an anti-mainstream or countercultural visual movement is also gaining popularity. Black-and-white photographs

may represent authenticity, honesty, and unvarnished truth in contrast to the stylized, hyper realistic images that are common in influencer culture and advertising (Franklin, 2020). As a result, they might be viewed as a component of a larger visual protest against the demands of materialism and perfectionism in the digital age.

To that effect, therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the general public views the beauty and applicability of black-and-white photography in the modern era, with an emphasis on how meaning is created and understood by various audiences.

Statement of the Problem

Black-and-white photography is said to still exist in both artistic and commercial contexts, but colour photography now seems to predominate in social media, advertising, journalism, and daily communication in today's visually-driven digital society. Although academics frequently praise black-and-white photography for its emotional depth, grace, and timeless appeal, it is unclear if the general public feels the same way or thinks it is out of date in a world full with colourful images. Although black-and-white photography is seemed widely used in art circles and online, little empirical research has been done on how different audiences interact with and perceive it. There are concerns regarding whether the popularity of monochrome filters among younger people and content producers is due to nostalgia, digital trends, or aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, this study aims to bridge a crucial divide between professional discourse and popular opinion by investigating how the general public views the aesthetics and applicability of black-and-white photography in the modern era.

Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives which are to:

1. assess public perception of black-and-white photography.
2. examine the relevance of black-and-white photography in the contemporary age.
3. identify factors influencing the appeal of black-and-white photography.

Aesthetic Perception of Black-and-White Photography

The ability of monochromatic images to highlight form, composition, and contrast while eliminating the distractions of colour is frequently commended (Franklin, 2020). In contrast to the more literal or realistic connotations frequently associated with colour photography, research suggests that viewers tend to link black-and-white images with emotional intensity, depth, and creative aim (Kumar, 2019).

According to Kumar (2019), in some situations, monochromatic visuals are more successful than colour images at activating parts of the brain related to pattern identification and emotional processing. This supports Franklin's (2020) claim that black-and-white photography elicits an interpretive and introspective reaction in viewers, urging them to decipher meaning rather than merely take in visual data.

Contemporary Usage and Popularity

Users can readily transform photographs to monochrome using mobile apps and filters, indicating a persistent desire for emotional expression and artistic experimentation (Chandler & Livingstone, 2022). Retro and minimalist visual trends also coincide with the popularity of

black-and-white photos on social media, especially among Gen Z and Millennial users (Jenkins, 2022).

According to Zhao (2021), algorithmic culture is a contributing factor in the revival of black-and-white aesthetics. This supports the findings of Griffin (2022), who found that users find black-and-white images more important or "serious," which increases their expressive value in digital contexts.

Audience Perception and Engagement

Although academic discussions emphasize the aesthetic and historical aspects of black-and-white photography, there are still few empirical research on how audiences perceive it. Recent studies, however, have started to examine how various demographics react to monochromatic images. According to Thompson and Akintola (2022), viewers' interpretations of black-and-white photos are greatly influenced by their age, media literacy, and cultural exposure.

Furthermore, context may influence how an audience reacts to black-and-white visuals. Black-and-white photography used in news reporting or conflict coverage, according to Lopez and Henry (2023), frequently conveys a sense of gravity and timelessness, which causes viewers to attribute higher importance to such images.

Relevance in the Digital Age

Even though colour photography has become more popular, black-and-white photography is still relevant in culture and communication. According to Zhao (2021), monochromatic images are dynamic components of visual culture rather than purely nostalgic relics in the digital age. Their use is a reflection of larger cultural ideals like emotional resonance, authenticity, and simplicity.

Black-and-white photos are frequently used in branding and advertising to convey qualities that many brands want to be associated with their identity, such as elegance, purity, or timeless appeal (Thompson & Akintola, 2022). This demonstrates that the medium is still effective for communication in a range of contemporary settings, including professional marketing and self-expression.

