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How the Framing of the Visuals of Poverty Influence Nonprofit Engagement

Kelsey Rudy

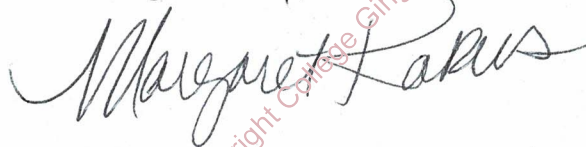
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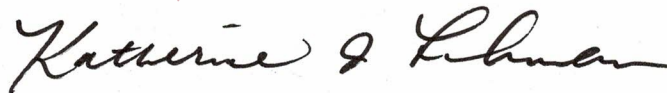
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

Departmental Distinction in Communications

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How the Framing of the Visuals of Poverty Influence Nonprofit Engagement

Kelsey Rudy

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Abstract

This study explores the current poverty situation in the country and how nonprofit organizations use visuals and framing to improve public engagement. Using this research, a survey was constructed that focuses on four images of homeless men. While there are many ways a picture can be framed, the chosen frames of focus are color versus black and white images and eye contact versus no eye contact. Survey participants were asked about their emotional responses to the pictures as well as their willingness to help alleviate poverty in response to those emotions. The information gathered could aid a nonprofit's ability to engage with the public and gain support for their cause.

Introduction

Sometimes poverty is difficult to look at. A disheveled figure holding a cardboard sign can draw people to them or deter others from even looking at them. Most people avoid the gaze of the homeless person on the corner. The situation plays out awkwardly with the driver passing by. What if the photograph of this disheveled figure was in a marketing material for a nonprofit? Would someone help then? What if the image was in black and white or if the figure had an emaciated body? Maybe that would inspire someone to help. This solicits the question of how the framing of the visuals of poverty influences nonprofit engagement? Framing is used to sway public opinion by highlighting a certain aspect of a perceived reality. This results in an individual thinking about an issue in a particular way. (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 159).

People in poverty cannot support themselves. They lack finances, food, resources, and sometimes shelter. This has always been a problem but it finally became a national issue in the 1800s during the industrial revolution (Kusmer, 2001, p. 3). From “the wandering poor” to “sturdy beggars,” these vagrants had increased in ranks until they weren’t easily overlooked. Since 1959 the poverty rate has dropped from around 23 percent to 14.8 percent in 2014. Though the number of people in poverty has increased during that time, the past couple of years have held a steady count at 45.3 million people.

“The nonprofit sector consists of a broad range of private organizations that are generally exempted from federal, as well as state and local taxation on the grounds that they serve some public purpose” (Salamon, 2012, p. 6). Some nonprofit organizations (NPO) that help alleviate poverty are Habitat for Humanity, which builds and renovates homes to provide affordable housing; United Way, which focuses on education, income, and health in local communities; the National Alliance to End Homelessness, which is committed to ending homelessness by improving policy, building capacity, and educating opinion leaders; Action Against Hunger

USA, which is committed to ending world hunger; the YMCA, which focuses on youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility; and the Salvation Army, which provides the basic necessities of life, food, shelter, and warmth, through a variety of adult support programs, children and family services, and international and disaster relief efforts. It's difficult to develop a straightforward marketing strategy for nonprofit organizations because they need to attract a wide variety of people for a wide variety of purposes (funding, services, time and effort). These are necessary things organizations depend on. Without the support of donations and volunteers, the nonprofits are unable to fill the need in their communities.

It's also hard for NPO's to cut through the clutter and get noticed. Recently, books and studies address this issue, such as "The State of Nonprofit America," "Social Media for Social Good: A How-To Guide for Nonprofits," and "Content Marketing for Nonprofits" (Salamon, 2012; Mansfield, 2012; Miller, 2013). They offer detailed social media guidance to engage followers and attract supporters.

The current study highlights the importance of visuals in order to improve engagement. It explores the current poverty situation in the country and how nonprofit organizations use visuals and framing to improve public engagement. A survey will be constructed using the information gathered and visual materials to see how people respond to them. This project will specifically benefit a nonprofit organization's ability to influence people to support their causes and volunteer their time. Consequently, they will be able to more effectively help those in poverty.

