Appraisal Theory: Can It Be Applied to Visual Images in Isolation to the Text?

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Abstract

The role of women in Saudi society is evolving; however, the process of reform is subject to multiple interpretations. This makes the role of resemiosis when interpreting visual media particularly important, perhaps more than a direct focus on the semiotic modes adopted. Data was collected from a variety of on-line media covering the recent changes. Appraisal Theory was used to capture the judgement process in terms of emotions experienced by the reader/viewer and how the wider context such as the full news article, or even just the headline, forms a part of this process. This posits that in contested situations, resemiosis is a critical part of the process and sometimes the apparent interpretation of a single image (intersemiosis) can be different to the interpretation of the whole. In such instances, different semiotic modes convey different meanings but a focus on one in isolation can be misleading as to the overall intent.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory, Resemiosis, Intersemiosis, Meaning-making, Saudi Women, Media

Introduction

The role of women, and specific restrictions they face, in Saudi Arabia has regularly attracted adverse comment. To many non-Saudis, the restrictions on the right to travel, social interaction outside the home, and the ban on driving were seen as indicative of a profoundly authoritarian society (Satiti, 2017). On the other hand, these comments took little no or account of the areas where Saudi women had freedom such as access to education, the right to run their own businesses, or increasing access to the labour market. From 2017, a major series of reforms to the male guardianship have opened up public spaces, eased male control over the right to travel, and lifted the ban on driving (Elyas & Aljabri, 2020). In turn, this has generated contested narratives between those who see these as profound and fundamental reforms (Rizvi & Hussain, 2022) and those who argue the changes are, at best, cosmetic (Aldosari, 2018; Lacroix, 2019; Rizvi & Hussain, 2022), leaving women's rights still largely subject to male approval.

This presents significant problems in interpreting media, especially visual media, when there are divergent opinions, and there may be a lack of trust as to the motives behind particular presentations (Alhuthali, 2018). This argues that when studying the interpretation of images of women in contemporary Saudi society, while the conventional focus on semiotic modes and their interaction (Iedema, 2003; Jewitt, 2005) is useful as part of an analysis, the prior attitudes and emotional response of an observer are equally important (Martin & White, 2005). This study takes a number of images, some photographs in natural settings, one from a magazine cover, and a number of cartoon style images, and uses the concept of appraisal as a tool to explore the ways in which a viewer might respond to and seek to interpret the images.

Literature Review
Recent Changes in Saudi Society

The representation of women in the Middle East, and Saudi in particular, has often been marked by stereotypes and prior assumptions in the western media. The tendency has focused on stressing either backwardness and repression and the substantial restrictions facing women in public life, but with little emphasis of how women have always been able to run their own businesses (Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, & Rajasekar, 2017) or access higher education. By focusing on the severe restrictions, the net effect overlooks or downplays any agency of Saudi women (Satiti, 2017) in shaping their own lives.

The legal changes since 2017 in Saudi Arabia, regarding male guardianship rules, have created a limited right to drive and more freedom to travel. This allows greater freedoms where agreed upon by the relevant male guardian and, more subtly, creates pressure for such permission to be granted.

As such, they have attracted attention both in the Western press (Elyas & Aljabri, 2020) and across the Arabic speaking world (Adel, 2019). More widely, these changes are promoted by their supporters as a radical reset of social relations in Saudi Arabia and by others as far too limited and possibly cosmetic in nature (Boghani, 2019). However, changes such as the right to drive are still subject to male consent, or in other words, women in a household can now drive if the head of the family allows this (Aldosari, 2018).

The reporting of these changes has witnessed the use of photographs, cartoons and videos, as well as more traditional text. This multimodal media approach to constructing and conveying meaning places an emphasis on creating a visual grammar as an important tool for interpreting images (Chen & Gao, 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Visual Grammar and Interpretation

To establish a framework, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between the represented participants and the interactive participants in an image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This approach further delineates objects, including people, background locations, and other contextual information, as represented participants, while both creator and viewer are seen as the interactive participants.