Theoretical Framework

Reception Theory

Stuart Hall, a British cultural theorist, created Reception Theory in 1973. It offers a helpful framework for analyzing how viewers understand visual content and media messages. Fundamentally, Reception Theory opposes the idea of a passive audience and stresses that meaning is actively created by the audience during the consumption process rather than being fixed or inherent in media texts (Hall, 1973).

When used in this study, Reception Theory provides a potent lens through which to examine how different public segments understand and provide meaning to black-and-white photographs in the digital era. In contrast to vivid colour photography, some people may consider such imagery to be visually appealing or out of date, while others may find it to be emotionally stirring or aesthetically sophisticated.

Aesthetic Theory

Theodor W. Adorno's posthumously published book from 1970, Aesthetic Theory, offers a critical philosophical framework for comprehending the interrelationships between art, beauty, and society. According to Adorno's theory, aesthetic experiences are profoundly ingrained in and reflective of larger social, historical, and ideological contexts rather than being purely subjective or based on personal taste (Adorno, 1970).

This study uses Aesthetic Theory to examine why certain viewers find black-and-white photography important or irrelevant in a contemporary, colour-driven visual society, as well as to critically analyze the underlying aesthetic implications of this style. The theory offers a philosophical foundation for analyzing the ideological, emotional, and symbolic significance of monochromatic pictures in today's popular awareness.

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, which entails gathering and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to assist explain or expound on the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The study used a multi-stage sample technique and was carried out in three states in South-East Nigeria: Enugu, Anambra, and Abia. In order to properly capture the variety of public perspectives and experiences across various socio-cultural and geographic zones, this approach was chosen.

Population

The estimated population of Enugu, Anambra, and Abia States was 15 million, with estimates of 4.7 million, 6.1 million, and 4.2 million, respectively, according to CityPopulation.de (2024). Based on United Nations demographic trends and Nigeria's 2006 census data, these population estimates were calculated.

Sample Size

Since the population is finite but large, the study adopted Cochran's sample size formula (Cochran, 1977), which is best suited for large or unknown populations.
Cochran's Formula:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1-p)}{e^2}$$

Where:

- n_0 = initial sample size (for infinite population)
- Z = Z-value (standard normal deviate corresponding to the desired confidence level; 1.96 for 95% confidence level)
- p = estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population (commonly 0.5 when unknown to maximize sample size)
- e = margin of error (desired level of precision, e.g., 5% or 0.05)
  Confidence level = 95% → Z = 1.96
  p = 0.5 (maximum variability)
  e = 0.05 (margin of error)

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot (1 - 0.5)}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$n_0 = \frac{3.8416 \cdot 0.25}{0.0025}$$

$$n_0 = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025} = 384.16$$

In order to adequately represent the 15 million people living in Enugu, Anambra, and Abia States, a sample size of 384 is determined using Cochran's method with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error.

As a result, the sample size was established and dispersed proportionately as follows:

Table 1: State, sample and population percentages

State	**Sample Size**	**Population (%)**
Enugu	108	28.00
Anambra	145	37.80
Abia	131	34.20
Total	**384**	**100.00**

Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling technique was used.

Stage 1, three states were purposively selected.
Stage 2, stratified sampling was employed to divide each state into urban and rural strata.
Stage 3, from each stratum, one Local Government Area (LGA) was randomly selected, making it two LGAs per a state, and
Stage 4, systematic random sampling was used to select individuals within each LGA.

Instruments for Data Collection

1. Formal Questionnaire: A standardized questionnaire with three sections was created for the quantitative phase:
   Section A: Psychographic and demographic factors (e.g., state, education, gender, age)
   Section B: Items on a Likert scale measuring opinions about the beauty and allure of black-and-white photography
   Section C: Black-and-white photography's emotional resonance and relevance in the digital age
2. Guide to Interviews: To obtain more in-depth information for the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide was employed. Questions such as: "Can you describe how you feel when you view a black-and-white image compared to colour?" "Do you think black-and-white photography still holds value in today's digital age?" "What factors do you think influence how people perceive these images?"

