Aesthetic Indices in Newspaper Sports Reporting

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Abstract: Apart from the overall design of a newspaper page, there are specific aesthetic issues that need to be taken into consideration while reporting sports for the masses. Some of those specific aesthetic issues are textual and non-textual. This article, therefore, examines those relevant aesthetic and indices that should be considered in newspaper sports reporting. It observes that many newspapers, particularly in Nigeria, appear not to take interest in applying certain textual and non-textual aesthetic principles that would make sports reporting a more enjoyable experience to readers. Accordingly, the article identifies and exemplifies certain newspaper sports reporting aesthetic indices. It concludes that with closer attention to the application of the identified aesthetic indices, newspaper sports reporting could be a more rewarding experience to publishers of sports news and their readers.

Keywords: Sportainment, Aesthetic Experience, Aesthetic Manipulation, Aesthetic Elements, Print Media Aesthetics, Sports News, Sports Photograph, Rhythm, Empathy, Authority.

1. Introduction

Depending on how it is presented, sports news is one of the contents that attract readership to newspapers. Because of the drama associated with it and its ability to fight boredom, sports news is very popular among the youths, who, observably, constitute bulk of readers of newspapers. It was sports pages that helped in popularizing Nigeria’s first news tabloid, \textit{Iwe Irohin}, written in Yoruba Language and published by a Presbyterian missionary, Henry Townsend, in 1859. Even though much of the sports news presented in \textit{Iwe Irohin}, and such other olden day newspapers, might not have been aesthetically minded, the popularity enjoyed by sporting activities, generally, made such pages attractive as concerned readers apparently ignored aesthetic issues and digested the sports stories. Usually carried on the back pages, sport news in those days could have attracted readers of that time to the newspaper and this enhanced the popularity of the nation’s maiden news tabloid. History has it that many young men, especially school leavers, habitually gathered themselves in small groups, reading, debating and analysing sport reports of interest more than they did on hard political and economic news of that time. They did this, no matter how poorly designed the pages were. This interest in sports news therefore must have encouraged Nigerian journalists of that time to develop tremendous interest and take to sports reporting to be relevant.

Today, the story is not different. A look at many Nigerian print media reveals that there is almost no edition of any newspaper or magazine that is without sports reports. Interest in sports reporting is so great in the country that even trade or house journals and other periodicals create specific pages for sports news and features. Many of such publishers do not feel they have published anything if they do not highlight certain developments in sports around their environments.

Also, to demonstrate the importance of sports reporting, there are newspapers that are specifically published for sports in the country, e. g., \textit{Sporting Life}, \textit{Complete Sport}, and \textit{Sporting Sun}. In this case, such publications carry sport news of every kind and are competing favourably with newspapers that carry hard news as their major contents. In today’s world where Europe is the star attraction in sports development, there are situations where football in particular appears to have taken over the sports arena in newspapers. Again, examples can be found in \textit{Sporting Life}, \textit{Complete Sport}, and \textit{Sporting Sun}, where only a small percentage of the pages are devoted to other sports, hence the reason why this article pays special attention to football. Taking cognizance of the necessity for quality newspaper page design, this discourse identifies and discusses certain textual and non-textual aesthetic elements, which, if blended with a good page design, could enhance better appreciation of sports contents in newspapers.
2. Aesthetics/Aesthetic Experience and Relevance to Sports Reporting

To persons with an average literary background, aesthetics as a concept is mainly about beauty, especially the physical beauty of an object as seen with the human eye. But aesthetics goes beyond the beauty seen with the eye only. It is rather the beauty perceived from all the human sense organs – sense of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. This means that besides, what is seen with the eye, there is beauty in what is smelled with the nose, touched with hands, tasted with the tongue, and heard with the ear. These give rise to aesthetic feeling or experience. As corroborated by Akpan (1987), an aesthetic experience is a feeling of satisfaction or pleasure produced when an individual comes in contact with a work of art. It is the empathy that someone has when he exposes himself to a work of art such as painting or media writing simply because the artist (the painter and writer) has been able to employ or manipulate relevant artistic or aesthetic principles of production to bear. Similarly, it is that feeling that makes someone who drinks a typical palm wine say a big thank you to a palm wine tapper after taking a deep satisfactory gulp of wine prepared by the tapper. In expressing his satisfactory feeling about the sweetness of the wine, he tells the tapper thank you very much. Even though palm wine is prepared with certain chemical substances, it takes the creativity of the palm wine tapper to mix the natural ingredients to produce a feeling of enjoyment expressed by the drinker. This creativity is synonymous with art. It is the same feeling that may be expressed by another person who eats well prepared afang soup or edikang ikong.

