

Research Article

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Representing Gender: Visual Literacy Instruction in the Academic Library

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Abstract: Contemporary society is dominated by visual communication, yet visual literacy is a learned skill that requires training. Gender issues, particularly the subjects of gender diversity and power struggles, are deeply pertinent to today's visual culture. The critical consumption of information has long been taught in libraries, though instruction has typically prioritized text-based sources. However, visual literacy instruction has the capacity to provoke critical inquiry into issues of gender, race, social class, and ethnicity. As institutions that promote social justice, libraries can help improve diversity and inclusion in their communities through teaching visual literacy skills at all levels. Critical visual literacy instruction can also help academic libraries advance student scholarship, which can only be achieved if they are literate in all forms of knowledge production.

Keywords: Image research, gender diversity, library instruction, visual culture, library neutrality

1 Introduction

Today's academic library must not limit itself to text-based information literacy instruction, given how media and other graphic materials are now an accepted (if not fundamental part) of scholarly works. Traditional information literacy has prioritized literary research methodologies, typically reserving only a small token to image searching that rarely delves into the act of critical thinking. Due to advances in new media technologies, including digital photography, internet access, and social media apps like *Instagram*, visual communication is ubiquitous in contemporary society. Academic libraries in particular, I will argue, have an important role to play in educating students - and teaching faculty - on image analysis, and the ways in which visual content can be used to provide proof or corroborate an argument. As institutions known to identify with missions of social justice (IFLA, 2018), equity, diversity and inclusiveness (EAD), gender issues, libraries would benefit immensely from visual literacy instruction. This article, therefore, aims to discuss gender representation as a component of visual literacy and advocate for its inclusion in current library curricula.

In Bamford's *The Visual Literacy White Paper*, though sponsored by *Adobe Systems*, validly champions visual education in today's world "the proliferation of images means that visual literacy is now crucial for obtaining information, constructing knowledge and building successful learning outcomes" (2003, p. 2). In addition to reading images, Czaran, Wolski, and Richardson, insist academic researchers must know how to use visual sources to engage their audience with more than just dry textual stimulus (2017). This is particularly true when presenting information to a non-specialist audience. As Berger, described in his seminal work *Ways of Seeing*, "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can

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speak" (1977, p. 7). Likewise, Drucker discusses how vision was ranked the highest of senses by our ancient ancestors (2014, p. 21). Thus, if as viewers we are to value images and other graphic media as vessels of knowledge production, then the ability to "read" them is critical.

2 Gender Defined and Gender Issues

In contemporary Western society, issues of gender are often disregarded by those under the false impression that equality has been reached, and misrepresentation is something of the past. Visual culture contributes to this misconception for visual media have the power to mislead and manipulate audiences - this is a frightening thought - given, the sheer number of images we consume on a day-to-day basis. Gender issues come in many guises as this article will demonstrate. However, to start we must attempt to clarify the terms "gender", "sex", and "sexuality". Becoming aware of these distinct terms is key to understanding the scope of gender diversity (such labels as transgender or non-binary) as well as understanding preconceptions about gender roles. According to the World Health Organization, "Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men;" to define further, gender is an identity, be it -- male, female, gender neutral, or another label -- that is not prescribed or restrained by biological or physical characteristics (2017). And while, as Fox highlights, we now have social media platforms like *Facebook* offering a "custom" gender option, this freedom of expression is far from the norm in offline life (2014). In Gender and the Media, Richardson and Wearing assert that gender is cultural, which "refers to masculinity and femininity and describes learned patterns of behavior or performance" (2014, p. 1). To be sure, visual culture is part of these so-called learned patterns of behavior.

Sex assigned at birth, conversely, is considered purely biological: male/female. While, the term sexuality results in such familiar labels as: homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and asexual. Both sex and sexuality are independent of gender. Issues of gender labels, parallel with race insofar as Dyer's argument about whiteness "there is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human' (Dyer, 1997, p.2). In varying degrees, the same can be said of the identities of women or LGBTQ people as groups outside the dominant power. The visual aspect of these terms, like their text-based counterparts contribute to negative stereotypes, otherness, and perhaps the most harmful of all underrepresentation. Another angle to consider, is indigenous concepts of gender identity tend to be far more open to concepts of duality than in Western culture. Certain Native American communities believe in the "Two Spirit," someone who was born with as Shepard and May, describe "both masculine and female spirits" (2013, p. 262). Similarly, in Samoa there is a third gender known as *fa'afafine* that are born male with feminine personality traits (Schmidt, 2003, p. 417). While it may be unrealistic to assume Westerners will embrace an "outsider" culture's concepts of gender due to the fact that these concepts were in many cases erased through colonization. Exposure to these alternative viewpoints may engender greater acceptance.