The interactive participant (the reader or viewer) draws together meaning from the image using four main systems: contact, social distance, perspective, and modality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Contact depends on how the represented characters interact with the viewer. If they are looking directly at the viewer, this can be seen as a 'demand', especially as some form of direct response is expected (ranging from empathy to disgust). If this is lacking, then the image is an 'offer' with a degree of passivity (Peng, 2022), but equally, it can be a situation where the future viewer is effectively irrelevant in terms of interaction within the image. In terms of demand, facial expressions are an important part of structuring the desired response. Social distance relies both on the composition within the image (how close the represented participants are), technical issues such as camera view (close up or long range), and how much of the participants is shown (Padilla & Padilla, 2022). Camera view also builds up the perspective in the sense of looking down at the participants, looking up at them, or at eye level. As with other social interactions, these positions are often held to reflect the relative power and importance between the participants.

Appraisal Theory and Contested Meaning Making

However, in a contested situation (Kress, 2010), understanding is not just a product of the semiotic modes adopted or how they are combined (Lazarus, 1991). To address this step, the concepts of Appraisal Theory are

particularly useful (Martin & White, 2005), especially when the presented image seeks to change behaviour or attitudes. In their model, "attitude is divided into three regions of feeling: 'affect', 'judgement', and 'appreciation'. Affect deals with resources for construing emotional reactions" (p. 35), and this can be summarised as:
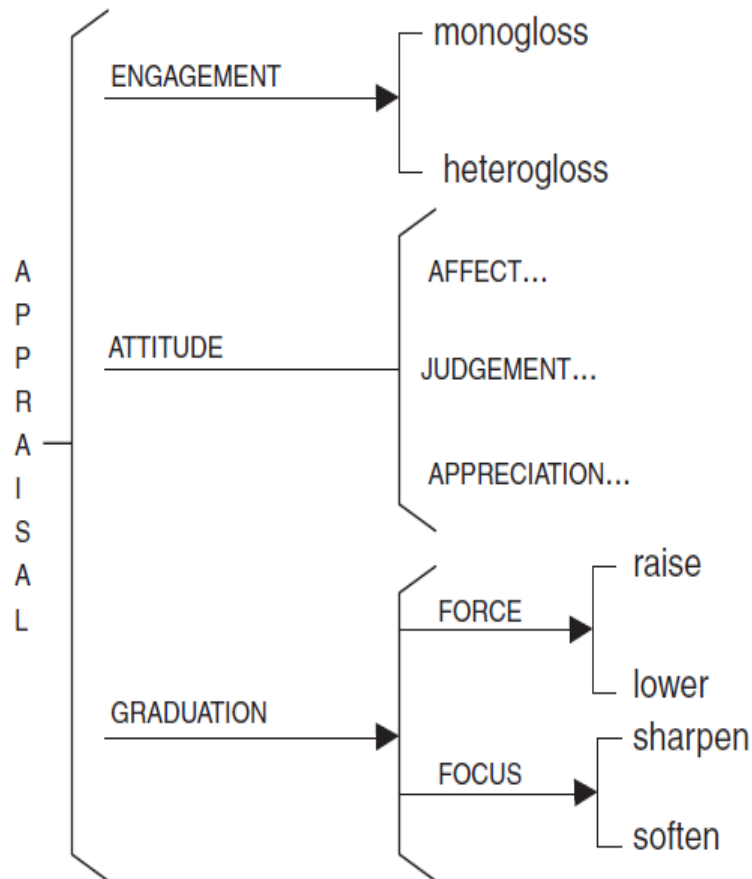

Figure 1. Outline of an Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005, p.38)

This approach was initially derived by Lazarus (1991) to understand how a situation determined the reaction of an individual. He argued that this process used two major types of appraisal methods: 1) *primary appraisal,* where an individual tries to interpret an event; and, 2) *secondary appraisal,* where they try to understand the implications. Since Lazarus was primarily interested in stress, his argument emphasized that stress (as an emotion) arose from this process of interpretation and understanding. This model was subsequently expanded to create a two process model of appraisal-response-re-appraisal (Smith & Kirby, 2001). In turn, differences have been drawn between appraisal using pre-learned schemas or where conscious cognition is

required (Gratch & Marsella, 2005). The focus on stress allows the original work to be readily transferred to other emotions such as agreement or the implications of disagreement.