In the case of print media and of course sports reporting, aesthetics or aesthetic experience can be seen in the newspaper’s content and how this content makes a reader enjoy and prefer that newspaper to another (Udoh and Obot, 2013). The content can be the news or language used by the newspaper in reporting. It can also be the photographs used, or the overall make-up elements of the newspaper. It is the feeling of satisfaction that a reader experiences when reading a piece of report in the newspaper. One of such reports, in the context of this article, is sports (Udoh and Obot, 2013).

Many people are exposed to newspaper contents generally because they have a need for the contents, especially the news contents of the papers. Often, they surf their way through such newspapers irrespective of how the news stories are assembled. In Nigeria, this can be demonstrated at certain newspaper stands in State capitals in particular, where some school leavers are observed gathering around a vendor, just to have a glimpse at the latest news, especially sports news of the day. But this may not always be the case as there are certain newspaper readers who may not actually buy or access newspapers because such papers carry news. Rather, such readers prefer certain newspapers to the other mainly because some newspapers are more beautifully designed or edited than the other. They prefer newspaper-A to newspaper-B because, perhaps, the former takes readers’ interest into consideration while writing and editing its news; while the latter may, to them, not consider readers’ interest at all. This is where aesthetics comes in.

3. Print Media Sports Reporting and Aesthetic Challenges

Until recently, the concept and application of media aesthetics, particularly at the local level, had been a matter for the broadcast media, (Akpan, 1987). At the global level, serious interest in broadcast media aesthetics came with a foremost television scholar, researcher and aesthetician, Zettl (2005), who was one of the scholars to identify what is today widely accepted as aesthetic elements in television production. Zettl in his series of works on media aesthetics revolves round television aesthetics. As a broadcast scholar, he rarely mentions print media aesthetics, thus stressing the need for more works in print media aesthetics. However, at the local level, the concept and application of modern media aesthetics has been promoted by some Nigerian scholars, particularly Akpan (1987) who, as a student of Zettl, was interested in television production. Zettl’s works on media arts and aesthetics identify little or no elements of print media aesthetics. As may have been covered in Zettl’s and Akpan’s views, sports reporting for the dramatic media like television can be made more interesting through proper manipulation of certain aesthetic elements, which should in turn give pleasure to the audience. These elements, namely, light, sound, motion, and time are some of the aesthetic indices for broadcast sports reporting or broadcasting generally identified by Zettl (2005).

While a few Nigerians may have done something in the general area of print media aesthetics; what they have done is, observably, not enough, especially in the area of sports reporting. Observation reveals that many local newspapers in Nigeria that carry sport news assign such pages to incapable hands and the result is observed in the way sport stories are poorly presented. It is common to observe mechanical
inaccuracies, poor punctuations, poor register, noisy photographs, and such other inadequacies that impede communication with the masses. Sports reporting for the print media should be capable of entertaining the audience in a special way and take them to a certain level of satisfaction. This entertainment aspect comes with proper manipulation of certain production elements aimed at relaxing the mind of the reader for better understanding. While the manipulation of these elements may be one task in the dramatic media, it is a different task when it comes to the production of the same sports story in a newspaper or magazine. This is partly because the production elements needed to put together an interesting sports news package for newspapers especially an international newspaper, require a special level of lexical and graphic intelligence requiring more carefulness.

For instance, while an average sports producer for television requires light, sound, colour and motion and sometimes voice-over as some of his aesthetic requirements for the subjects and objects of news, a sport writer for a newspaper may not require the same type of light to make the readers understand him. He rather requires textual light, so to say! Textual light, here, has to do with the white space that contrast printed words from other page elements. What this sums up to is that, because of the un-dramatic nature of the print media, a newspaper sports writer or editor requires a relatively different set of aesthetic principles which he must manipulate effectively before he can hold the attention of his readers.

On the issue of drama, newspaper in its hardcopy, carries static photographs and other graphic materials, shows no motion, and no practical action. How then can sports writers and editors working for newspapers dramatize static photographs? So, for the sports writer or editor to make his reader see the drama and stay glued to the sport pages, he needs to go extra miles. He really needs to look for ways of stringing production elements together for a production that, according to Akpan (1987), would hit the audience at the midriff and yank him by the hair of his head, thus making such an audience have an aesthetic experience. This is where identification of aesthetic indices of newspaper sports reporting begins.