3 Visual Culture

The growing interest in studying visual culture often within an interdisciplinary context, validates Mayer and Goldenstein's statement that "as visual culture expands and becomes more complex, universities should offer introductory courses that require specific visual competencies and sets of visual knowledge production..." (2009, p.16). In an article discussing our contemporary image saturated society, and the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, Brown, Bussert, Hattwig, and Medaille suggest "this participation in a highly visual culture does not in itself prepare [students] to engage critically and effectively with images and media in an academic environment" (2016, p. 60). This is to say, often students and teaching faculty take visual literacy for granted, assuming it is an innate skill not requiring special training. In addition, as electronic modes of communication (emails and texts) increase, it has become more common to use emoji to disambiguate meaning (Rodrigues, 2018). Similarly, traditional phone conversations are being superseded by such face-to-face video interactions as Skype and Facetime. Even so, both emoji and faceto-face communication still suffer from misreadings as do their textual or audio counterparts. According to Averginon, living in a visual culture "influences enormously our attitudes, beliefs, values, and general life-style" (Averginon, 2009, p. 28). Therefore, library instruction must include lessons devoted to visual forms of knowledge production.

Having qualified the terms gender, sex, and established the term "visual culture," we can now investigate gender related issues, especially difficulties surrounding gender roles and gender diversity. Women in empowerment movements throughout history challenged their allotted gender roles, lack of autonomy, unequal pay, and sexual harassment. Looking back through history, starting with primitive cave paintings, to visual and plastic arts, followed by photography, printing presses, film media, and finally computer technologies; visual materials can promote or aggravate discrimination. The way women and other marginalized groups are depicted is crucial to gaining equality, as Cocca states:

But if, over and over in a variety of media, we see women represented only a fraction as often as men; if we see a woman portrayed as a leader, a mentor, a professional; if we see women written and drawn and acted as only supportive, interested in their own looks and in romance, in need of rescue, and emotional; and if we never see women as heroes, what happens to our imagination for ourselves and our world? And if we do see female heroes, but those heroes are almost never people of color, people with disabilities, people who identify as gender-fluid or transgender or queer, what happens to our imagination for ourselves and our world? (2016, p. 4)

Gender issues affecting women in visual culture are not limited to privileged white, cisgender females, thus, an important part of teaching information literacies is acknowledging your own biases. By identifying your personal "context" or background, such factors as nationality, gender, sexuality, generation, class, and political leaning, will make you a more conscious observer. We are drawn to look for that which resonates with us as a viewer (as if on autopilot mode), and consequently do not observe the misrepresentation or exclusion of oppressed groups.

Female superhero characters to this day are represented in a highly sexualized fashion and number far less than their male counterparts. Although, Weida counters "is it not female superheroes, but male ones whose appearances consistently transgress gender codes: for they juxtapose muscular bodies with flamboyant, colorful, and form-fitting attire usually more typical of feminine fashion" (2011, p.8). The visually illiterate consumer passively accepts this as the status quo. In the nineteenth century the first wave of feminism began, known for the women's suffrage movement and demands for equal property rights (Lai, 2009). In the 1960s emerged the second wave of feminism, a time devoted to such issues as employment equality, sexuality, and reproductive rights. It was during the second feminist wave that antidotes to male superheroes appeared, followed by the 1990s third wave feminism which embraced diversity and individualism, and finally the fourth wave feminism known best for equal pay and the "me too" movement. Most notably, the problem with the second wave in uniting women "in turn marginalized other women, including lesbians, women of color, and working-class women," (Lai, 2009, p.59). McCluskey, refers to this issue as the "voice-over" by white feminists, which "operates as a virtual hegemonic discourse, containing or ignoring differences based on race or class" (1994, p. 107).