In Appraisal Theory, *Attitude* is used to capture those elements in the image that are used by the reader to identify responses based on their personal feelings and values. The sub-division of Affect captures the understanding of the emotions embedded in the image, Judgement reflects how the image indicates assessment of the character and behaviour of others, and Appreciation relates to judgements of the value of specific things. Most often, judgement, in particular, is socially determined as both creator and viewer will draw on the context (either within the text or in wider society) in order to judge how appropriate something is (Coffin, 2003).

Engagement is used to reflect the degree of nuance in the images. Thus, the more categorical the presentation is, the more likely it will be described as Monogloss. If the image allows for multiple meanings or is used to contrast different concepts, then it can be described as Heterogloss.

Graduation, in turn, is used to capture instances where the image is structured to either emphasise a particular point or to focus on a particular aspect. Thus, a neutral picture, indicating either lack of understanding or focus, will lack both aspects. As with the other categories, it is also possible for any statement to have more than one aspect. Therefore, a statement could stress both the focus and moderate the force if this was appropriate.

Research Design

This study is based on a small number of images that represent some of the changed social relations in Saudi society. As noted in the introduction, they are a mix of photographs and cartoon style images. The sample used for this paper was a sub-set drawn from a wider study that collected 50 images meeting certain criteria. These criteria stipulated that the images should relate to representations of the role of Saudi women and be sourced from western media. The majority of the wider sample was drawn from images published after 2018, thus reflecting recent changes, but a few predated that.

These search criteria were run using a search on google images. The images below were chosen for their relevance to the research focus but are representative of the broader spread of press coverage. In particular, photographs and cartoon style images were selected to enable a comparison between the two and consideration of how they might differ in their approach to meaning making.

The analytic approach was two-fold. Vector analysis was used within the images, as it is a powerful tool to explore the visual grammar in use, particularly regarding whether the image places a demand on the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The concepts of Appraisal Theory (Ellsworth,

2013; Smith & Kirby, 2001) were then used to explore the role of context in meaning making and how this was influenced when the image was placed in the wider context of the surrounding article, other reporting, or even simply the chosen headline captions.

As a result the overall approach is qualitative (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Symon & Cassell, 2012), using a small number of images that, in turn, allows for in-depth study as to how meaning making is constructed.

Findings

The first image is taken from a Getty photograph of the newly created Saudi women's team in training (Nureldine, 2021) and the second is from a CNN report also on the creation of soccer/football league for women in Saudi Arabia (Kottasova & Thornton, 2020). Giving women access to both watch and play sport in public has been a major part of the post-2017 liberalisation and, as such, it is used to stress the importance of the changes. Of note, for both images, the sight vectors are related to their current actions, not to the external observer (Peng, 2022).

Figure 2. First Saudi female football team (Nureldine, F. 2021), photograph for /AFP/Getty Images
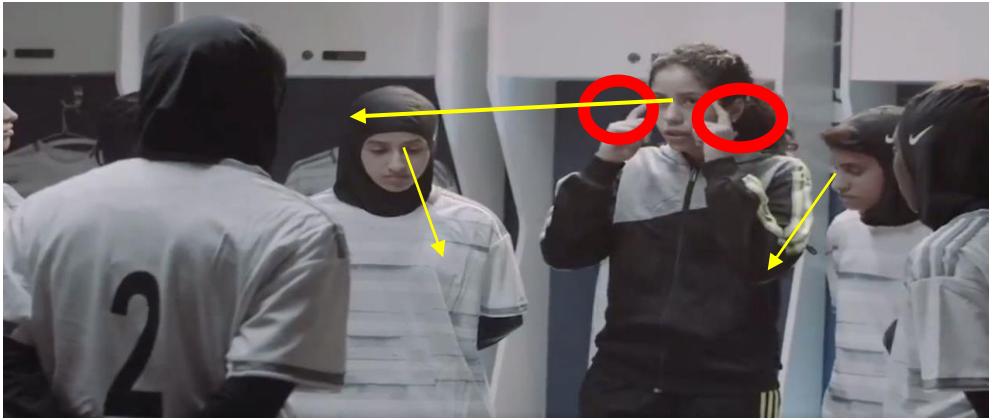
Figure 3. Saudi female football team From CNN (Kottasova & Thornton, 2020)

