

## Reading Meaning Through Semiotics: A Visual Discourse Analysis of Selected Cover Pages of the *Tell Magazine*

Muhammad Mallam Modu & Amina Salisu Aliyu

1Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Maiduguri, Borno State  
Email: modumodu43@gmail.com & [meenat22@unimaid.edu.ng](mailto:meenat22@unimaid.edu.ng)

### Abstract

This study explicates on the semiotics of visual discourse analysis of selected cover pages of *The TELL Magazine*. Three cover pages were analysed via the models of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar. The study examines how semiotic resources displayed on the selected covers, such as colours, images and figurative expressions expound on meaning possibilities. It was found that the magazine covers consist opulent semiotic resources which portray meaning making on the aspects of economy, state of the nation and politics in Nigeria. The study further explains how colours and imageries found on the selected cover pages carry meaning potentialities like the written texts. Visually and symbolically talking, the semiotic elements displayed on the magazine covers were used to either criticise or support the Buhari led government in one way or the other regarding policies economy, state of the nation and politics in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Magazine covers, semiotics, social semiotics and visual discourse analysis

### Introduction

Semiotics as 'the study of signs', involves some variations regarding definition among leading semioticians as to what semiotics connotes. One of the broadest definitions is that of Eco (1976 p.7) which states that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign.' Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. Contemporary semioticians expound on signs not in isolation, but as part of semiotic 'sign-systems' (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are made and how reality is represented (Eco, 1976, p.7).

According to Chandler (2007), Peirce and Saussure are widely regarded as the co-founders of what is now more generally known as semiotics. They established two major theoretical traditions. Saussure's term 'semiology' is sometimes used to refer to the Saussurean tradition, while the term 'semiotics' sometimes refers to the Peircean tradition. However, nowadays the term 'semiotics' is widely used as an umbrella term which include all aspects of multimodal discourses.

Chandler (2007) further states that semiotics is not widely institutionalised as an academic discipline (although it does have its own associations, conferences, and journals, and it exists as a department in a handful of universities). Yet, there are some self-styled 'semioticians', those involved in semiotics include linguists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary, aesthetic and media theorists, psychoanalysts, and educationalists.

Social semiotics stresses on the specific semiotic resources that are organised in each text. Its focus is primarily on the ways in which given visual strategies can be deployed within and across texts to achieve meaning-making and possible ideological insights. One of the main goals of social semiotic analysis is “to provide usable descriptions of major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of Western visual semiotics, and to analyse how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.1).

Social semiotics is concerned with meaning makers and meaning making. It studies the media of dissemination and the modes of communication that people use and develop to represent their understanding of the world and to shape power relations with others. It draws on qualitative, fine-grained analysis of records of meaning making, such as ‘artifacts’, ‘texts’, and ‘transcripts’, to examine the production and dissemination of discourse across the variety of social and cultural contexts within which meaning is made (Bezemer and Jewitt 2009). Different ‘versions’ of social semiotics have emerged since the publication of Michael Halliday’s *Language as Social Semiotic* in 1978. The argument offered in this study is engrossed on the model of visual grammar proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in their book titled “*Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*”

Visual Discourse Analysis deals with how images, colours, layout, composition/dimension of texts and images, and other semiotic modes and multimodal elements are studied and analysed to discuss how meaning is being communicated to readers/analysts. Thus, analysing and explicating of visual communication or elements is an important aspect of visual grammar as well as general linguistic discourses. This is evident in recent multimodal texts, films and music etc. which expose necessity and value of semiotics in our daily life. This is because of the rapid technological advancement in the globe which encompasses all aspects of human endeavours. In the words of Modu (2019, p.8).

Due to the advancement of science and technology, the modes of human communication and meaning interpretation have also moved from the traditional meaning-making mostly attached to written text to include other aspects such as social semiotics, graphology and multimodality. Visual systems of meaning construction offer different resources and potentials for meaning making in both literary and non-literary texts. Thus, readers need to acquaint themselves with a range of ways to make sense and read visual images alongside with written text to decode meaning.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p.3), ‘visual discourse in a given society can only be comprehended ‘in the context of, on the other hand, their uses and valuation’, this shows how important to explore on the aspect of visual discourse, because it has occupied most of our human endeavours. For Kress (2003, p.59) ‘nowadays people are exposed to texts that contain elaborate visual images, unusual narrative structures, complex design elements and unique formats of verbal and non-verbal communications’ this shows the levels of interaction among people through different modes of communication and various semiotic resources, which indicate that meaning is constructed not only through written language alone, but also through semiotics or integrated linguistic and non-linguistic resources as well as multimodalities.