The second wave of feminism produced female superheroes including Wonder Woman, Bat Girl, and Princess Leia. During the third wave of feminism, the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* came out. The heroine (Buffy) is physically strong like her second wave counterparts and sends a similarly subversive message that females can be heroes too (Cocca, 2016). The show's creator, Joss Whedon, explains that his motivation for developing the show's main character was to avenge the token blonde female that dies in most scary films (as cited in Cocca, 2016, p. 158). Thus the typical sexy, god-like female superhero, was replaced with a more relatable (and to a lesser extent sexualized), goofy "girl-next-door" who sports regular clothes, and does her homework (Cocca, 2016). More importantly, Buffy's friend Willow subverts comic book tropes as an intelligent lesbian woman who also identifies as pagan (Weida, 2011).

Just as female superheroes have been used as a means to uphold a patriarchal society; popular music videos (country, rock, hip-hop) legitimize the male gaze. Mainstream hip-hop's worldwide popularity, particularly amongst juvenile and college aged students is inundated with powerful messages of male chauvinism. Only so many can be written off as artistry, or merely a bit of fun, for the content has featured

sexist, homophobic behavior, and the objectification of women. A recent example that exemplifies these characteristics is Snoop Dogg's music video Moment I Feared featuring Rick Rock, which includes a woman in a red bathing suit dancing erotically and a cross-dressing man to be ridiculed (Worldstarhiphop, 2017).

The visual culture of hip-hop is reflected in fashion and performance and holds significant influence over African-American teen's constructions of black identity (Chung, 2007). As with other music genres, these depictions of underdressed women shown performing erotic dance moves do nothing to empower their female viewers, nor do they encourage their male audience to respect women. When white male viewers watch hip-hop music videos, it reinstate notions held during slavery as described by professor Audrey McCluskey, "Black women's bodies, historically, have been sites of sexual commodification and spectacle in the white mind," (as cited in Chung, 2007, p. 35). Hence, this objectification of women is not simply a gender issue, but one of racial bias.

An exception to the norm is social media commentator Afropunk. Their online platform offers an alternative view to stereotypes of black culture and embraces gender-fluid identities. Featuring photography from music festivals and other public events, Afropunk showcases attendees with natural hair, androgynous outfits, and expressive body paint (Zamamdoda, 2018). A dialog confronting misogynistic representations of women have been contested by female film characters. In the film Set it Off (1996), Queen Latifali's character "Cleo" is imagined as a masculine female lesbian, a rare sight during the 1990s wave of what Keeling (2003) describes as ghettocentric action films. However, certain checks and balances were put in place to help the audience "tolerate" the character of Cleo, namely her attractive and highly feminine lover (Keeling, 2003). Another example is the musician M.I.A., whose single Bad Girls (Mantangi, 2013) features Arab women performing stunts in cars during a time when it was illegal for women to drive in Saudi Arabia (Noisey, 2012). This video not only depicts women as strong and powerful, but the musician has used their fame to share these problems with a wider audience.

A particular sub-genre within country music called bro-country (and known to collaborate with hip-hop artists or appropriate from), also reinforces hegemonic masculinity through their music videos and album covers (Fox, 2017). Popular key players being Kenny Chesney and the Florida Georgia Line, who depict women in overtly sexual ways aided by camera shots that zoom in on female anatomy. As noted by Berger, the male gaze is very different to that of the female "Women watch themselves being looked at... Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (1973, p. 47). Watching these videos without sound, the conventional messages of sweet, soft femininity and rugged, dominant masculinity, are clearly discernible. It is still rare, on the other hand, to break through mainstream music with videos that subvert social norms, as seen in Janelle Monae and Erykah Badu's single "Q.U.E.E.N." (Atlantic Records, 2013). The video "Q.U.E.E.N." is set in a futuristic exhibition space that parodies the "objectification of black bodies" (Aghoro, N., p.332, 2018), while affirming female independence with accompanying lyrics like "add us to your equations, but never make us equal," (Atlantic Records, 2013). Until more artists who identify as LGBTQ or other marginalized groups, receive greater representation from mainstream media, library instruction can only reflect on issues of inclusiveness and the lack thereof.