Poverty

The U.S. Census Bureau determines who is in poverty by using a set of dollar value thresholds that vary by family size and the number of related children (see table below). "If a

family's total money income is less than the applicable threshold, then that family and every individual in it are considered in poverty" (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015, p. 43).

Poverty Thresholds for 2014 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years

(Dollars)

Size of family unit	Related children under 18 years								
	None	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Eight or more
One person (unrelated individual):									
Under age 65	12,316								
Aged 65 and older	11,354								
Two people:									
Householder under age 65	15,853	16,317							
Householder aged 65 and older	14,309	16,256							
Three people	18,518	19,055	19,073						
Four people	24,418	24,817	24,008	24,091					
Five people	29,447	29,875	28,960	28,252	27,820				
Six people	33,869	34,004	33,303	32,631	31,633	31,041			
Seven people	38,971	39,214	38,375	37,791	36,701	35,431	34,036		
Eight people	43,586	43,970	43,179	42,485	41,501	40,252	38,953	38,622	
Nine people or more	52,430	52,685	51,984	51,396	50,430	49,101	47,899	47,601	45,768

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

According to current U.S. population reports, 46.7 million people are in poverty, which brings the official poverty rate to 14.8 percent. The poverty rate and number of people in poverty at the national level are not statistically different between 2013 and 2014 though rates did go up for two groups: people with a bachelor's degree and married-couple families (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015, p. 12). The number of people in poverty can be broken down using many demographics. For example, 26.5 million people in poverty are ages 18 to 64, people 65 and older consist of 4.6 million and 15.5 million children under age 18 make up the rest (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015, p. 14).

The effect of poverty can be hard to grasp. In the 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development stated that on a single night in January 2015, almost 600,000 people were homeless in the U.S. (Henry, Shivji, de Sousa, & Cohen, 2015, p. 8). According to Feeding America, a nonprofit established to fight hunger, there were 48.1 million Americans who lived in food insecure households in 2014. "Food insecurity exists in every county in America, ranging from a low

of 4 percent in Slope County, ND to a high of 33 percent in Humphreys County, MS” (Feeding America, 2015). The Children’s Defense Fund is a nonprofit that serves the needs of poor and minority children. According to their yearly report, each day in America, 2,723 babies are born into poverty (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014, p. 12).

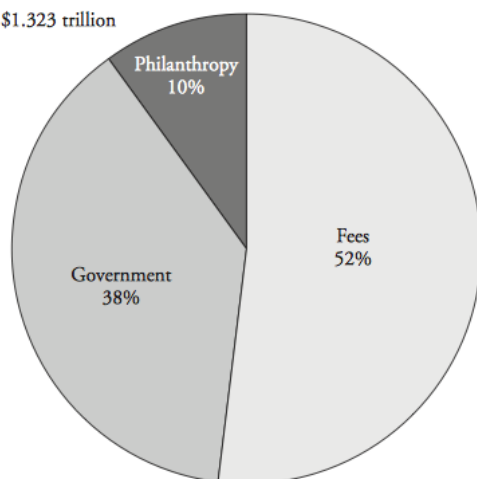
Nonprofit Organizations

Data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics shows that there are over 1.5 million registered nonprofit organizations including public charities, private foundations, chambers of commerce, fraternal organizations, and civic leagues. They benefit a variety of causes such as the arts, education, environment, human services, international needs, civil rights, and social action and advocacy. The nonprofit sector boasts the largest workforce of any U.S. industry with 4.5 million full-time-equivalent workers, which includes volunteer work time (Salamon, 2012, p. 8).

As of 2012, public-serving organizations ranging from hospitals to advocacy groups and cultural institutions were bringing in over \$1.3 trillion in revenues (Salamon, 2012, p. 10). Philanthropy, while not the major source of revenue, still supplies 10 percent of an

Figure 1-4. *Revenue Sources, Nonprofit Service and Expressive Organizations, 2007*

Total revenue: \$1.323 trillion



Source: Lester M. Salamon, *America's Nonprofit Sector: A Primer*, 3rd ed. (New York: Foundation Center, 2012), chap. 3, n. 18.

organization’s funds (see table below). “Even more important in understanding the data is the fact that not all nonprofits are required to file financial reports with the IRS, and among the exempted organizations are religious

congregations” (Salamon, 2012, p. 497).