Magazine Covers are mostly multimodal texts designed and produced by different magazine organizations to attract customers' attention, as well as to give semantic insight into a given multimodal text. Its primary purpose is to serve as a cover page and to display most of the important aspects or main information of a magazine in different captions and styles of imageries, cartoons, real and manipulated pictures, apt colours, and other semiotic modes to draw readers' and prospective customers' consideration to either embark on a critical study or for mere reading to obtain desired information for certain needs. This nature and apt design of the modern-day magazine covers which contain varieties of multimodal elements are not unconnected with recent technological advancement experienced in the globe, which encompasses different aspects or elements of semiotic and multimodal discourse such as colours, images, cartoons, painting graphics etc.

### **The Tell Magazine – A Brief Account**

*The TELL Magazine* is an independent Nigerian weekly magazine established in 1991, with its headquarters in Berger, Lagos' (John & Akinkurolere, 2013, p. 1). It published its first edition on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1991. The magazine features political, social, economic, and religious happenings in Nigeria and beyond. According to Olamide and Segun (2014, p. 1), *TELL Magazine* is one of the prominent news magazines in Nigeria. It has gained widespread recognition across the globe to an extent that it has won several awards for portraying critical social, economic, and political issues in the nation.

### **Justification**

Due to the great link between language, communication and visual modes (semiotic resources), couple with the recent technological advancement in human life with particular reference to the application of varieties of semiotic modes such as colours, imageries, and among other multimodal elements that are mostly displayed within and outside multimodal texts for meaning making, there is the need to explore on semiotics to pave way for readers to easily comprehend semiotic discourse.

There is, however, paucity of studies carried out in this area, this study is therefore carried out to show how the visual elements or modes displayed on the selected covers of the *Tell Magazine* convey meaning or messages to readers and critics of different multimodal texts. The study can also complement the amount of literature in the area of semiotic communication.

### **Visual Analysis of the Selected Covers**

The visual discourse of magazine cover pages is multimodal in nature and offer emphasis on semiotic modes of representation which are dominated by visual modes to attract readers' attention. This is evident in our society which is influenced by the presence of new variety of texts and magazines which are obviously characterised by the increasing dominance of the visual mode (Modu, 2019, p. 56.) In the words of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the main visual features of magazine texts are: colour, layout, salience, framing and photographs. Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2002 cited in Lirola, 2006, p. 4), explain that colours of a text including clothing are

used to denote specific aspects of personal or image portrayed in a given text. Therefore, background colours, other colour effects and images displayed on multimodal texts make it easier for readers to read and analyse messages in a text through symbolism or association of a particular colour or image.



Plate 1. The TELL Magazine, Issue No. 27, July 2016.

### Analysis of Plate 1

Colour symbolism or association is used to refer to those occurrences where some particular notion or perception is interconnected to a certain or particular colour, or when colours accomplish conventional or cultural effects other than that of nomenclature of the field of colour (Ibrahim, 2009). The light purple (lavender) background colour on this cover page has diverse colour symbolisms. However, in this context it depicts wealth and worlds of economic visions because it has direct link with the images on the cover page. In the words of Cerrato (2012) 'purple suggests wealth and extravagance, fantasy and the world economic dreams' The most salient images are symbols of different foreign currencies arranged sequentially based on their official usage and high rate in the Nigerian markets, namely, the British Pound Sterling, American Dollar and Euro. Just above these symbols is the main headline which reads 'CAN NEW FOREX REGIME SAVE ECONOMY?'. The word 'FOREX' is formed through blending of the words 'FOREIGN' and 'EXCHANGE'.

A critical study of this cover page based on the combination of these symbols with the lexical items of the headline presents the pressing issues in the Nigerian economic system, which portrays devaluation of Naira to save the fallen economy. Yet, the currency of the nation in question (Nigeria) is not among the foreign currencies displayed on this illustration, which hints on the devaluation of naira. Another significant aspect of visual linguistic discourse on the lexical items of the main headline is the formation of the word "FOREX" through blending; it is blended from the words foreign and exchange to further propagate the devaluation of naira. Furthermore, the application of blue colour in all the displayed foreign currencies symbolises financial institution

in this discourse; yet, there are other symbolisms and associations of blue colour in geographical discourse, such as sky and water. However, Cerrato (2012) states that blue colour works well for corporate world and is often used for more conservative types of businesses such as accounts, insurance, companies, banks, and other financial companies where trust and reliability are important.