Perhaps the most persuasive and insidious of all visual culture is advertising, given its desire to make money at all costs. Gender roles have always been demarcated when selling products, and can differ widely depending on who the intended audience is. For instance, an advertisement played during a television show popular with heterosexual males will differ widely from that in a magazine intended for female readership (Clarke, Currey, 1983). In the men's magazine Gentlemen's Quarterly (GQ), frequent, images promoting a sophisticated male lifestyle, and includes articles which profile both successful men and women. Yet, their advertising campaigns still present women in gendered stereotypes, such as air hostess. In the travel section of GQ's website, the header image is an animated scene depicting two male passengers together on a plane nudging arms, while in the background a woman rolls her eyes, dressed as an air hostess (Conde Nast, 2018). To be sure, an image such as this could be interpreted many ways, for example, it could be viewed as a gay couple on a trip, but why is the woman rolling her eyes? For a female viewer critiquing the image it may appear as two men committing sexual harassment on the attractive female air hostess. Moreover, this is not to imply there is anything wrong with being an air hostess, but by increasing depictions of women in power (perhaps the woman could have been dressed as a pilot) is an important step to equality.

Meanwhile, the cover pages of female centric publication *Good Housekeeping* leans towards wholesome pictures of modestly dressed women often displaying some sort of hostess prop (Hearst Magazine, 2017). An example of a sexualized image is tennis champion Serena Williams' cover shot for *Sports Illustrated* (Tsai, 2015), here she is seductively posed, muscles airbrushed out, wearing only stilettos and a lacy, black leotard. It was a controversial image at the time, and one William's actually choose to portray, nonetheless it received criticism for being too sexy. William's *Sports Illustrated* cover is in striking contrast to a Wilson Tennis ball advertisement that features her now clothed in sports gear, muscles rippling and racquet launched (2013). Changes are being made in some areas of marketing including a jeweler's wedding ring commercial showing a lesbian couple both dressed in wedding dresses and embracing - the caption "Let's both wear white" (Zimmerman, 2013). Understanding the history of advertising emphasizes the evolving path it is on while demonstrating new subtle ways of supporting heteronormative ideals.

In contemporary society, visual communication in the field of artistic production has often covered gender issues. The old proverb "seeing is believing" has never been truer, and semiotics can help us understand our interpretations of images (Gaines, 2010). Semiotics refers to the study of signs, a fundamental part of "reading" images. Since their inception, the fine arts and art history, have looked critically at and contextualized visual materials. Whether it is studying the male gaze during the Italian Renaissance, interpreting Robert Mapplethorpe's nude photographs of gay men, or examining feminist works by the Gorilla Girls, rather than taking things at face value we engage in critical thinking. Indeed, teaching visual literacy with mass media alone is not enough, and the benefits for using artwork in the classroom is manifold. Conversely, as Heise argues, visual culture is emerging as the newest canon of art (2004). Art history faculty, more and more often, are listing visual culture as one of their specializations. As Oscar Wilde wrote in his 1889 essay *The Decay of Lying*, "Life imitates art, far more than art imitates life" (1913, p. 1). Replace Wilde's "art" with "visual culture" and it equates to today's high level of influence that images have on the ways in which society constructs meaning. Indeed, both art and visual culture are inherently linked, exposing our preconceptions and dominant views.

4 Visual Literacy

Visual literacy and related terms such as media literacy, digital literacy, multimodal literacy, and metaliteracy, have many definitions (Hattwig, Bussert, Medaille, & Burgess, 2013). Media literacy and visual literacy do overlap, yet as Chauvin explains "the major difference being media literacy's focus on the mass media and visual literacy's focus on all media" (2003, p. 124). The International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) does not favor one definition, instead acknowledging how the many discipline specific versions make it difficult to find a unanimous statement (2012). The ACRL's first instance of the *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (the second installment is currently underway to match the ACRL's 2016 *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*) includes seven components each with unique learning outcomes. According, to their current definition:

"Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy enables a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture." (ACRL, 2011)

The ACRL's 2016 Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education consists of the following frames:

- 1. Authority is constructed and contextual.
- 2. Information creation as a process.
- 3. Information has value.
- 4. Research as inquiry.
- 5. Scholarship as conversation.
- 6. Searching as strategic exploration.

Similarly, the ACRL's 2011 Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education include seven standards based on the Framework. The following all begin with "the visually literate student":

- Determines the nature and extent of the visual materials needed.
- 2. Finds and accesses needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently.
- 3. Interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media.
- 4. Evaluates the effectiveness and reliability of images as visual communications.
- 5. Uses images and visual media effectively.
- Designs and creates meaningful images and visual media. 6.
- 7. Understands many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media and accesses and uses visual materials ethically.