4. Aesthetic Indices in Newspaper Sports Reporting

Sport reporting is a serious business and should be seen as such. This means that for a sport writer of today’s digital age to make a name, he must be exposed to certain principles. Whether it is presented as straight news or feature or pictures only, a typical sport presentation in newspapers or magazines should contain certain aesthetic elements that should make the reader stay glued to what is before him. There are specific principles that must be followed while writing and/or editing sports news or features for newspapers and magazines in a developing country such as Nigeria where interest in sports grows by the day. In line with the opinions of Ang (2001), Anim (2003), Batchen (1999), Evans (1984), Ikpe (2000), Kobre (2004), Okoye (2000), and Udoh (2015), the following are the identified textual and graphic aesthetic indices of newspaper sport reporting: sportainment, rhythm, empathy, informality, register, and authority/factuality. Others are: clari-sharpness, magnification, specificity, colour, mood and completeness.

4.1. Sportainment

This is a coinage formed from the words, sport and entertainment. It may sound informal but it is a very important aesthetic coinage and element in sport reporting generally. It is even more important in newspaper and general print media sport reporting. This is because apart from health and fitness, a major reason for engaging in sport activities is entertainment. This means any sport activity seeks to entertain its audience. In other words, a sport story or presentation should be the one that causes the reader to jump from his seat or move his hand s or feet! Even when the sport activity has to do with a fight (as in wrestling contest and other physical competitions); the audience will not enjoy the report if the report contains no element or expressions of excitement, leisure and relaxation. For instance, it is better to say: Manchester United fans danced home yesterday as the team walposed their City rival in a friendly encounter. Even where there was a fight somewhere as the match progressed, the element of “dance” will conjure a picture and relax the mind of the reader of the news.

Readers of sports news may not enjoy what they read if their spirit is not lifted to a certain level of entertainment. So, to ensure that the spirit of sportsmanship is lifted and relaxed in the minds of his readers, the sport writer must ensure that he uses the language that entertains the reader and makes him find enjoyment. He must use words that make the reader relaxed while reading his piece. The same thing is applicable when he chooses pictures for his stories. Portraits rarely make impact in sport news. Pictures that actually shows how a goal was scored, a shot was taken, and a dribble was made, speak volumes and
are more entertaining than portraits. When the world class Portuguese footballer, Christiano Ronaldo, was stretchered out of the final of 2016 European Championship due to injury, most foreign broadcast stations showed how Ronaldo actually wept for his country. They kept playing back that aspect of the news. Even though the weeping was pitiful, it was altogether entertaining because of the person who wept – Ronaldo! No word would speak the action better than a good action photograph. Newspapers can do this in their own way by playing up the important aspect of a photograph. It adds to entertainment.

4.2. Rhythm
In its ordinary sense, an activity is said to have a rhythm if it follows a characteristic or particular pattern. For a sports story to command the serious attention of the reader, such a story must be structured in a particular rhythm. Short sentences with repetitions and poetic scent usually sound more rhythmic than formal prose that is long and could contain sentence fragments. The following sentences will convey meaning quickly in sports reporting to any literate or semi-literate reader:

Man United yesterday proved their pundits wrong. They beat their City rival by a lone goal. They needed just three passes. And the game was over.

Although it may not be very professional for a news paragraph to be broken into more than one sentence as shown above, it is excusable in sports reporting because of its entertainment under one. Readers, observably, do not like long boring sentences even in traditional hard news writing and reporting. Just as a footballer strikes the ball with his instep, the writer should write his piece in such a way that the rhythm of the strike is felt by the reader. Similarly, since most sports go with songs, usually rendered by the supporters of such sports, it becomes more appealing when sport writers present their stories in rhythms, which, like a song, can be followed easily by the reader. Of course, since observation has shown that footballers, for instance, play better when they are motivated through songs, as in supporters’ club, the reader of sports stories may read better if such stories are presented as if they were songs. Even the example shown above can be turned into song!