Nonprofit organizations need a marketing strategy now more than they did 30 years ago. With over 1.5 million organizations, competition is high for donors, volunteers, and government support. Engagement with these groups is necessary for the nonprofit sector to thrive. Volunteers are the lifeblood of NPO’s. “In 2008, 62 million Americans volunteered” (Salamon, 2012, p. 505). Volunteering increases with education, community involvement and if children are present in the house. It will also increase with the movement through the lifecycle as young adults are less likely to participate, adults with children are more likely, and even older Americans are volunteering more than they used to (Salamon, 2012, p. 506). Like volunteering, individual giving increases with education and community involvement. It also depends on the household’s income and habits of charity passed on from generation to generation (Salamon, 2015, p. 500).

Technological advances have paved the way for fundraising and communications to go online. The idea of fundraising has changed over the years from “the seeking of gifts from various sources as conducted by 501©3 organizations” to “a relationship between donors and recipients mediated by varying images of the public good” (Waters, 2007, p. 61). With this in mind, nonprofits need to have an open and honest dialogue with donors about their interests and the inner workings of the organization. In a content analysis study of the Philanthropy 400, Waters (2007) found that the top nonprofit organizations in the United States are not using strategic communications to maximize their e-philanthropy efforts. The results show that NPO’s are relying on one-way communication strategies and need to invest more resources to cultivate relationships using the Internet. While most provided a description of services (96.9 percent) and current news (91.9 percent), “smaller numbers of organizations provided the following information to potential donors: listing of the board of directors (47.5 percent), a copy of the

completed IRS 990 form (29.4 percent), a message from the chief executive director (25.0 percent), and a list of current organizational goals (11.9 percent)” (Waters, 2007, p. 66). The sampled organizations rarely used moderated discussion forums (3.1 percent), only four allowed their visitors to email information from the site (2.5 percent), and none had live chat capabilities.

Online giving skyrocketed after September 11, 2001, which is when an estimated \$110 million was donated online to help victims of the attacks. “Prior to 2001, roughly 50 percent of the nonprofit organizations on the Philanthropy 400...had online donation capabilities. By the end of 2001, that number had risen to 80 percent. Currently, 95 percent of the Philanthropy 400 organizations accept online donations” (2007, p. 60). Many first-time donors now give online which allows immediate response for disaster relief efforts (Salamon, 2012, p. 509).

Visuals

In “Social Media for Social Good: A How-To Guide for Nonprofits” Mansfield (2012) provides nonprofits with social media guidance so they can be more effective online. He discusses how YouTube and Flickr can be used for storytelling because visuals can possibly get to someone’s heart faster than a print article or website news story. These sites are “not ideal for gaining new supporters, but are exceptional tools for sharing and distributing videos and photos to better engage supporters you already have” (Mansfield, 2012). High-quality digital photos used on their website, social media, newsletters, and brochures will grab the supporter’s attention. Mansfield says that a nonprofit’s “future success in utilizing social media and mobile technology is directly connected to your ability to create, and share fresh, high-quality digital photos regularly” (2012, p. 127). According to Simply Measured, a social analytics company, photos and videos drive the most engagement for the top 10 brand pages on Facebook. Photos are liked twice as often as text updates and videos are shared twelve times more than links and text posts combined (Booth, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

There are certain theories for the way people process visuals. The elaboration likelihood model refers to the inner dialogue within a person when they read or witness some sort of claim. The message will either be processed in a high-effort “central route” or a low-effort “peripheral route.” The “central route” requires conscious and rational thinking while the “peripheral route” is done instinctively and focuses on appearance or perceived credibility. In most cases, this occurs in a message with both textual and visual messages. The elaboration likelihood model suggests that a photograph will be processed peripherally, which will activate an emotional response (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 239).

