**EVALUATION OF THE ROLE OF AESTHETICS IN THE PRODUCTION OF**

***AUNthisWEEK***

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**DEDICATION**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**CERTIFICATION**

We certify that this project was conducted by Musa Muhammed, ID Nos: A00014928, of Communications and Multimedia Designs Program of The American University of Nigeria, under our supervision.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER ONE**

* 1. Background of the Study
  2. Statement of the Problem
  3. Purpose of the Study
  4. Research Questions
  5. Significance of the Study
  6. Scope of the Study
  7. Limitations of the Study
  8. Definition of Terms

## CHAPTER TWO

* 1. Introduction
  2. The Evolution of Electronic Publishing
  3. Common Formats in Electronic Publishing
  4. Aesthetics and Information Technology
  5. User Perception of Visual Appeal
  6. Aesthetics: Implication for Newsletters
  7. Theoretical Framework

## CHAPTER THREE

* 1. Introduction
  2. Research Design
  3. Population of the Study
  4. Sample Size and Procedure
  5. Description of Data Gathering Instrument
  6. Method of Data Analysis

## CHAPTER FOUR

* 1. Introduction
  2. Data Presentation and Analysis
  3. Discussion of Findings

CHAPTER FIVE

* 1. Summary
  2. Conclusion
  3. Recommendation

LIST OF TABLES TABLES 1-5 (SURVEY RESULTS)

* + 1. Gender of Respondents.
    2. Department of Respondents
    3. Remark on the use of aesthetics in ***AUNthisWEEK***
    4. Most Attractive feature of ***AUNthisWEEK***
    5. Most attractive design feature of ***AUNthisWEEK***

# ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand the role of aesthetics in the production of electronic newsletters. In this study, AUN’s weekly newsletter (***AUNthisWEEK***) was put under the microscope in an attempt to examine the effect some of its design features have on readers. Users are known to patronize that which the find appealing to any of their senses.

The persistent use of familiar design features is likely to bore readers and gradually diminish their numbers. To prevent this, multimedia designers must constantly work to improve the functionality and aesthetics of electronic content. The standard of design in modern electronic platforms is continuously improving. Because there is competition in the market, these platforms have no choice but to out-design their competitors. However, ***AUNthisWEEK*** lacks that competition but still seems to satisfy its readers.

This study intends to use Abraham Maslow’s self-actualization theory as a framework to help explain some of the research questions. A survey will be used to gather data that will be analyzed by simple percentages.

At the end of this study, the aim of answering the research questions will have been met fully. This study hopes to reveal any blind spots that might be present in how the newsletter uses aesthetics. It will also recommend ways to improve any irregularities that may arise from this study.

* 1. **Background of the Problem**

# CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the former Vice President of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar established the American University of Nigeria (AUN) with the help of renowned Nigerians and academics from Nigeria and abroad. Located at the Northeastern state of Adamawa, AUN is rated among the best educational institutions in the country according to the National Universities Commission ranking (2018). The university prides itself as being Africa’s first Development University with the aim of “pioneering service learning that will produce leaders who will be equipped with the knowledge to resolve societal concerns”.

Because of questions raised around the quality of education in Nigeria and Africa (UNESCO, 1995), AUN has taken it upon itself to provide the high-grade education that is in low supply. The university has a clear objective to “prepare the leaders of tomorrow for the challenges on ground and those that are lie ahead in the journey to achieve true excellence”. Achieving excellence is top priority for AUN. This means that it must strive to always be a step ahead of others in the education sector. The university values elegance and all things concerning them must carry a seal of uniqueness with it. This elegance greatly affects the multimedia channels the university uses to relay vital information, (AUN Website, 2018).

The university has striven to fulfill its promise of unlocking the true potential among members of its community. For this reason, AUN provides high quality internet connection that will greatly ease the process of accessing information. AUN boast of being a wireless university that places a lot of emphasis on Information Technology. Computers, internet connectivity, and

other significant IT facilities are very effective tools for teaching. AUN recognizes this hence, these tools are readily available. Another important goal of the university is to graduate individuals that are well-educated and learned in both general knowledge and a specialized discipline of choice. The university thrives in diversity. It is home to people from different backgrounds and ethnicity that function seamlessly.