In visual discourse, the positioning of these currencies at the centre signifies the notion of nucleus status of the information on foreign currency and foreign exchange policy displayed on the cover page. In other words, the information or the news is current and important. This illustration visually supports the economic foreign policies of the present administration, it is also in support of devaluating naira for foreign currencies.

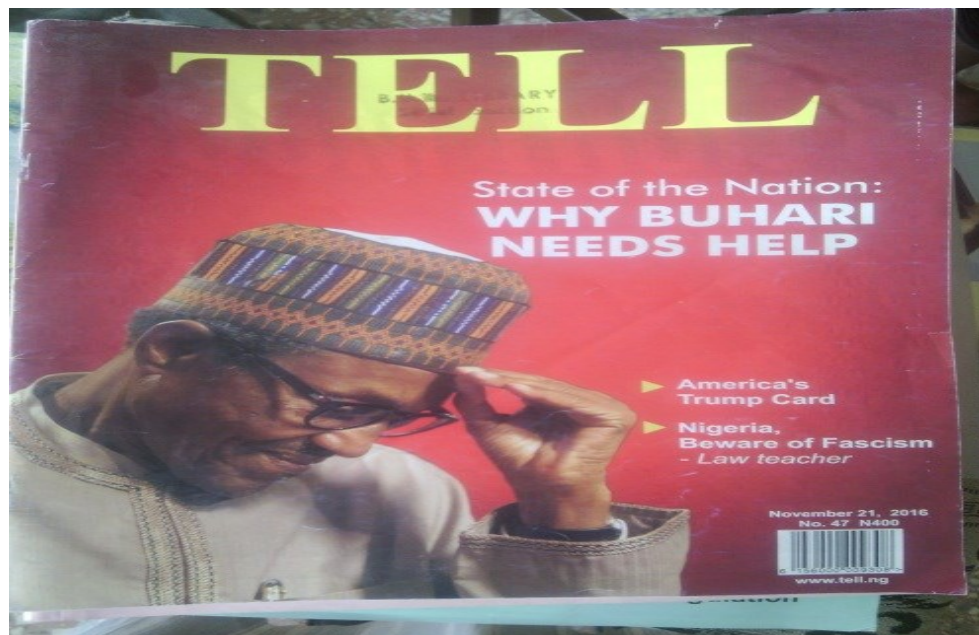


Plate 2: *The TELL Magazine*; Issue No. 47, November 21, 2016.

### Analysis of Plate 2

In this edition, *The TELL Magazine* features its masthead with yellow, unlike the usual red colour as its nomenclature on most of the publications of its cover pages. This symbolically signifies that *TELL* is reporting a peculiar and an appalling report on the state of the nation (Nigeria) under the Buhari led administration. This can also be observed in the lexical items of the main headline which is captured as 'STATE OF THE NATION: WHY BUHARI NEEDS HELP'. In the words of Ibrahim (2009, p.150), the yellow colour refers to various associations and symbolisms, 'it is not clear whether the multitude of meanings regarding yellow are directly linked to the colour or to the entities used to name the colour'. Based on her analysis on semantic of colour terms in Nigeria, yellow is associated with alien or foreign issues. This shows *The TELL Magazine* is reporting new or strange issues concerning Nigeria. Based on this view, the multitude nature of the denotations attached to yellow, De Bortol and Maroto (2001) explain that yellow symbolises



caution, hazard as well as cowardice. Though, in the words of Zammitto (2005), yellow is associated with intelligent and logical thinking. This idea can be observed via the sitting position of Mr President which shows how he is logically thinking about the state of the nation. Yellow also depicts innovation, spirituality, hope, joy as well as delicacy. These discourses coupled with the dark-red colour background which depicts danger, death, or battle in the African context, arguably shows how President Muhammadu Buhari is in an administrative muddle and in need of great help and way out to stop the nation from collapsing.

