The International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220483

Women, Abortion Protest, and Visual

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Abstract: With the overturned case of Roe v. Wade, women have taken on a battle of fighting for body rights. After the final decision of the case, relevant reports dominated the front pages of newspapers and magazines. This essay aims to explore the relationship between women and visuals in the context of protest, with a specific focus on abortion protest. It adopts the perspective of visual activism and applies image analysis, focusing on a series of photographs and artworks about demonstrations, especially the abortion protest and the movement of "Black Lives Matter". It concludes that visual materials could express women's emotions and power and spread them to more people. They promote gender equality, which reflects the positive side of visual activism. However, to some extent, visual materials reinforce gender stereotypes when other social elements are involved, such as racism in the movement of "Black Lives Matter".

Keywords: visual activism, communicability, abortion, body rights

1. Introduction

With the finalized decision of the Supreme Court in the Roe v. Wade case, abortion protests broke out worldwide. The news and images of protesters were everywhere on the internet. The protest became not only the concentration of the media in the United States but also the main focus of the world. The important factors in this issue consist of visuals, women, and abortion protests. This research paper is designed to explore their relationships, utilizing images and artworks through the lens of visual activism. The result demonstrates that visual materials are able to help women in various ways, showing their power and emotion in protest to promote gender equality. In abortion protests, they were the center of reports because it is thought that their rights to their bodies were "abolished". The message of abortion protest could spread worldwide because of the communicability and effectivity of visuals. Nevertheless, visual materials also replay gender inequality. To some extent, women were unrepresented in the movement against racism. Therefore, visual representation is not neutral but gendered.

2. Visual and Visual Activism

2.1. The Communicability of Visual Materials

Visual activism refers to the visual materials of an event or action that contains activist practices. In this paper, visual activism primarily concentrates on the exhibition of visual materials about abortion protest and their effects. Visual materials appear in people's everyday lives, on television, in newspapers or magazines, and especially on all kinds of social media that are used on a daily basis,

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like Instagram and Twitter. If a user follows someone on social media, it is likely that this user will be able to receive the posts he or she shares on the account and receive the information that the posts intend to indicate. If it is something that matters or is interesting, it is also possible that it will be shared with friends and family, and the cycle continues. According to the data and conclusion by Jiang Yang and Scott Counts, the speed of a tweet can be calculated through the number of offspring tweets of an original tweet and the number of users tagged on the offspring tweets (the tweets being forward) [1]. Therefore, people can get a broad sense of communicability on similar social media like Instagram.

2.2. The Effectivity of Visual Materials

The effectivity of visuals in this essay is defined as the ability to deliver messages to the viewers. The effectivity of visuals is an important reason for the popularity of pictures or memes compared to direct words and sentences. For visuals, people can find useful information at the first sight, including the location where it is taken and the main subject. According to Dr. Lynell Burmark, the author of *Visual Literacy*, "…unless our words, concepts, ideas are hooked onto an image, they will go in one ear, sail through the brain, and go out the other ear. Words are processed by our short-term memory where we can only retain about seven bits of information (plus or minus 2) … Images, on the other hand, go directly into long-term memory where they are indelibly etched" [2]. In psychology, short-term memory, also working memory refers to a stage where people preserve information while they are working on it. Some of the information stored in short-term memory is able to be transferred to long-term memory after several times of rehearsals. Long-term memory refers to the memory and information which is stored in people's brains permanently but needs related retrieval cues to pull it out [3]. In addition, according to the researcher in 3M corporation (an American corporation that produces a wide range of products), humans process visuals 60,000 times faster than text [4]. This evidence proves that images are easy for people to remember and process, therefore, they work more effectively under particular circumstances compared to words.

3. The Role of Visual Materials in Abortion Protest

3.1. Women's Power and Emotion in Protest Reports

After the case of Roe v. Wade has been overturned by the Supreme Court, it overthrew women's rights to abortion. Therefore, thousands of protests mostly by women started in most of the states in the U.S. This huge anti-abortion law tide has no doubt become the concentration and priority of media and press. Every article that talks about the march and abortion protest contains visuals to help in explaining the situation. The relationship between the abortion protest and visuals seems to be established without being noticed.

The abortion protests aim to convey the message that abortion law is inappropriate and is a deprivation of body rights for women. Women were powerful in the protests. For instance, one picture taken in front of the White House during an abortion protest shows a woman with headwear that represents the Statue of Liberty [5]. Since it was an abortion protest against the Supreme Court, using the Statue of Liberty was ironic. The deprivation of body rights contradicts the goddess, which symbolizes freedom and democracy. The fire drawn around her eyes can be seen as the representation of anger, the anger from women whose rights were taken away. The mask indicates this protest was held during the Covid-19 period. In addition, the slogan printed on the mask tells "Bans off our bodies" which is a direct accusation of the Supreme Court depriving women's body rights. Even though the background was grammaticized, it is still clear that the other protestors were women as well.

Women are basically the center of abortion protests. In the pictures taken during protests, women are always in the center. The cameras focus on their faces and gestures, which show their anger and

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power, and they even express their opinions by screaming, because the negation of abortion rights has taken women's rights to their bodies away. Visuals show the mightiness of women but also make people think about the reality of the situation of women.