The university focuses on training future leaders of Africa that may serve as true agents of growth and development. This is the major motivation behind the idea of providing a broad- spectrum type education where individuals are equipped with the best tools to manage challenges. The excellence that AUN showcase to African and the world has attracted students from different parts of the world. International organizations also took notice of the Good work being done by AUN and rewarded them with awards. Some of those awards for excellence include the Harry Wofford Global Citizenship that was conferred on the Founder by the America Peace Corps. Also in 2011, former AUN President, Dr. Margee Ensign was awarded the African Leadership Award in Education Excellence. Another notable award AUN received in Atlanta was that of African Leading University in 2012.

Some of the goals AUN consider top priority include:

* Becoming Africa’s first Development University.
* Building an institution where faculty comprises of highly educated individuals who possess outstanding skills in aspects of teaching, research, and shaping critical thinkers.
* Creating a community that guides students into becoming problem solvers.
* Encouraging members of its community to adopt the use of technology as a vital tool of education.
* Establishing a community that will ensure the realization of the University’s objectives (AUN, 2014).
  1. **About *AUNthisWEEK***

For an institution that values transparency and togetherness, it is important that members of the AUN community receive frequent updates as to the progress the university is making. The global trend for organizations is to have a department that works for the sole purpose of communicating the affairs of the organization within and outside the organization. Owing to the advancement of technology, there are several means of communicating with the stakeholders of an institution like AUN. Custom made newsletters and electronic bulletins are effective ways of keeping stakeholders up to date. In AUN’s case, ***AUNthisWEEK*** is the preferred means of communicating the affairs of the university. ***AUNthisWEEK*** is an electronic newsletter published weekly. Originally referred to as News to You; ***AUNthisWEEK*** started off as a hard copy publication in 2005. The central motive behind this publication was to keep stakeholders informed about the activities of the university. The world has evolved to no longer need to pass information across through hard copies instead, these e-newsletters are communicated in the form of multimedia (a blend of text, audio and video).

According to Webster (2018), a newsletter is a written report that is issued periodically, typically by a business, organization, or institution that present information and news to people with a specific interest in the organization or subject. People usually value productions that are

pleasing to the eye’ and are more inclined to continue patronizing that product as far as it satisfies their aesthetic needs. This case applies to the production of newsletters where a lot of work has to go into making aesthetic choices that will keep the readership satisfied and wanting more. Aesthetics in a newsletter can be presented in the way the background is set up, the colors, audio quality, image quality, and video quality. Nobody will want to continue patronizing a newsletter that contains blurry images or low quality videos or even an audio recording that can be barely heard. The readership can easily get bored if nothing in the newsletter appeals to their sense of elegance and beauty. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the readers satisfied by constantly coming up with innovative ways to improve the aesthetics of the newsletters.

Aesthetic quality improvement can be seen in how social networks and other online platforms regularly roll-out updates for their user interface. These updates usually come about as a result of user feedback. When users become increasingly dissatisfied with the aesthetic choices of the platform they utilize and may demand for changes if the producers want to continue having the support of the users. It goes without saying that aesthetics in any production play a vital role in keeping the users satisfied as well as attracting more users. The better the quality of the aesthetic appeal used, the more likely it is that the product will be recommended to others. Since the major aim of a newsletter like ***AUNthisWEEK*** is to provide contents to as many members of the community as possible, it is important to look at the underlying effects aesthetics have to the readership.

Norman (2004) is of the claim that aesthetic design plays an influential role in affecting user preferences. His claim is supported by well-established knowledge in the field of marketing, product design, as well as social psychology. He continued by adding that, the aesthetic quality

of a product influences the attitude of consumers. (Karen Dion, 1972) reported that, not only is beauty an key quality of a product but its effect seems to transcend the object and influence other judgments, in what is known as the halo effect.

## Statement of the problem

AUN is an organization that values elegance and beauty therefore, in aspects of newsletter publication, there has to be some form of distinctiveness about how the newsletter feeds the eyes of the readers. Every publication is done with the intention of reaching as much people as possible but will only live up to that expectation if it possesses a strong appeal factor.