In terms of attitude, these two images, affect and judgement, are the important sources of evaluation. Without additional context, the primary attitude towards the first is one of essential normalcy. The players are dressed as one would expect many footballers to be in training, and their entire focus is on the footballs. This image is from a report published by CNN titled "Saudi Arabia Secures Victory in Its Debut Women's International Match" (Nureldine, 2021). The article notes that the idea of the women's team playing an international match is indicative that for some women, at least, the changes since 2017 have had a demonstrable effect on their lives (Aldosari, 2018; Kottasova & Thornton, 2020). It is worth noting that, while seen as a broadly positive outcome, some critics have stressed that women need permission to play sports rather than having a fundamental right to do so.

Figure 3 is slightly different, as the number of players wearing Hijabs marks this clearly as happening in an Islamic country. However, the extent of any explicitly Saudi context only comes from the wider article.

In terms of engagement, Figure 2 can be described as Monogloss. Although there are multiple actors in the image, the consistent focus is on the footballs they are individually working with. Figure 3 is Heterogloss, as it is open to multiple interpretations. The fact that the eyelines of the more visible individuals do not meet could suggest they have different focuses. Similarly, the interaction between the coach and her players could be perceived as either positive and supportive or highly critical. A similar distinction can be made regarding gradation, with the meaning of Figure 2 having a clear and consistent focus, while figure 3 appears more complex

Figure 4. HRH Hayfa bint Abdullah Al Saud (George, 2018)

The controversy around a 2018 cover for Vogue Magazine (George, 2018) showing a Saudi princess preparing to drive a car was reported by CNN (Young, 2018). The Vogue image and accompanying narrative were designed to show that the ban on women driving had been lifted. The CNN report noted that even after the decree was implemented, women who had long campaigned for the right to drive had been arrested. A more positive alternative reading to the original Vogue article indicates that the image makes it clear that the new rights are well embedded. The subject of the image is a member of the Saudi royal family and both the structure of the image and the place of its original publication are unambiguous as to what is happening.

In terms of image design, the subject is looking directly at the viewer, described as a demand for attention, and presumably in this case, empathy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Despite this, the image is perhaps an example of where the intended affect and some of the responses vary radically. The intent is to showcase the reforms using an image based around wealth and elegance. However, external judgements were less favourable, juxtaposing the relative privilege of the subject of the photograph with the ongoing detention of other women who had campaigned for this change. The image, as such, is intended to be Monogloss with a single focus on the woman in the car. However, this is an instance where the range of judgement gives it a Heterogloss outcome. In terms of graduation, the image is clearly designed to emphasise a particular point, and this is shared between both favourable and unfavourable readings.