Key to these Visual Literacy standards is the act of critical thinking (interprets and analyzes), which may require further research into an image to contextualize the authority that it embodies. For without these cognitive tools, we are merely sponges of information and not creators of knowledge. This list of competencies put forth by the Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education includes distinct skills for finding and interpreting images, and ways to incorporate visual materials into academic work. While the much broader Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education is explored through the specific learning outcomes within the seven Visual Literacy Standards. By recognizing, as Harris puts it, that "these activities overlap and blur during the research process, the relationship between information literacy and visual literacy becomes intertwined," more librarians will embrace image learning activities (2010). One must not then assume, however, that these literacies should merge into shared learning outcomes for their skills are indeed distinct (Harris, 2010).

5 Role of Libraries

Why do libraries have a stake to claim in matters of gender and visual literacy? As already noted, gender issues are affected both positively and negatively by visual culture. The subject of gender involves issues to do with diversity and inclusion, attributes that align with a library's' mission as a social justice institution (IFLA Blog, 2018). Many colleges today, require students take one or more courses that include diversity and inclusion content. To complement these efforts, librarians must be cognizant of diversity and inclusion topics both in literature and visual sources. Diversity in institutional life, cautions Sara Ahmed, can merely be a documented goal that never results in change (Ahmed, 2012). Actions are what is required, for example, offering themed information literacy workshops and in-class instruction on such issues as gender identity and sexual discrimination.

In the academic library context, leveraging library instruction with faculty's already limited class time can be quite an obstacle. It may require starting small by persuading just one faculty member to participate in a test run. In Milbourn's Art Documentation article humanities professor W.J.T. Mitchell, describes a pictorial-turn as the "shift from a reliance on words to an emphasis on images that typically follows new image reproduction technologies" (2013, p. 275). Librarians must build relationships with faculty to successfully advocate for the importance of the various information literacy workshops. When library instruction is made compulsory or there is the offer of extra credit, students will come. When this is not possible, we need to get creative with games and snacks to entice students.

Increasingly, college students and academics are using visual resources in their teaching, assignments, and scholarship respectively. Just as text-based information literacy features strategies for applying search terms and filters into an online catalog or database, so do image repositories, for example, ArtStor, Google Images, and Europeana. The seemingly simple act of searching for images is fraught with its own gender discrimination, which is blatantly evident when using public search engines, namely Google. To demonstrate this bias, Noble reveals screenshots from searching on the term 'black girls' that retrieve sexualized images, while "professor style" returns images of white men in suits (2018). As more and more students prefer to use online tools outside the realm of academic libraries, librarians and teaching faculty

must push for visual literacy instruction in all its facets. Nelson argues that visual literacy instruction is not a librarian's prerogative due to unique ways it must be applied to different disciplines (2004). As for Beatty, who agrees with Nelson to a point "some librarians do not have the background to conduct visual contextual image analysis" (2013, p. 39). This argument, however, simply negates any form of information literacy instruction, asserting that subjects are so specialized they can only be carried out by teaching faculty in the classroom. To be sure, not all librarians leave library and information science schools with any training in visual literacy instruction, wherein part of the problem lies (Beaudoin, 2016).

Despite Nelson's dismissal of librarians teaching the analysis and critical thinking aspects of visual literacy this article has focused on those very skills as they relate to gender issues. In the context of visual literacy, another term for critical thinking is what Appleton, Montero, and Jones refer to as "cognitive visual literacy" (2017, p. 152). These skills are reflected in specific ACRL *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education's* performance indicators, including standard three: "the visually literate student identifies information relevant to an image's meaning, [...] situates an image in its cultural, social, and historical contexts, [and] ... the visually literate student identifies the physical, technical, and design components of an image." Likewise, the performance indicators in standards four and seven relate to many of the competencies I discuss.

Practical exercises are key to successful learning outcomes, and instruction should involve conversations on the similarities and differences in representing gender. By using examples of art, advertising, popular culture, and other sorts of visual aids, students start to recognize gender constructs. Typically, students start the process by stating what they see (color, tree, girl), which is followed by identifying possible narratives through interactions between the things they see, then culminating in the articulation of these ideas and an awareness of techniques or manipulations present (Shivers, Levenson, & Tan, 2017).