Another symbolic salient object in this cover page is the half-body portrait photo of President Muhammadu Buhari. As a matter of fact, portrait photos look real and natural for viewers and readers, yet they contain some hidden messages that can be revealed during visual critical analysis. The composition of the elements in a visual image may be read through its horizontal or vertical axes. The later axis creates a structure which Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) call 'given' and 'new'. In this sense, the left side is called the given, which presents image or object as known or understood by readers/viewers. This indicates that placing Buhari's picture by the left side of this cover page shows he is a renowned personality in the Nigerian context and Africa at large, since the magazine covers some parts of Africa. The manner in which he bends his head, looking down and supported it with his left hand, also depicts that he has many issues to tackle in order to ease the tension regarding the state of the nation. The transparent spectacles worn by Mr. President coupled with the way he looks down present a possible hidden agenda on the issues on ground. While the closure of his mouth shows he is short of words. According to John and Akinkurolere (2013, p. 6) '... the eyeglasses depicts that there could be possibility of hidden motives ... the manner by which both of them ... opened their mouths shows that they have a lot to say against each other. In the case of Buhari, he closes his mouth, this shows he is short of words.

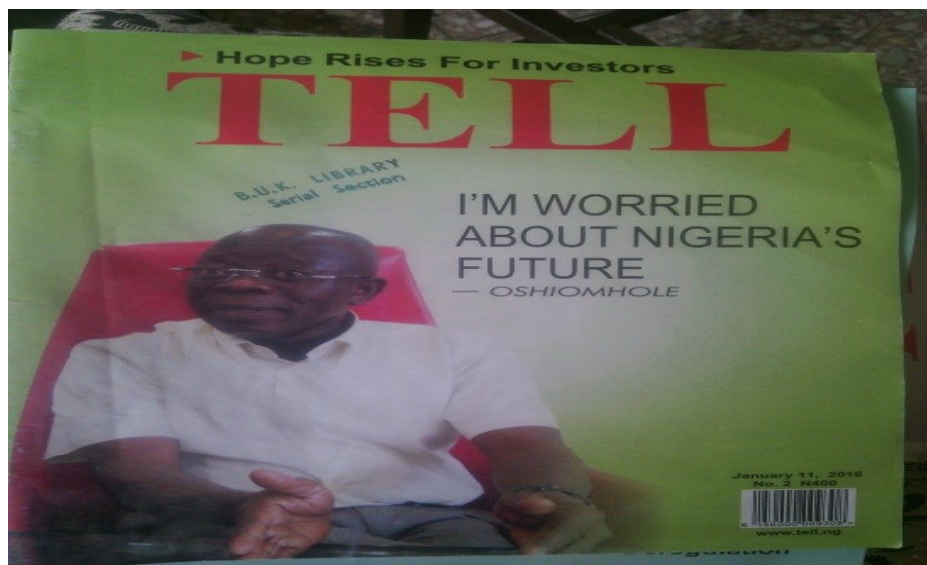


Plate 3. Illustration C: *The TELL Magazine*; Issue No. 2, January 11, 2016.

### Analysis of Plate 3

This illustration features former leader of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and governor of Edo State, under the ruling party (APC), Mr Adams Oshiomhole. His half-body picture is positioned by the left of the cover page which signifies that he is a known or popular personality in Nigeria. It is obvious that Oshiomhole was very popular among Nigerians during his leadership as the NLC boss.

In visual exploration, the green background colour of the cover page signifies growth, harmony, love, freshness, abundance, and prosperity. Cerrato (2012) submits that green symbolises nature and freshness. However, it is obvious that green is associated with agriculture or vegetation as its main reference point in meaning construction. Yet, in other instances, it is said to be associated with fertility and abundance, growth, and prosperity. In fact, in some symbolisms, green is linked to illness and death; in some context however, it signifies love and paradise (Ibrahim, 2009).

From the foregoing, symbolisms of green as a colour, coupled with the main headline, which reads 'I'M WORRIED ABOUT NIGERIA'S FUTURE', it can be argued that Oshiomhole is portrayed as committed and dedicated politician who cares for his nation. Another interesting symbolism of semiotic discourse in the above analysis is the mixture of white at the middle of the green colour of the background alongside with his white shirt, this arguably depicts him as a somewhat upright politician. This presents him as a noble and comrade political leader who is mindful of his nation. This can be deduced in the words of Cerrato (2012, p.12) who posits that, 'white is associated with light, goodness, innocence, as well as purity' in both western and African contexts. In most Nigerian languages, white is associated with the general concept of 'goodness' or 'wholesomeness'. It symbolises peace in some languages, in others, respect, while in some it serves as an emblem of good forecast (Ibrahim, 2009). Ibrahim further explains that, in the case of white entities or objects coloured white comprise certain semantic loads that are lacking in some objects which are not coloured white. Yet, white symbolises certain negative ideas in some Nigerian languages.