The next two images are stills from two videos produced by Human Rights Watch in 2016. The first covers the restrictions on travel, resulting from the male guardianship system (Human Rights Watch, 2016a), and the second addresses issues around domestic abuse, resulting from the powers of the male guardianship system (Human Rights Watch, 2016b).
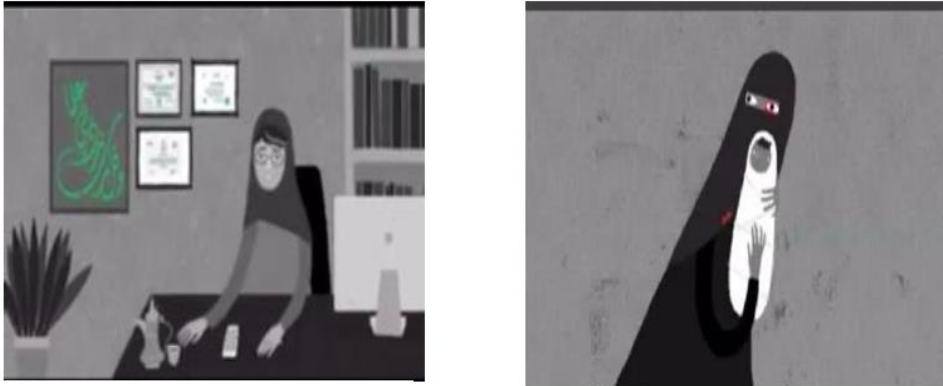

Figure 5. Campaign against Male Guardianship

The first image is taken from a narrative where the female subject has the chance to present at a prestigious conference but cannot gain the needed attention or permission from her son (who holds the guardianship). In the second image, the subject is fleeing domestic abuse clutching her young baby. In terms of affect, in the first picture, the subject is gazing downwards, in a pose often seen as invoking pity and empathy. In the second picture, the gaze is direct but also indicative of fear (and perhaps a degree of secrecy). Both images taken in isolation lead to a judgement of sympathy for the subjects and concern about the wider situation. The longer video in the first case shows the arbitrary nature of the denial to travel, and in the second, the ongoing consequences of the abuse – including the fact that the subject has no right to refuse to return to her husband. Both images can be seen as Monogloss, perhaps not a surprise as both are produced by an organisation campaigning for very specific changes. This is also reflected in terms of graduation, as there is little ambiguity either in the actual chosen stills or the full video.

The next two images (Lannes, 2018; Steinberg, 2018) are taken from a New York Times article published in 2018 after the ban on driving was lifted (Aldosari, 2018). The wider article notes the potentially far reaching nature of the changes but also emphasizes that this will mostly only apply to women with supportive guardians who can access the new freedoms, as opposed to those in more conservative social groups.

Figure 6. Women access to driving (New York Times, 2018)

In both images, in terms of affect, the overwhelming impression is one of residual control. In the second, it is not even clear if the female subject is actually being allowed access to a car, or if this is being withheld. The difference in this regard reflects the wider article's argument that the changes are significant but very limited.

The first image is slightly Heterogloss, as the male gesture could signify either continued control, concern that the new rights are well used, or simply removing previous restrictions (the flat palm away from the body). This carries over into a consideration of the degree of graduation. Both these images have a clear focus (women driving) but, as with the accompanying article, the images show how these new rights come with significant restrictions.

Discussion

The examples in this paper include two photographs taken in relatively natural settings (Kottasova & Thornton, 2020; Nureldine, 2021), a posed photograph for Vogue magazine (Young, 2018), two cartoon style images from a human rights pressure group (Human Rights Watch, 2016a, 2016b), and two cartoons (Lannes, 2018; Steinberg, 2018) from a New York Times article (Aldosari, 2018) that stresses the retention of male control despite the lifting of the absolute ban on women driving (and of note, a theme absent from the original Vogue article).

In general, the two natural photographs can be seen as more Heteroglass and subject to interpretation (especially Figure 3). What stands out about figure 2 is the relative normalcy of the image. Without the context of the CNN report, it could be any group of women undertaking football training. Figure 3 (Kottasova & Thornton, 2020) is, in many ways, the most complex. There are multiple vectors of direct gaze towards the floor, and the mix of headgear indicates an Islamic country. However, it is still not obviously

Saudi Arabia. Equally, in both figures, the focus of the subjects is internal and there is no direct interaction with an external observer.

Figure 4 stands out due to the difference between the message intended in the photograph and the more complex reporting in the wider article. The intent is to stress freedom and the lifting of restrictions, with the subject gazing directly at the camera. The context provided by the wider article becomes critical to any understanding of the range of meanings. To a large extent, this is an instance where observers will identify what fits their prior assumptions. Thus, the actual semiotic make-up of the image is secondary.