Analysis of images is heavily based on asking questions that go far beyond what is depicted (Hollman, 2013). Students need encouragement to dig beyond the surface of images. Educators can model critical thinking through questions that challenge hidden assumptions, particularly those dealing with gender identity and gender roles. In addition to what is presented, we need to be asking what is missing. What issues are being raised or ignored? What influence does this image hold (documentary photography in *Time* magazine or popular social media blogger)? Who created or produced these images and for what audience? Are there other possible interpretations one could take from this image? And finally, what does this image provide that text does not? Questions such as these are devised to train students in meaning making so to move away from personal subjective comments. This was the experience Palmer had in a first year seminar class "students simply were not prepared to discuss art or images in the ways they might text, that is, critically" (2015, p. 20).

Most of the case studies surrounding gender and visual literacy come from teaching faculty rather than librarians, but they are informative for library instruction nonetheless. According to Schoen's (2015) article "Teaching Visual Literacy Skills in a One-Shot Session," the following higher education institutions are just some of the growing number of colleges with courses devoted to visual literacy: Brown University, University of California (Santa Barbara), the University of Oregon, the American University (Washington D.C.), Northern Illinois University, Dominican University, and the University of Michigan. In an introduction to Gender and Women's studies class, Hart, found students falling into the trap of "transnational visualities" whereby an "exotic" photograph of a woman wearing a veil immediately drew conclusions of oppression (2016, p. 36). Undoubtedly, this interpretation stemmed from "colonial epistemologies, the visibility of women is equated with freedom" (Hart, 2016, p. 36), as withheld by Western ideals. For librarians to effectively combat this in their visual literacy instruction sessions, they need advanced notice of discipline specific concepts typically found in course curriculums. Training and practical applications of visual literacy instruction is not hard to find, as for now the greatest obstacle is convincing other librarians of its importance.

5.1 Neutrality in the Library

The issue of gender is not an objective or neutral topic for a library, that is, a public space with patrons belonging to different faiths, politics, and social ideologies. Under the American Library Association's (ALA) code of ethics are eight guiding principles of fairly broad persuasion. The language of these statements employ terms and phrases like "unbiased"; "resist all efforts to censor library resources"; "we distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties," which insinuates unrealistic claims of neutrality (ALA, 2018). While it is important to be aware of your biases, pure impartiality is impossible to achieve, hence, the debates about neutrality in the library. Considering our mission of social justice, a workshop offered on visual culture and gender diversity aimed to help improve inclusivity and encourage empathy could be provoking. For instance, a conservative person might feel the library is taking sides and is promoting a liberal agenda.

When discussing the neutrality of libraries, Drabinski emphasized the environment's materiality and the endless choices librarians are constantly making (2018). As an example, Drabinski states "Books about reparative therapy for gay people can be simply another view if yours is not the body and mind those authors seek to destroy" (2018). While this relates to a library's collection, the effects of seeing these books on library shelves is harmful to those it relates to, and what's more can empower oppressors to discriminate. Correspondingly, the complete omission of marginalized groups from a library's holdings is equally damaging.

To counteract this, library images produced in brochures, websites, newsletters and other media can help promote gender diversity through representation. This is echoed by Heinrich who claims "modeling visual literacy skills consistently in external communications [...] shows patrons and students that visual literacy is a valuable and important concept, and provides concrete examples to use when at the reference desk or in the classroom," (2014, p. 16). Anti-oppressive pedagogy proponent Kumashiro (2000) cautions that ignoring diversity in the classroom through the illusion of neutrality does not help marginalized students. It is far better through acknowledgement to embrace and empower those who are underprivileged (whether by gender, ethnicity, or faith), so to lessen feelings of alienation.

6 Conclusion

This article makes the case that libraries as social justice institutions can foster greater diversity and inclusion through visual literacy instruction. Contemporary society is defined by visual culture, hence, images are now the most dominant and influential method of communication. To this day, information literacy continues to favor text-based instruction and subsequently students and other library patrons do not have the critical skills required to interpret visual materials. In the academic context, librarians must advocate for visual literacy instruction with their teaching faculty to ensure participation. Gender diversity, sexual orientation, sex discrimination, equality, power struggles, and other points of conflict are perpetuated in popular culture. More recently, images that challenge the status quo are beginning to appear as well as greater representation of once ignored minorities. By educating students in analysis and critical thinking they become not only better scholars, but can produce far more engaging and digestible research. The term visual literacy is a contested one, and many argue definitions should be customized to specific subject disciplines. However, the basic principles (such as those listed in the ACRL framework and standards) hold true and should be engaged when using images and other visual resources.

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