Schema theory says that people filter new information through their existing knowledge and belief systems. “How people’s schemas can be activated by the messages they receive is the subject of frame analysis” (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 240). Framing theory takes the idea of how visuals are processed and suggests how public opinion can be swayed. “The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). This theory is often underutilized in studying visuals. If applied, it is done so by conducting studies on both visual and verbal information at one time, something this study cannot achieve. Theory building regarding visual framing is lacking. Though variables such as close-ups versus long-shots, whether or not looking up at someone equals power and looking down at them equals weakness, and nonverbal expressions like emotion, posture, and gesturing are questioned as being visual frames, Coleman and her colleagues treat them as such (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 241).

Visual Frames

Children's images are often used for promotional materials because they are the most vulnerable of victims (Fisher & Ma, 2014, p. 436). "The greater the child's suffering, the greater the vicarious distress is experienced by observers and the stronger their feelings of compassion and sympathy for the victim" (Fisher & Ma, 2014, p. 438). In a study on the attractiveness of children in need relating to the empathy and help they receive from unrelated adults, Fisher and Ma (2014, p. 446) discovered that when a victim's need is severe, all thoughts about superficial characteristics are crowded out by empathic distress and feelings of compassion. Also, there is a strong association between children expressing negative emotions and empathy evoked in observers (Fisher & Ma, 2014, p. 439).

Eye contact as a form of nonverbal communication is a well-studied area. Infants and adults alike have a natural attraction to the facial region where the eyes are located. "Gaze and emotion share an ecological relevance to the observer, one that meaningfully influences behavioral and neural processes underlying their perceptual integration" (Adams & Nelson, 2015, p. 351). Eyes are an important social cue for people to gain information and interact emotionally with each other. Research compiled by Adams and Nelson (2015, p. 348) suggests that a direct gaze towards the observer causes higher ratings of attractiveness, friendliness, and trustworthiness in an individual. An averted gaze leads to lower ratings. From the current research I have developed the following hypothesis:

H1: Images with victims that have eye contact with the observer will increase empathetic responses and feelings of compassion in the observer.

Color is yet another variable that can play a significant role in impacting emotions and perception. "The perception and application of color is strongly influenced by one's

innate physiological and psychological predisposition, personal experiences, age, gender, personality, income, ethnographic and demographic factors that makes its effective application within the domain of marketing all the more cumbersome and challenging” (Singh & Srivastava, 2011, p. 200). An effective communications tool for advertising and marketing, color affects the subconscious with its symbolic meanings, for example, white represents peace and neutrality, also truth, coldness, fearfulness, and humility. Black symbolizes sophistication, power, emptiness, seriousness, sorrow, and darkness. Red is very emotional representing things like passion and strength to danger and war. In a study on the effects of color, Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1995) found that color advertising is more persuasive for the consumers who put little effort into ad processing (p. 135). On the other hand, when ad-processing motivation is high black and white ads and their claims are more persuasive. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Black and white images will increase empathetic responses and feelings of compassion in the observer.

Method

Studies on nonprofit visuals or the framing of them have been nonexistent. A content analysis would help supply that information but that isn't the objective of the current study. The main aim of this study is to examine if the framing of the visuals of poverty play some part in influencing the public to engage with nonprofits. This objective is achieved by carefully choosing four images that encompass these combinations of variables:

- 1) Color + Eye contact
- 2) Color + No eye contact
- 3) Black and White + Eye contact

4) Black and White + No eye contact

Color versus black and white photography was chosen as a variable because though black and white imagery was favored twenty years ago, it could have changed by now. It's unlikely to see marketing materials without color since it easily grabs attention. That being said, black and white pictures may stand out for that reason. In a place where color pervades, the stark contrast of black and white might draw an observer or make it that much easier for them to glance past it. Eye contact versus no eye contact was chosen as the second variable because humans are drawn to eyes for social cues, which can result in an emotional connectedness between observers.

Only two pictures of men were used but the survey included each image in both color and black and white, creating a total of four images for the survey. The pictures chosen are all close-up shots on a homeless man's face. These were used to keep as much uniformity as possible outside of the chosen variables. This eliminates body type, which could easily become an unsought variable by introducing body stereotyping. Men were specifically chosen as the subjects since women and children are more susceptible to empathy because of their vulnerability. In order to keep out unwanted variables, the careful selection of images made it more likely that the participants would focus on the colors of the images or the eyes of the men portrayed.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to administer the survey to the entire Albright student body through the solicitation of email, as well requesting participation on social media. Responses were received from 155 participants of whom 68% were ages 18-24 years old. Respondents 25-34 years old comprised 20% of the sample and 12% were 35 years old and older. Many more females than males participated (73% versus 27%). Half the sample was still in college, 22% had bachelor's degrees, and the rest had varying levels of education.