Newsletters today can undergo various aesthetic tweaks to make them look appealing to the readership. Also, people have become increasingly exposed to different types of electronic newsletters and magazines to be able to pick favorites based on their aesthetic qualities. It is therefore important to evaluate how effective the aesthetics used in ***AUNthisWEEK*** has helped the newsletter in terms of; gaining acceptance among AUN community members, meeting the objectives of the university, and playing a significant role on the readers. This research looks to see if there are areas of aesthetics that can be improved in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK***.

## Research Objective

The objectives of this research are as follows:

* + 1. To find out if the use of aesthetics in ***AUNthisWEEK*** agrees with the University’s goals and objectives.
    2. To identify what aesthetic elements used in ***AUNthisWEEK*** appeal most to readers.
    3. To evaluate the effects of the use of aesthetics in ***AUNthisWEEK*** on readers.

## Research Questions

The research questions that motivated this study are

* + 1. Does the use of aesthetic appeal in ***AUNthisWEEK*** meet the goals and objectives of AUN?
    2. Are there specific features of ***AUNthisWEEK*** that readers find aesthetically attractive?
    3. What role does aesthetics play on the readers of ***AUNthisWEEK***?

## Significance of Study

This research is essential in order to ascertain the current status of AUN’s newsletter when it comes to keeping up with recent best practices of newsletter production. These best practices include the use of new methods and tools to polish the newsletter so it becomes very pleasing to the readers. Readers are unlikely to continue subscribing to e-newsletters if they are very drab and boring. To avoid this, it is vital to look into the current tools of aesthetics that are being used by ***AUNthisWEEK*** to see if there will be need for improvements to keep up with modern standards. Newman, (2014) was of the view that newsletters are important in transmitting vital information to members of an organisation but there has to be a certain element that makes it appealing to readers and leaves them asking for more. Furthermore, Anthony, James and Janet (2013) emphasized on the need to keep evolving along with technology as new and improved tools are now available. They further stated that lagging behind will inevitably cause readers to quickly lose interest in the newsletter production. This continues to prove that if modern tools of improving aesthetics are not used, newsletters will not be patronized to the point

where they will fulfill their job of informing stakeholders about the happenings of the organisation.

Mawson, ( 2011) argues her point on how the human mind instantly connects to all that glitters. According to Mawson, the more colorful and elegant something is the more it will attract attention from onlookers. In a situation like that of e-newsletters, it is therefor important that they be produced with some sort of aesthetic distinctiveness that will make readers glued to their screens just to enjoy the contents of the newsletter.

For the above reasons , ***AUNthisWEEK*** deserves to be looked at with regards to how it is keeping up with modern tools of improving its aesthetic quality. Does it meet up with recent best practices when it comes to e-newsletter production? Are there elements that readers will appreciate more that what their currently getting? Does AUN’s standard of excellence reflect on the weekly production of this newsletter? If not then what can be done to see that it stands out and represents the elegance that AUN strives for? Seeking the answers to these questions makes this research all the more important. Documented evidence exist of a study that is similar to this one however, that research was related to the readership and effectiveness of ***AUNthisWEEK*** while this focuses on the aesthetic quality of the newsletter and how helps in spiking the interest of readers. This research will also help provide some insight to other researchers who will venture along these line of thought.

## Scope and of the study

This study is limited to the following areas:

1. To the case study which is: ***AUNthisWEEK*** which was selected because most of the population in the study have come across the said newsletter that will serve as a yardstick to compare other newsletter.
2. To the use of questionnaire as well as interviews to ascertain how users perceive the aesthetic quality of ***AUNthisWEEK***
3. To a particular time frame, in this case, most copies of ***AUNthisWEEK*** from its inception to date.

## Limitations of the Study

* Access to information about the total population of members of the AUN community that will enable the decision as to what percentage of the population is ideal for an effective result of the study.
* unavailability of recent literatures that are related to the study
* The time frame did not allow contact will the ideal population that will ensure an effective result.

## Definition of Terms

* + 1. **- Aesthetic:** Having a sense of beauty, concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty. Its use in this paper is to show how elegant ***AUNthisWEEK*** is based on how images, sound, and videos are used in the e-newsletter.
    2. **- E-Newsletter:** this is a bulletin that is distributed electronically on a periodic basis to members of a society or organization.
    3. **- Best Practices*:*** these practices can be regarded as the preferred or considered standard within an organization, business, or industry.
    4. **- Evaluation:** to judge or calculate the quality, importance, amount, or value of something.
    5. **- Effects:** a change which is as a result or consequence of an action or other cause.
    6. **- Organizational standard*:*** these are the values that are predominant and widely- acceptable. These values are regarded as the best in the field.
    7. **Publications*:*** the act of making information or stories available to readers in a printed or electronic form.

# CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

The world today can be said to be a digital playground as technological advancement has become the order of the day. Before the idea of an e-newsletter, hard-copied newsletters were the norm. However, hard copies were quite useful back in the day, but it had a limit to how much information it could transmit. Hard-copied newsletters also had a limit to how much aesthetics can be utilized in its production. The advent of e-newsletters became a game-changer in terms of how much more can be achieved through its use. Electronic newsletters now had the ability to feature audio and video as well as other design features that greatly improves the quality of the newsletter. Competition exists in the multimedia industry and therefore content producers have to constantly evolve else they will fall behind in meeting up with the demand of the readers. This chapter takes a look at scholarly literatures that are relevant to the study. It further reviews the evolution of electronic newsletters and how their design has played an important role in swaying readers. Furthermore, this chapter looks at how newsletter aesthetics can be the difference between the success and failure of an electronic newsletter.

## The Evolution of Electronic publishing

People often have the need to be informed about the things happening around them, to know of the events that have taken place as well as the ones that are yet to happen. People also feel the need to transmit their ideas to other people. Usually, people create several avenues that will satisfy their craving for information and also serve as a platform for them to relay their own

information (Ozden Pektas, 2013). In the past, ideas and information were expressed through the use of signs and symbols. However, the horizon has broadened as ideas were transmitted through writing that reached the readers with the invention of the printing press. Information that was processed in the printing press had the advantage of being able to last through generations without likely losing the true meaning of the information. According to Henri Berr, in his work titled Georges Weill’s *Le Journal,* the press and scripts have played a vital role in disseminating information. He further argued that the press basically multiplied information endless times and gave it an eternal status. Modernization and the prominent use of information technologies swept the printing press aside. The technologies that evolved at the time increased the importance of aesthetics in publishing. As a result, this facilitated the use of aesthetics with remarkable visuals, audio and stylish text fonts. The emergence of new technologies meant that a lot more can be achieved through exploiting the tools that technology has provided. Progressively, the use of hard-copies in publishing was greatly reduced and electronic mediums were being used increasingly (Turgut, 2013, p. 990).

Moving on from hard-copy publishing, electronic publishing emerged as a preferred alternative that was a better way of reducing press and distribution costs. This led (Kist Joost, 1989) to define e-publishing as the “information that is constituted, stored, processed and updated in computer basis”. This term was used to indicate any transmission aimed at being replicated through media like fax, radio, internet and television. However, the term is used today to refer mostly to web or online based publishing. The numbers of media creators that utilize e- publications (materials that can only be read with the help of an electronic medium) are on a

constant rise as people are increasingly accepting it as a preferred means of gaining information. This situation has led to the materialization of an entirely new sector in publishing.

## Common Formats in Electronic publishing

Most of the electronic newsletters that are found today on the internet are designed using the format of a web page. Though, new technologies that are available today in electronic media provide multiple dimensions that can be followed depending on the priorities of the producers. Ozden (2013) noted that, electronic design newsletters, with their highly interactive composition that comprise of multi-media properties, content, and visual power play a crucial role in the development and application of different approaches in e-newsletter publishing.

Ozden (2013) further noted that the design elements and impact are affected by the technique used in the production of the newsletter that usually comprises of 3 general types: *PDF, Flash, and HTML.*

Ozden (2013) went on to explain that, the electronically designed newsletters that were prepared using the HTML usually appear like that of a classical web page with their structures containing an article, review and forum contents. Typically, on the upper portion of the screen lies the title of the newsletter, right below it or towards the left side of the screen contains the navigation buttons, the page flows from top to bottom. The navigation between pages is made possible through the use of buttons or links on the visuals or text. According to Ozden, Flash or GIF of motion pictures and videos can be used occasionally to provide visual impact. However, Ozden noted that these elements are scarcely used due to the fact that the download of motion pictures, videos, and sound files can be time consuming depending on the speed of the internet.