In a visual discourse or social semiotic context, the way Oshiomhole directly looks at the viewers, though, slightly to his right shows demand or request from the viewers or readers to believe in his political ideology about Nigeria and its future. Most pictures showing peoples or objects looking direct at viewers establish an imaginary contact; personalities in such pictures symbolically demand something from the viewer (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2004)

Wearing of the transparent eyeglasses depicts that he does not have hidden negative motives or ideologies against Nigeria's political landscape, and the manner in which he opens his mouth and right palm projects that he has much to offer on the issues concerning Nigeria's politics. Yet, despite the above positive discourses and interpretations on the said Nigeria's political figure, the red seat he is sitting on, possibly signifies the political or leadership system in the Nigerian context as a game dribble by some few political players, which is neither guided nor controlled by the laid down principles of the said game and the constitution. Arguably, it is rather played either by the whims and caprices of the few players, as it is obvious in the Nigerian political system.

## Result of the Findings

The following findings are observed during the course of this study:

- i. It was found that colours with their symbolisms in multimodal discourse accomplish a significant task on meaning-making of semiotic modes.
- ii. It is worthy to note that, colour and image meaning capabilities differ from one culture to another. In this sense, similar image or colour can portray divergent countenance in different cultures.
- iii. Magazine covers are multimodal texts designed with varieties of semiotic modes to attract the minds of readers/analysts to give possible meaning acumens on a visual discourse.
- iv. It was observed that the magazine cover pages under study contain rich visual discourses accessible via graphics on economy, state of the nation and political matters.
- v. It obvious that the headlines of the selected cover pages are written in upper case letters, very short, concise, precise, and unambiguous for clarity, easy identification and reading.
- vi. The background colours in selected covers are displayed via bright colours in order to establish semiotic awareness of the visual modes displayed on cover pages for meaning clarification.
- vii. It was found that *The TELL Magazine* mostly apply question tags in the lexical items on the headings to attract attentions of readers for possible visual meaning-making, clarity and linguistic precision.
- viii. The selected magazine covers apply elements of figurative expressions in the lexical items to aid visual explication, as well as meaning-discourse.

## Conclusion

This study explored on visual discourse analysis of selected cover pages of *The TELL Magazine* to reveal how semiotic resources and figurative expressions presented on the selected covers convey messages to readers. In doing this, colour and image symbolisms were critically explicated and analysed to show how these multimodal or semiotic modes can aptly convey meanings to readers and analysts. The study also discussed some key terms related to the topic such as semiotics, social semiotics, visual discourse analysis and magazine covers.

This study explored on visual discourse analysis of selected cover pages of *The TELL Magazine* According to Walsh (2006, p. 1), 'Multimodal texts are those texts that have more than one 'mode' so that meaning is communicated through a synchronisation of modes. That is, they may incorporate spoken or written language, still or moving images, they may be produced on paper or electronic screen and may incorporate sound'. Different types of multimodal texts [which contain



visual discourses] that students commonly encounter in their educational environment in print form are picture books, information books, newspapers and magazines. Multimodal texts in non-print form could be a film, video and, increasingly, those texts through the electronic screen such as email, the internet and digital media such as CD Roms or DVDs’.

In the words of Modu (2019) visual discourses of cover pages are multimodal in nature and offer unique emphasis on the modes of representation which are not written texts – colours, imageries, charts, and maps etc., which dominate most of our modern texts. Modu further explains that this is evident because our society is influenced by the presence of new variety of texts and magazines which are obviously characterised by the increasing dominance of visual modes. For Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the main visual features of magazine texts are: colour, layout, salience, framing and photographs. In a similarly view, Kress and van Leeuwen (2002 cited in Lirola, 2006, p. 4), explain that colours and [images] of a text including clothing are used to denote specific aspects of personal or image portrayed in each text. Therefore, background colours and other colour effects make it easier for readers to read and analyse messages in a text through symbolism or association of a particular colour (Modu 2019).