Method of Data Collection

Both online and in-person questionnaire administration were used to gather quantitative data. In-depth interviews with 18 participants — six from each state — representing various demographic categories were used to collect qualitative data.

Method of Data Analysis

The SPSS software (version 26) was used for the analysis of quantitative data. For the demographic and psychographic data, descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, and frequency) were employed.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data. To support the quantitative results, interview transcripts were coded and emerging themes were categorized.

Demographic Analysis

Table 2: Distribution of variables about demography data of the respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n=384)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	192	50
	Female	192	50
		384	**100**
Age	18–25	90	23.4
	26–35	126	32.8
	36–45	84	21.9
	46 and above	84	21.9
		384	**100**
Educational Level	Secondary	42	10.9
	Diploma/NCE	102	26.6
	First Degree	156	40.6
	Postgraduate	84	21.9
		384	**100**
State	Enugu	108	28.1
	Anambra	145	37.8
	Abia	131	34.1
		384	**100**

Psychographic Analysis (Likert Scale-Based)

Table 3: Distribution of variables about psychographic data of the respondents

The following are abbreviated: SA represents Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N/U = Neutral/Undecided, D = Disagree, and SD = Strongly Disagree

Item Statement	SA	A	N/U	D	SD	Total
I am interested in photography.	120	154	60	30	20	**384**
I prefer black-and-white photos over coloured ones.	98	100	80	56	50	**384**
Black-and-white photos are aesthetically pleasing.	110	142	70	38	24	**384**
Black-and-white photography is still relevant in contemporary media.	102	178	52	30	22	**384**
Colour photographs are more expressive than black-and-white photographs.	90	144	70	50	30	**384**

Quantitative Findings

1. Black-and-white photography was seen more emotionally impactful than colour photography by a sizable percentage of respondents (62.5%).
2. Black-and-white photography inspires nostalgia and timeless appeal, according to 58.1% of respondents.
3. Only 34.6% felt that black-and-white images are outdated, while 49.8% felt they are artistically superior.

Qualitative Interview Themes

1. Emotional Depth: According to respondents, black-and-white photos emphasize emotion by eliminating distractions. "It brings the emotion straight to the surface," for instance.
2. Historical Value: "I feel like I am watching history unfold when I see images in black and white."
3. Modern Relevance: "I still prefer black-and-white wedding photos because they better convey mood."

Discussion of Findings

Responses indicated that cultural, emotional, and experiential backgrounds influenced how people interpreted black-and-white photographs, which was in significant agreement with Reception Theory (Hall, 1980). While older participants linked it to historical significance, younger responders valued the sentimental experience.

In keeping with Aesthetic Theory (Beardsley, 1958), participants evaluated black-and-white images not just for their technical merits but also for their emotional, symbolic, and artistic qualities. A lot of people mentioned the mood and expressive simplicity that these pictures convey.

Each objective was met:

1. On Public Perception: Due to its emotive and creative power, black-and-white is seen favourably by the majority.
2. On Appeal Factors: Historical context, emotion, nostalgia, and simplicity are important components.
3. On Relevance: Black-and-white is still widely seen as being extremely relevant, especially in documentary, art, and journalism.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the researchers drew the conclusion that, despite its tradition, black-and-white photography is still both visually pleasing and culturally significant. In addition to being a visual medium, it is also an expressive and interpretative art form that still has resonance with viewers today, particularly when used strategically in journalism, fine art, narrative, and cultural archiving.

Recommendations

1. Black-and-white photography courses should be offered at art schools to teach students how to perceive emotions and visual literacy.

2. Photographers ought to be inspired to experiment with black and white as a medium for expression rather than as a throwback look.
3. Black-and-white alternatives ought to be incorporated into digital platforms' default filters in order to encourage visual storytelling.
4. More research should examine how audiences' perceptions of black-and-white aesthetics are impacted by Artificial Intelligence and generative tools.

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