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Exploring Visual Representations of the University Library through a Photo Contest

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Abstract: Users' photographs taken in a library building can be symbols illustrating their inner perceptions of the academic library as a place and its services. These photos can also enable the library to elicit users' insights beyond those offered by other mainstream techniques of data collection. By applying visual content analysis, this paper aims to reflect on how the photos, which were originally submitted to a contest as part of the Thai university library's marketing campaign to promote its brand, can be valuable representations of the library that the photographers have actually interact with. This kind of visual method has potential for being used to supplement library managers' efforts to discover real user needs that shape both service design and marketing in the library context.

Keywords: Library photographs, User perception, Visual content analysis, Visual methods

1. Introduction

Developing an understanding of how library users respond to a library service space's design may assist library managers in improving both current and future designs. In Thailand, library services in universities traditionally receive feedback about user experiences through several methods of data collection. Among these are surveys, interviews, and focus groups. For university libraries that need to know the way their users perceive the libraries' buildings and service spaces, visual methods would be helpful for them to discover the current perceptions of the library users through visual representations seen in visual materials, i.e. photographs. The visual methods, though a common research approach for academics in the field of librarianship, is considerably new among library practitioners, especially in Thailand. Some Thai librarians have shown interest in the visual methods but are not sure whether it is feasible to apply such methods or not.

This paper describes the photo contest as a source of the existing visual data or photographs, presents an observation of the Thai library practitioners' usage of

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visual analysis for the first time in the central library as well asthe results of training them as a visual analyst, and concludes with some suggestions about using visual content analysis in the university library settings.

2. The Photo Contest

In August 2014, the central library and its 37 member libraries of a Thai university held “My Favourite Corner in the Libraries” photo contest where students, academics, researchers, and staff were invited to submit photographs, either in digital or hard-copy format, of their favourite spots within the library buildings in order to reflect the library users’ points of view on the library service space. Up to three photographs could be submitted, along with a short description explaining the reason why they liked those places. The contest organisers expected that this activity would promote the significance of the library service spaces for the users’ different purposes. After the two-week deadline for submission, 40 photos in total (see Figure 1) were submitted by 19 participants of seven different subordinate units in the university, and three library locations (see Table 1).

Figure 1 some photographs taken by the contestants

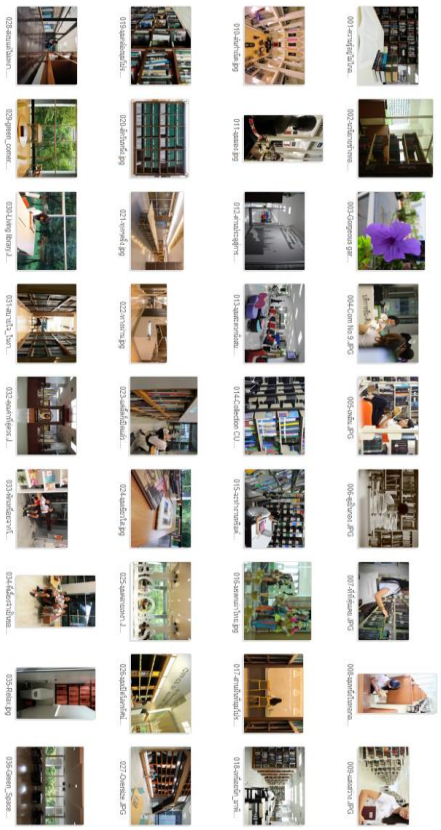

Table 1 Summary of the photo contest participants' profiles

Gender		**Subordinate units**		**Photo location**	
Male	10	Faculty of Architecture	2	Central Library	31
Female	9	Faculty of Arts	3	Humanities Information Centre	5
Total	***19***	Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy	1	(Arts Library)	
		Faculty of Political Science	2	Intelligent Information Centre	4
		Faculty of Psychology	3	(Petroleum College Library)	
		Faculty of Science	4	***Total***	***40***
		The Petroleum and Petrochemical College	4		
		Total	***19***		

Every photograph submitted to the contest was judged on the basis of their composition, concept and definition, photography technical factors, aesthetics, and creativity. These five criteria were made by the judges, who were three academics working in related fields from other universities. The judges scored the photographs according to the five criteria already mentioned. The overall total was 50 points (10 point per criterion). The points were then totalled and averaged across the three judges. The photographs were subsequently ranked according to their overall score. The prizes were awarded for the first place winner, two runner-up winners, and a contestant who won the popular vote.

In the context of this pilot study, all 40 pictures entered to the photo contest were treated as a set of visual data to be analysed for its image content. The aim of this visual analysis is to explore the meaningful underlying messages depicting by library users' perception of library service space through the photographs. It should also be noted that, since the visual analysis approaches have rarely been used as practical approaches to analyse perception of university libraries in the Thai context, they were first piloted by the researcher. Then, he provided short exercises involving visual analysis approaches to the participating library practitioners who would later become visual analysts to learn the approaches. The exercises were designed to reinforce them to be better prepared for applying visual content analysis in the workplace.