### **Recommendations**

The increase in the use of digital devices in the conveyance and analysis of human communication has led to an emergent interest in the modes of human communication other than the speech and writing systems. The verbal, along with the visual, is now generally recognised as having some bearing on meaning-making possibilities and worthy of close analysis across a variety of contexts (Lyons, 2016). In this sense, the wide-ranging acceptances of technology and new media by many people have foregrounded the visual communication, more especially in the print media. Thus, meaning-making has always been constructed visually through the presentation and use of semiotic resources via different colours and images. Lyons (2016, p. 6) states that, ‘these resources [semiotic modes] are often referred to as modes and the theoretical approach concerned with their use in communication is known as multimodal analyses’. In this view, multimodal approach [visual approach or discourse] can be described as the concept which posits that meaning is being constructed not only through the general notion attached to writing and verbal systems of language, but it includes other aspects of language such as semiotics, colour, images, typography, layout, book cover among other linguistic and non-linguistic features.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 67) recognise the importance of these semiotic modes and state that, ‘the important role of images, colours or graphics on contemporary newspapers, magazines, public relations materials, advertisements and other various kinds of books cannot be disregarded’ in linguistic, visual, as well as semiotic analysis of multimodal texts.

Sequel to the above significances attached to visual discourse, it is recommended that, studies on colour and image symbolisms, typography, layout, book cover, graphology etc. should be piloted on other multimodal texts such as cover pages of novels, poetry books, other educational non-educational textbooks which portray visual modes to further discuss and explicate the theories and approaches of semiotic, visual and multimodal discourses to readers/analysts to easily comprehend

this emerging field of study. Because it is obvious that visual discourse has dominated most of our human endeavours around the globe.

## References

### Primary Texts

#### *The TELL Magazine*

*The TELL Magazine*, January 11, 2016. Issue No 02.

*The TELL Magazine*, July 04, 2016. Issue No 27.

*The TELL Magazine*, November 21, 2016. Issue No 47.

### Secondary Texts

Bezemer, J. and Jewitt, C. (2009). 'Social Semiotics'. In *Handbook of Pragmatics* Verschuren and Elime Verslury (eds.). Amsterdam: John Benjamin.

Cerrato, H. (2012). *The Meanings of Colour*. USA: HC Graphic Designer.  
<http://www.linkedin.com>. Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2017.

Chandler, D. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), (2007). *Semiotics: The Basics*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) Routledge: London.

Eco, Umberto (1976) *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press/London: Macmillan.

De Bortoli, M. and Maroto, J. (2001). *Colours Across Cultures: Translating Colour in Interactive Marketing Communication*. Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2017.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Arnold).

Ibrahim, R. A. (2009). *The Semantics of Colour Terms in Nigerian English Usage*. An Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis Submitted to the Department of English and French, Bayero University, Kano.

John, A. E. and Akinkurolere, S. O. (2013). Reading Meaning through the Visual Images: Social Semiotic Approach to *The TELL Magazine* in Nigeria. *Journal of New Media and Mass Communication*. Vol. 17, Pp. 65-70. <http://www.iistc.org>. Accessed on 12 November, 2016.

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge.

Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2002). 'Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for Grammar of Colour', *Journal of Visual Communication* Vol. 1 (3): 343-368. Accessed on 03 November, 2016.

- Kress, G and van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Lirola, M. M. (2006). 'A Systemic Functional Analysis of Two Multimodal Covers'. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* Vol. 19 (2): Pp. 249-26. Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2017.
- Lyons, A. (2016). "Multimodality" In: H. Zhu (ed.) *Research Methods in Intercultural Communication: A Practical Guide*. Wiley-Blackwell. Pp. 268-280. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281589563>. Accessed on 03<sup>rd</sup> November, 2016.
- Modu, M.M. (2019). *Ideology, Graphology and The Media: A Comparative Multimodal Stylistic Study of Selected Cover Pages of The Newswatch Times And The Tell Magazines*. An Unpublished M.A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English and Literary Studies, Bayero University, Kano.
- Olamide, I. and Segun, A. (2014). A Speech Act Analysis of Editorial Comments of *TELL Magazine. A Journal Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol.4, (9). Pp. 1 – 8. <http://www.iistc.org>. Retrieved on 19 December, 2016.
- Van Leeuwen, T. and Jewitt, C. (2004). *Handbook of Visual Analysis. Visual Meaning: A Social Semiotic Approach*. London: Sage.
- Walsh, M. (2006). 'Reading Visual and Multimodal Texts: How is 'Reading' Difficult?' *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 29 (1), 24-37. viewed on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2017.
- Zammitto, V. L. (2005). 'The Expression of Colours *Changing Views – Worlds in Play*' in the *Proceedings Conference of DiGRA 2005*. Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2017.