4.3. Empathy
This is the ability of a sports writer to transfer his sincere feeling to his reader. It could be a feeling of joy, hate or indifference about the particular sports event that is reported on. For instance, a football writer who was not satisfied with the officiating of the match that he covered can arouse empathy on his readers when he is specific on the area of poor officiating such that the editor casts the story’s headline in that spirit. Or in the case of a football team that was good in all departments of the match, particularly in possession, the reader of the report would be more empathic if the writer provided him with the match statistics such as percentage of possession, shots at goal, and number of passes made by the winning team. One way of reporting to cause the reader to laugh, cry, jump, sing or dance with a sport writer is by capturing the object of empathy in the story lead and running this thread in the story line. Example:

Statistics shows that Germany scored 90 – 10 percent in possession, but it was France that won the match after all by 2 – 0. What a painful loss for World Champions, Germany!

The same empathy can be demonstrated photographically. Here, the newspaper sports photographer would zero in on the sorrows, regrets and disappointments on the faces of the Germans as soon as the centre referee blew the whistle ending the match.

4.4. Informality
Just as most sporting activities involve competition and, by extension, conflict; the language of sport is relaxed, emotional and informal. What this means is that sport news is best written in everyday English. For instance, contraction of words and question tags (won’t, don’t can’t, didn’t etc) are allowed in sport news writing. In normal news reporting, the reporter uses words commonly used by those he is writing for. He uses the common words like: go, come, stands, sits, opened and closed, can’t, won’t and so on, if the news must make any relative or reasonable impact on the reader. The same principle must be applied in sports news writing, otherwise a reader who is bombarded with strange and technical terminologies will soon drop off because he is not actually finding pleasure in what he is reading.

4.5. Register/Grammaticality
According to Udo (2015) “a register refers to a conventional use of language in relation to a specific context or as associated with a particular field of human experience... this may be occupational e.g. doctors, lawyers, journalists, footballers etc.” Since sport news usually has its own audience, it will be out
of place for the sport writer to manufacture his own conventional language. For his report to be fully assimilated by readers, he must use appropriate word cluster taken from the sport register. Kick off, shot, foul, penalty, set-piece, over-the-bar, off-side, yellow card, red card, woodwork, hitting-the-bar, etc, are some of the terminologies found in sport, particularly football, register. They must be used as the key words and used as frequently and consistently as possible in related sport stories; otherwise the readers would be confused and the result of such lexical confusion can better be imagined.

Similarly, since news is written in English, the convention or rule of grammar must be respected. It would be out of place for a sport writer to disobey known grammatical rules in the pretext of sport writing. The subject of a sentence must for instance agree with the verb of the sentence and vice versa. It is not aesthetic to violate the rule of the grammar with which news is written.

4.6. Authority/Factuality

In a world where everybody appears to be doing one thing or the other in the media, there is that tendency for everybody to act as a sport reporter especially for local newspapers. This ought not to be so. Credibility is the hallmark of reporting. For sport news to be credible, it must be handled by an authority in sport reporting - a capable hand, someone who knows the language of sport, one who masters sport reporting. Apart from this, the name of the newspaper is important in making the reader believe the story. For instance, it is more authoritative, believable and factual for a sports news story to say:

Christiano Ronaldo told Sporting Champion in an exclusive interview that he would not have played international football anymore had Portugal lost the 2016 European League to France. Or Ronaldo told our reporter, Okon Effiong, that....

Facts are sacred; hence for sport news to be interesting, it must be laced with supported facts and figures. Readers will drop a sport newspaper that is either noted for reporting falsehood or whose publisher, writer or editor is not well versed in the art of sport reporting. There is nothing aesthetic about a doubtful and fictitious sport story.

4.7. Clarity/Sharpness

Just as clarity is the first aesthetic field in news writing and reporting (Udoh and Obot, 2013), sharpness remains the first aesthetic field in news photography. In order to command the serious attention of readers and make them satisfied, a sport news photograph must not be noisy. A photograph is noisy if it is in any way blurred or unclear. It is noisy if it carries extraneous features. Extraneous features on a photograph are those features that have nothing to do with the main issue in the news it seeks to tell. Often, such photographs are taken by an unprofessional hand and they oftentimes cause a newspaper reader to be confused as to whose photograph he is viewing on a new page. Naturally, a portrait used to identify a human news object who is an old man must be able to reveal the colour or signs of old age on the face of the newsmaker. In other words, sharp photographs show the “hidden” realities on the object of news. It magnifies and shows reality. There should be no doubt about who is being shown in any news photograph if that photograph is sharp enough. To get this kind of photograph, the cameraman must himself be up-to-date. Whether in colour or in black and white, sharp pictures usually stand out and are bestsellers anywhere. However, no matter how digital a camera is, it would not perform any magic until it is manipulated professionally by a sports photojournalist.