The two images from Human Rights Watch clearly depict a sense of grief, loss, and lack of control. Conversely, the two images from the New York Times protray male control, which may either be benevolent or indicate that restrictions can still be imposed. In this sense, the wider context is important but may be less critical for interpreting an image compared to the three photographs.

In terms of resemiosis, prior beliefs may be applied to the photograph alone. Nonetheless, in most cases, the intent of the creator, the reporter, and to some extent the observer can only be derived from the setting of the image. This is perhaps more important the more complex an image becomes. Even with the New York Times discussion, crucial information is lacking. Is the coach angry with her team – a possible interpretation given the relative eye vectors? Is she simply trying to explain something and downward gaze becomes indicative, perhaps of concentration? Equally, this could be considered perfectly normal. Different football coaches use different motivational techniques and the key message is that some women, at least in Saudi Arabia, can now take part in public, professional sport.

Conclusion

This paper supports the view that the analysis of images is dependent on a three-stage process. This begins with the construction of the image, particularly examining how participants interact both within the image and with a viewer. Building on this analysis is the additional context provided by, for example, the surrounding news item (or even just the title and knowledge of the publication). However, the process of resemiosis remains important, albeit more judgemental. The extent to which the recent changes in Saudi Arabia represent a fundamental shift in women's rights is contested and it is unsurprising that the various images are all open to multiple interpretations, mainly framed by a prior belief that the changes are profound or essentially cosmetic.

There is a relative split in the images. Figures 2 and 3 can be seen as naturalistic photographs. They may have been posed or carefully chosen, but they show individuals carrying out actions other than seeking to engage with

a later viewer. On the other hand, Figure 4, even if it is a photograph, is clearly constructed to present a clear image and understanding of the role of women (in this case, that they can indeed now drive in Saudi Arabia). As might be expected, cartoon images are not ambiguous. However, they are drawn and placed in a context to make a particular point.

The importance of this distinction is that in the first images, the viewer is allowed to make their own interpretation. This is derived from their prior understanding as well as the presented image. Nonetheless, resemiosis is an important part to the meaning making of the observer. The final photograph and four cartoons are created to invoke a particular interpretation. This might not always be successful,, as seen in the contested Vogue cover. However, the aim is to ultimately guide the viewer towards a conclusion. The two images in Figure 5 are openly designed to emphasise aspects of Saudi society where women are denied agency. Conversely, the images in Figure 6 reflect the degree of control that still exists, where women are permitted to drive but require approval from their male guardians. Essentially, there is a clear intent to limit the role resemiosis can play in the observer's meaning making. The construction of the image directs the viewer towards a conclusion.
Thus, it is essential to study an image in terms of its internal semiotic modes: how it is built up, how it demands attention from the observer, and in some situations, this might suffice to complete the process of moving from the image to interpretation. In many cases, accessing secondary contextual information is also necessary, even if all this comprises the article headline.

This study suggests that resemiosis is not only a complex, essentially personal process, but its role in meaning making can be circumscribed by image composition and role. The more an image is composed to convey a particular meaning, the more the intention is to reduce the role of resemiosis in creating alternative interpretations. As seen with the Vogue cover, while this may be the intention, it is not always successful. For various reasons, the photograph became contested not in terms of its intended message, but for the validity of that message. In other words, the clarity of the intent in terms of meaning making was clear, but it still became contested due to alternative frames of understanding the subject matter.

Therefore, there is a need for further research in fields of contested meaning making and image composition. Such studies need to take full account of the semiotic modes used and their combination (intersemiosis). Additionally, it is important to consider the extent to which multiple interpretations are invited (or at least accepted) or if the intention is to lead the viewer to a certain understanding. In the latter case, an overlooked complexity arises when at least some viewers reject the desired framing and instead impose their own interpretations.

Data Availibility: All the data are included in the content of the paper.

Conflict of Interest: The authors reported no conflict of interest.

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