3. Visual Analysis Approaches and Training

There are many ways we can use visual methods as a means of studying and understanding all kinds of visible objects and materials, i.e. visual representation. However, implementing visual analysis training to familiarise library staff with the process requires pragmatic approaches. Employing visual analysis in practice requires more than application of the research method but also mastering skills in analysing photography so that visual representations in photographs can be explored and makes sense of them (Rose, 2012).

According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006: 86), qualitative inquiries into visual culture and visual representation tend to take three approaches to study images: 1) cognitive approach 2) descriptive approach, and 3) interpretive approach. The cognitive approach refers to how viewers, or analysts, perceive photographs based on their personal knowledge, backgrounds, and interests. The descriptive approach is to analyse visual data by forming a theoretical or conceptual framework to categorize pieces of contents into pre-defined constructs. The interpretative approach is an advanced analytical process which inquirers employ semiotics and literary theories to find the meanings behind images.

The three common approaches of visual analysis, generally found in academic research, can lend themselves to practical usage by enabling university librarians to discover the hidden voice of the library user. The interpretive approach is more abstract than the other two methods and it may be difficult for library practitioners, who are new to the semiotic analysis, to try implementing a method with such high level of abstraction. As a result of this hindrance, only cognitive and descriptive approaches were selected for the present study's volunteered visual analysts, a librarian and a graduate student in librarianship, to apply.

Photography Critique Training

At first, both visual analysts were trained to evaluate every photograph from the photo contest from photography technical point of view. The intention of this practical exercise was to allow them to learn how the photo contestants created all the pictures. A professional photographer from the Central Library Media Centre was invited to teach the analysts how to criticise the photographs using considerations from a photography technical perspective. Three main considerations for evaluating the photographs included compositional elements within a frame, image quality, and photo display.

Cognitive Approach to Visual Analysis Training

Using a cognitive approach to elicit visual representation, the two visual analysts practised focusing on the perception of visual elements of each photograph. In other words, they were trained to notice people, objects, and activities through the photographs. The photo analysis worksheet derived from the Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration (2010)'s tool were used to support this learning process. Despite the fundamental purposes of this worksheet might be more generally applicable in for teaching students with historical documents, it seemed, however, compatible with the use of novices who needed to learn how to observe individual items or visible details in photographs.

Descriptive Approach Training

The photographs were then analysed in terms of the most frequently occurring characteristics used to describe "Good Library Space" or, in the context of present study, "My Favourite Corner in CU Libraries". While coding and listing visual elements, the two analysts took into account 11 categories from McDonald (2006) who states that good library space should be:

- Functional : space that works well, looks good and lasts well
- Adaptable: flexible space, the use of which can easily be changed
- Accessible: social space which is inviting, easy-to-use and promotes independence
- Varied: with a choice of learning and research spaces and for different media
- Interactive: well-organized space which promotes contact between users and services
- Conducive: high-quality humane space which motivates and inspires people
- Environmentally suitable: with appropriate conditions for readers, books and computers
- Safe and secure: for people, collections, equipment, data and the building
- Efficient: economic in space, staffing and running costs
- Suitable for information technology: with flexible provision for users and staff
- Oomph: bold space that captures the minds of users and the spirit of the university

4. Training Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results obtained from piloting the visual analysis using cognitive and descriptive approaches. They are presented with three sub-sections regarding to the training exercises mentioned above: critiquing photographs, reading photographs, and describing visual contents.

Critiquing Photographs

Judging aesthetic value of photographs is primarily concerned with drawing the viewers' attention to photography technical factors, for example, exposure, lighting, composition and depth of field rather than grasping the message of the photograph. Through observation, it is likely that techniques of photography critique taught by the professional photographer have not directly affected the two visual analysts' analytical thinking required for critically interpret the photographic images. Nevertheless, learning about the method which the amateur photographers, including the library user who submitted their work to the photo contest, uses to produce their photograph could influence the two analysts to notice more details or visual cues that made up these pictures. This

also leads them to have a better perception of visual representation when performing a visual analysis in their workplace.

Reading Photographs

The results stemmed from using the cognitive approach to visual analysis are called an "inventory list" (Lester, 2014: 130). The two trained analysts observed items apparent in 40 photographs together, and identified objects as well as people and activities captured in the pictures. Next, they made a list of all they notice in the photographs. As shown in Table 2, the representation counts of objects made up the majority, i.e. chairs/stools (57.50 percent), tables (52.50 percent), books (50.00 percent), and bookshelves (42.50 percent); followed by people, i.e. female users (35 percent), and male users (15.00 percent); and pictures of actions, i.e. book reading (32.50 percent), and studying (15 percent).

Table 2 A detailed inventory list of items seen in the photographs

People	**f**	**%**	**Objects**	**f**	**%**	**Actions**	**f**	**%**
Male	6	15.00	Books	20	50.00	Reading	13	32.50
Female	14	35.00	Bookshelves	17	42.50	Studying	6	15.00
			Chairs/stools	23	57.50			
			Tables	21	52.50			
(N = 40)								

The two visual analysts in this pilot study felt comfortable with identifying and counting of people, objects, and actions or activities in the photographs as this visual content analysis is simply based on what directly visible to both of them in these photographs. It is quantitative and easier to examine frequencies of individual items.