Visuals are also able to evoke people's emotions. According to experimental research by Yang et al., visual stimuli from photographs are able to evoke corresponding emotional responses [6]. Crying women can be seen in the reports about abortion protests. For example, two women were crying and comforting one another in front of the Supreme Court building, and they created a sense of helplessness and evoked viewers' sad feelings [6]. Therefore, visual materials could play a role in influencing people's emotions including those who are against abortion and indifferent to the issue. Visuals also bring women together. With the communicability of visuals, one picture could be viewed and spread to a number of people. Therefore, with the widespread of the photographs of protest, women can learn that they are not alone in this battle and continue striving for their rights.

3.2. Gender Inequality in Artwork

The marching protests seem to be the most common way to express a sense of dissatisfaction and anger in relation to visuals. However, artists also utilize visuals to demonstrate other noticeable aspects of the event.



Figure 2. Supreme Injustices.

(Credit: https://hyperallergic.com/744771/one-artists-scathing-indictment-of-a-crooked-supreme-court/)

Figure 1 is an art piece created by Robbie Conal, named "Supreme Injustices" in 2022 after the Supreme Court overturned the case of Roe v. Wade. The uniqueness of this piece lies in gender differences, and it is created by a 78-year-old male artist. According to Lauren E. Rothschild's research about the gender gap in American politics, women hold 23.2% of House seats and 25% of Senate seats [7]. Therefore, the voting of the overturned case can be concluded that women are not

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able to make the choice of their own bodies, but instead, men have the power to do so, which is an indication of gender inequality not only in the political aspect but also in the social aspect. This visual art piece is also considered a form of protest in the field of art. On the top and the bottom of the artwork, it says "Supreme Injustices" which indicates it is in relation to the abortion law. The main subjects in the artwork are six abstract faces that take up almost 90% of the space.

The woman in the center has the facial expression of crying and being scared. However, the rest of the five men's facial expressions are complacent, scornful, and hideous which are all highly in contrast with the only woman's face. The black background indicates the darkness of the Supreme Court and the dark sky of women after the overturn of abortion rights. Even though this piece is not all about the victim women, the depiction of men reveals the oppressed women from another point of view, which is the power concentrated on men. Both the pictures of the abortion protest and the artwork are protesting against the deprivation of women's body rights and expressing women's fear and anger of their rights being controlled by a paper file. With the communicability and the effectivity of visuals combined with the use of visual activism, the fear and the determination of women could be acknowledged by more people.

4. Gendered Visual Representation in the Protest "Black Lives Matter"

Visuals leave evidence for the existence of this remarkable movement either in people's brains or in the media [8]. According to Brady et al., people have remarkable performance in remembering visual information, and the visual long-term memory capacity is larger than people expected. Therefore, some remarkable images of the protest will be stored in the visual long-term memory and will be activated if people need the information [9]. On the other hand, with the development of technology and the powerful media and internet, even if the original post is deleted, the communicability of visuals allows it to be further transmitted and even reproduced.

Visuals reveal the inequality in gender politically and socially, evoke emotion, create solidarity among women, and help people remember this remarkable protest. However, the negative side of visuals also appears in protest. After the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a Caucasian male police officer, the protest titled "Black Lives Matter" was initiated by people from all races. Posts and reports came out like a flood and took over the front pages of media rapidly. There were several "Black Lives Matter" movements prior to a series of protests in 2020, dating back to 2014. This paper focuses on the latest one [10]. In these protests, the subject is the black community overall, however, the figures of black males seemed to dominate the protests and black women were invisible. The case of George Floyd serves as a fuse to the whole "Black Lives Matter" protest and protestors treated him as a tragic figure and held his pictures as a symbol. It is generally assumed that black males are prone to be the victims in incidents with police officers rather than black females because of their "brute" images even though they are unarmed [11]. However, the number of female victims suffering from police violence is far more than people's expectations. According to the University of Florida Law Faculty Publications, black women are routinely wiped away by the police, regardless of their background [12].

Journalist photos generally focus on the purpose of the protest, namely the reformation of the police department and the advocacy for the rights of the black community. However, black females were not mentioned and did not present. For example, the figure indicates that the posters held by the protestors commemorate the black males who lost their lives or suffered tremendously due to police officers [13]. The protest was named "Black Lives Matter", therefore, the subject should include both males and females in order to make this protest complete. The lack of representation of black females in the pictures demonstrates that if people protest as a whole, the concentration will also fall on the side of men even though women are suffering from the same level of inequality. Therefore, it can be

concluded that visuals do have positive effects on women to some extent but the representation and interpretation of visuals are not neutral but gendered.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing different visual materials about both the abortion protest and the movement of "Black Lives Matter", this research concludes that visual materials play an important role in activism. With their excellent communicability and outstanding effectivity, they enable the emotion and the main idea of abortion protest to be disseminated and acknowledged by more people. However, they also reveal the fact that women are generally disregarded in activist events compared to men, which means that protest reports repeat gender inequality visually. However, this conclusion about visuals can only be applied to activism. Further research about the roles of visual materials in other aspects should be considered.

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