Procedure

The survey was conducted online. Participants accessed a designated web address to participate. Each person selected their birth month which determined which set of two pictures they would see. If those who selected January saw the variables “Color + Eye Contact” and “Black and White + No eye contact” then those who selected February saw the images with the variables “Color + No eye contact” and “Black and White + Eye Contact.” After viewing the images, the participants were asked about their emotional responses to the pictures as well as their willingness to help alleviate poverty in response to those emotions, along with demographic questions.

Results

First, the outcomes of the hypotheses were assessed. The relationship between eye contact photos and various empathetic responses was investigated using Pearson correlation coefficient. There was a weak positive correlation between the two variables. Some of the eye contact images and responses show a slightly stronger correlation than others. These were the questions that asked if viewing the image made the participant feel sympathy towards the person in it and if viewing the image made the participant interested in looking for ways to help people in poverty.

The relationship between color condition images and various empathetic responses was also investigated using Pearson correlation coefficient. There was no correlation between the two variables.

After the participants viewed and responded to questions about two images, they were shown all four images at one time. The following questions asked them to compare

and select the most appropriate photo according to their opinions. When asked to select the most depressing picture, 67% chose the black and white images. This validates research on black and white color symbolism, which suggests that the white may represent coldness or fearfulness and black can represent emptiness, seriousness, sorrow, and darkness.

When asked to select the most powerful images, 79% chose the images with eye contact. One may think that the participants will also select the eye contact images when asked to choose the most personal picture. Humans are drawn to eyes and that contact can result in an emotional connectedness between observers or it can communicate the need for help (Adams & Nelson, 2016, p. 343). In actuality, 61% chose the colored images to be the most personal pictures, which may have resulted because color feels more real and relatable. This would make sense since the colored images were also chosen out of all four images to be the most realistic.

Then the participants were asked about their current involvement with nonprofit organizations that help alleviate poverty. It is interesting to note that 63% of the respondents who follow NPO's on social media said that the organization does not regularly post pictures. In his book, "Social Media for Social Good: A How-To Guide for Nonprofits," Mansfield says that a nonprofit's success on social media is directly connected to sharing photos regularly (2012, p. 127). It is possible though that people miss seeing these photos due to an overabundance of information on their social media newsfeeds. A content analysis would have more accurately determined if and how often NPO's are sharing photos online. This is important because 50% of the survey participants said they would be more likely to donate to a NPO if they received information with pictures.

Discussion

Previous research demonstrates that visuals are very important to an NPO's success. Visuals drive online engagement twice as often as text updates. They can also speak to the heart faster than words. With most first-time donors now giving online, this calls for effective communications in the nonprofit field.

Studies on nonprofit visuals or the framing of them have been nonexistent. The present research examines if the framing of the visuals of poverty play some part in influencing the public to engage with nonprofits. This was achieved by looking at the variables of eye contact and color condition images in relationship to empathetic responses within the observer.

The results of the study cannot conclude which color condition is best to use in nonprofit visuals. There is a stronger relationship between eye contact variables and empathy so it is suggested that images with eye contact will connect with the observer better than images without eye contact. It is also suggested that NPO's should post quality pictures to drive engagement.

This study would benefit from more participation, in which case the correlation tests could have had a stronger outcome. Also, it would be in the researcher's best interest not to include the option of "neither agree or disagree" when asking about pictures because this does not advance or benefit the study in any way.

This study provides a guideline that NPO's can use as a foundation for utilizing visuals of poverty to gain donors and volunteers. The study also gives a basis for more research in this area. Only eye contact and color condition is examined in this study. There are many other visual frames to be considered. Future research should examine the impact of other frames such as expressions, posture, and the kind of shots used. Another interesting aspect to include would be a participant's preconceived perceptions about poverty and homelessness.

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