Describing Visual Contents

Exploring visual representations requires more than simply looking at the photographs and counting noticeable items. Since this analytical approach often isolates the picture from its meanings that represent particular relevance to the visual content, a daunting task which a novice applying visual content analysis faces is to make sense of the visual representation (Bock et al., 2012: 321). An introduction of guidelines could help the analysts grasp the context and messages which the contestants' photographs depict.

McDonald (2006)'s "Qualities of Good Library Space" as the framework of thinking in this pilot study allowed the two visual analysts to contextualise all

40 photographs. Not only did they had a chance to use the descriptive approach for their visual content analysis, they also practised categorising and comparing the visual representation across the photographs. The qualities of good library space appeared in the photographs were specified by clearly defined descriptions that the two analysts could classify consistently. They therefore coded and counted the visual clues to understand the meanings of 40 photographs through the more precise, reliable identification of the image contents. Three figures below illustrate examples of the qualities of the library buildings decoded by the two visual analysts in this pilot study.

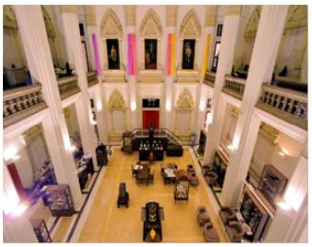

Figure 2 Winning photo: The origin. Caption: This beautiful and unique place brings back memories of being recognized as the first library in Chulalongkorn University, and it is supposed, from a user perspective, to exist forever. Photo location: The Humanities Information Centre's entrance hall. Used by permission.

Qualities of library space shown in this photo: functional, accessible, varied, interactive, conducive, environmentally suitable, safe and secure, and oomph.

Figure 3 The first runner-up and popular vote award: The corner that relieves loneliness. Caption: It is another corner giving us reading happiness, pleasant surroundings, and facilities available for study. Photo location: Learning commons, the Central Library. Used by permission.

Qualities of library space shown in this photo: functional, adaptable, accessible, varied, conducive, environmentally suitable, and safe and secure.

Figure 4 The second runner-up: Researching comfortably. Caption: The library provides easy access to the full text of theses and dissertations both in printed form and online. Being hard-working at the library can be accompanied by a relaxed atmosphere. Photo location: Thesis and Dissertation Service, the Central Library. Used by permission.

Qualities of library space shown in this photo: functional, adaptable, accessible, varied, interactive, conducive, environmentally suitable, safe and secure, and efficient.

Based on the Qualities of Good Library Space framework, both visual analysts discussed their decisions on classifying the image contents. The results of the agreed content classification are provided in Table 3. It shows that the majority of the photo contest participants, who took the photographs related to their perception of the favourite corners in the case library, indirectly indicated the

design functionality (77.50 percent) and the variety of service space (60 percent) as representing a positive impression of the library buildings.

Table 3 Visible qualities of the library areas represented in the photographs

Qualities	Frequency	Percentage (N=40)	Rank
1. Functional	31	77.50	1
2. Adaptable	11	27.50	6
3. Accessible	18	45.00	3
4. Varied	24	60.00	2
5. Interactive	9	22.50	7
6. Conducive	16	40.00	4
7. Environmentally suitable	9	22.50	7
8. Safe and secure	13	32.50	5
9. Efficient	9	22.50	7
10. Information and communication technology	5	12.50	8
11. Oomph	4	10.00	9

It is important to note that each photograph can express more than one possible meaning, and its perception lies with the visual analysts. Even though two analysts were employed in this pilot study, this would still not capture the wide range of interpretations to counteract subjective issues, such as quality, satisfaction, or perception. Nonetheless, visual content analysis – either through cognitive or descriptive approach – seems feasible for introducing visual analysis methods to library practitioners, who might already have experience of conducting surveys in their workplace as well as being familiar with counting the frequency with which certain contents appear.

5. Conclusions

There are many ways to explore visual representations of university libraries. No one single method of analysing visual contents in photographs will reflect a complete picture of library users' views and perceptions of library buildings and service spaces they interact with. This pilot study should be considered as an initial attempt of visual analysis approach application to assess photographs in the context of Thai university libraries as well as application by library practitioners. The results of piloting the approaches might support the hypothesis that the visual methods are a useful choice for analysing contents of photographs about the places and spaces in which library and information services happen. The short exercises in visual analysis provided in this study could be also employed as interesting practical activities to prepare librarians to analyse any photographs beyond a photo contest. Nevertheless, we have only begun to explore the potential of visual methods to be used in Thai library practitioners' research. Similar to any other methods, they have their limitations. We believe that there is plenty of room for combining the strengths of visual analysis approaches alongside mainstream methods such as surveys, interviews, observation and other unobtrusive approaches to delve deeply into library users' perceptions of the library service space in the field of library design and service marketing.

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