4.8. Magnification

Writing is an art, and one of the functions of an art piece is magnification of experience. For any sport news photograph to be fully appreciated by a reader or viewer, it has to be large or magnified enough. Largeness here is relative. It does not mean that all news photographs have to be large and, perhaps be the same in size. A sport photograph on the front page of a newspaper should not be the same in size with those inside. To be able to sell the newspaper, a front page news photograph or illustration should be easily seen from a relatively long distance. In other words large photographs appear proportionally nearer to the eye than small ones. A photograph should be able to command the serious attention of a newspaper reader.

4.9. Mood

Photographs generally complement or support a textual story. This support also covers the story mood or purpose or theme. The mood field of news photographs requires those who select news photographs to take the situation of the story into consideration. This is most applicable when the picture
is placed side by side with the story. A photograph of the captain of a football team that has lost an
important match should depict the sad mood of the loser; the same principle should be followed while
portraying a winner. But for pictures that are independently news, the choice of mood is that of the editor,
especially when such a picture is placed on a key page, such as the cover. The mood of a photograph can
either attract or repel news readers or viewers. For aesthetic reasons, the mood of a news photograph must
be seen in the mood of the story. A tension-soaked football match must be reported in such a way that the
tension is reflected on the language.

4.10. Specificity

News presentation is an ordered, clarified, intensified and interpreted experience. It does not thrive
on confusion or speculation. For example: The match started at 4pm is better than the match started at
about 4pm.

In other words, news, whether textual or pictorial, must be specific if it is to be fully appreciated. In
the same way, sport photo news is made specific on an issue, or at worst emphasizes an idea or point for it
to be understood by its viewers. This point of emphasis must be given prominence in the picture. In order
to be specific about the size or kind or colour of eyeballs possessed by a person in the news, the person’s
face, in relation to the position of the eyes, must be emphasized during editing or cropping by the relevant
photo editors. In sport reporting, the photograph has to be specific on the news. It must, for instance, show
how a particular goal was scored and who actually touched the ball last. Another word for specificity as
an aesthetic field in picture journalism is emphasis. And, as pointed out by Ikpe and Anim (2006), “the
item to form the focus of the picture and transmit the relevant news should be specified.”

4.11. Colour

Colour, as an aesthetic field, demands that news pictures be presented in their true candour or
quality. Even though the use of black and white photographs is still popular in some local newspapers,
colour photographs present the candid quality of the event or object presented and publishers must strive
towards this. In the case of sport reporting, a sport photograph that is presented in full colour attracts more
attention than a similar photograph presented in black and white. A well-presented colour of the jerseys of
a particular sport team attracts a reader to a sport story about that particular team more than a black and
white representation of the same jersey. However, it is not enough to present photographs in colours; the
colour so presented must be of high quality, because the higher the colour quality, the more aesthetic the
report would be.

4.12. Completeness

Completeness is not actually an aesthetic index but a combination of indices. Completeness has two
implications: first, it means that for a sport report to give the reader the needed enjoyment and
satisfaction, it has to answer the basic questions that an average reader may want to ask. Completeness in
this sense therefore means that the report must, as much as possible, answer the 5Ws and the H questions
of textual news writing and reporting: who, what, where, when, why and how? Also, sport news readers
are usually interested in how their teams won or lost a match. This means the H-question is very important
in sport news reporting. The second implication is that by the time a sport reporter abides by all the
identified aesthetic indices of sport reporting, he is significantly complete in aesthetic handling of his
story.

5. Conclusion

The discourse has taken a look at the concept of aesthetics, its relevance and applicability to
newspaper sports reporting. This is informed by the observation that even though there appears to be a
newspaper boom in many states, not much has been done both by newspaper publishers and researchers in
terms of spelt out aesthetic indices for sport reporting. The discourse has identified a number of aesthetic
indices that can be manipulated by sport writers and editors for the benefit of their readers. This has
become compelling as readers are also exposed to digitalized information, on the dramatic media such as
the television and the internet. It takes a great deal of aesthetic exposure for a sport newspaper publisher
to hold readers’ attention through his medium.
References