Successful e-publications based on HTML format designs include *PingMag* and *Creative Behavior*. These publications have been reviewed to have satisfied the aesthetic need of their readership through regular changes and innovation.

In the report by Ozden (2013), he affirmed that PDF is among the widely used formats of electronic newsletter design. This is the case because when compared to other formats, PDFs few interactive content and the limited use of multimedia features gives it an advantage in terms of document size. This advantage in document size make is much easier to download, to distribute, copy, and save. Furthermore, the pages of a PDF newsletter can be printed without any visual losses and distortion which makes it easy for readers to store in printed form.

Additionally, the newsletters created in PDF format can be easily viewed by different operating systems that include Windows, MacOS, and Acrobat Reader.

*Flash* is among the 3 general formats used in the production of electronic newsletters. It is very popular because it is a leading technology with an artistic sense. It is the most versatile formats of e-publishing because it provides the designer with a variety of facilities to choose from in constituting motion pictures. *Flash* can also support Bitmap images which further provide more options in terms of the images a designer intends to use without having to go through the stress of converting images to supported formats before they can be applied.

Additionally, *Flash* provides various applications that the reader can choose from such as theme songs , page flipping effect, interactive images, changing background images and much more.

These are made possible with the use of unique codes called *actionscript.* On a final note, Ozden made it clear that the success of electronic newsletter is directly proportional to the quality of the design. The above statement by Ozden reinforces the fact that more people will be more likely to

regularly subscribe to a well designed electronic newsletter. The logic is simple, bees are more attracted to the better looking flower and the same can be said for humans.

## Aesthetics and Information Technology

Vitruvius from the first century BC who was a systematic theoretician of architecture argued that, architecture has to satisfy three basic requirements: strength, utility, and beauty (Kruft, 1994). Strength (*firmitas*) – covers the field of construction, statics and materials; utility (*utilitas*) – the use of the building and its functionality; and aesthetics (*venustas*) (Tractinsky, 2004). However, architectural theories have changed considerably today but Vitruvian principles still provide a solid theoretical ground to stand on. For this study, the vitruvian principles will seek to justify the use of aesthetics in the production of electronic newsletters. Most of the work being carried out in the field of IT focuses on the dependability and robustness of the products created by the professionals of the field; (*firmitas)* (Tractinsky, 2004).

Tractinsky, (2004) reported that, the second requisite for an ideal information system like a newsletter is *utilitas.* This aspect deals with the ways information technology can be customized to satisfy the individual and organizational needs when it comes to the systems’ functionality and also how easy it is to use. Research carried out by Dickson et al. (1977) measured the utility of an information system objectively. The result of their experiments indicated that the functionality and ease of use of an information system plays a substantial role in user satisfaction. More research was carried out in this area and it soon gained the recognition that improved how information systems were designed.

The above descriptions by Tractinsky, (2004) were just a preamble to guide readers to the point; ”that the aesthetic criterion is inseparable from effective design of interactive IT” (Alben, 1996). Only recently did the Vetruvian requirement, *venustas* , gain some attention. Research in this field was almost completely absent in various IT disciplines (Tractinsky, 2004). Tractinsky continued by adding that, even though some schools of thought in other design fields deny the importance of aesthetics, there is no doubt that the beauty of electronic media greatly influences users. He gave a couple of reasons as to why some IT disciplines reject the importance of aesthetics. The first reason is a product of the idea that content designers will always attempt to oversell glitz and glamour instead of functionality and ease of use. Another reason was that, the origins of content design placed great emphasis on efficiency and utility, thereby leading to the rejection of any idea that is not based on the aforementioned qualities (Tractinsky et al. 2000).

To conclude his paper Tractinsky noted that, there are concrete evidence to propose that aesthetics matters a lot in almost every aspect of human thought and behavior. He also stressed that equal attention be given to aesthetics. Maslow’s (1970) self-actualization theory gave further insight as to how important aesthetics are. The theory explains that, the need for aesthetic pleasure is among the higher growth needs, which are manifest after the lower level (where most needs have been satisfied to a certain degree. Maslow added that, unlike basic needs, the need for aesthetics increases the more it is supplied. In her article, (Virginia, 2001) suggested that the use of aesthetics has fundamental value: “People crave it; that is why they reward those who provide new and improved aesthetics as well as identify with people who share similar interests.

## User perception of visual appeal

In a research conducted by (Lindgaard et al., 2006), they sought to determine how quickly people formed an opinion about the visual appeal of a web page. Their study discovered visual appeal to be closely related to the impression users had on different samples (Gitte Lindgaard, 2006). First impressions have proved to be very powerful in various fields of study including that of personality attributes, medical analysis, and studies of user perception of appeal and usability like the one conducted by (Gitte Lindgaard, 2006). A study was conducted by (Lindgaard and Dudek, 2002) to explore users’ experience with a website that was already found to be visually appealing still received high ratings from respondents before they even got to test the functionality of the website. Furthermore, the functionality of this website was found wanting even before they got to test it, but the strong impact of the aesthetic quality of the site drew attention away from the fact that there were issues with the website’s functionality. What this suggests is that, aesthetics and visual appeal factors are what users look out for first, and they could significantly influence how users judge subsequent experience (Heijden, 2001). Marketing research literatures describe the long-term effect of a good first impression as the ‘halo effect’ (Gitte Lindgaard, 2006).

In human decision-making literature, the effect of a good first impression is referred to as the cognitive ‘confirmation bias’ (Mynatt et al, 1977). This observable fact occurs when people exclusively search for assenting evidence that supports their original assumption while ignoring the evidence that does not support their hypothesis. Therefore, when a person has a positive first impression, that individual is likely to disregard or downplay negative outcomes that eventually manifest. Conversely, a confirmation bias based on a negative first impression, it may lead to

severe consequences because even corrections may not be able to convince users because they will downplay any positives based on the initial negativity associated with the subject (Gitte Lindgaard, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that a publication or any form pays close attention to how aesthetic design can make or break their product. Neglecting visual appeal can increasingly cause users to boycott a product because it lacks the attractive factor needed to keep their attention rooted to the product. Users may even go as far as advising others against utilizing the said product because they do not find it attractive enough. In the same way, users can recommend a product to others solely because they find it usable and attractive not because of how functional it is.

## Aesthetics: Implication for Newsletters

This section of this literature review will argue why it is time to embrace and integrate the aesthetic element of design in the process of building and managing IT. The above literatures have suggested that aesthetics play a role in the way users interact with information technology. This section will provide three (3) arguments as to the reason why researchers and professionals in the IT field need to dedicate more time and attention to aesthetics. This does not translate to mean that aesthetic considerations is the most important feature of IT products rather, it is intended to create awareness on the importance of aesthetics in IT.

The first argument focuses on how the level of performance of IT products exceeds the needs of mot users. The rapid growth and development in the field of information technology has to a great extent, exceeded the requirements of many users and organizations (Tractinsky, 2004). Because the level of performance of IT products is near-perfect, attention will soon switch to

making products have better visual appeal. According to Norman (1998) , the functionality of new IT products well exceeds the need of users’, as a result, the competition starts leaning towards enhancing users’ experience rather that toward improving the functionality of products. The sooner content designers and organizations realize that the future of IT products is directed towards improved aesthetics the better it will help them stay ahead of the competition. Norman (1998) used the watch-making industry as an example to compare this process. The watch industry has since surpassed the technological requirements of users’: today, watches are now seen and marketed as objects of fashion and design.

Secondly, the use of aesthetics satisfies basic human needs. The extent to which aesthetics consideration should gain relevance in the IT scene is still heavily contested. Some may view the aesthetic design of information systems as manipulative. In recent times, the increased acknowledgment of the role of emotion in decision making, it has been contested that modern design has placed too much importance on performance issues and not enough on the aesthetic aspect that stimulate emotions like pleasure, fun, and excitement, that are essential motivators of human behavior. (James Fogarty, 2001), ascertained that, since technology has evolved beyond the bounds of the work environment and into the personal lives of people, technology has also expanded into different aspects. Fogarty et al. (2001), claim that if the value of information technology was previously measured by its usefulness and ease of use, additional requirements, like attractiveness, have since emerged. Matters relating to visual appeal and aesthetics have become a central part of interactive system design.

Lastly, the idea that aesthetics will overcome functionality sounds very appalling to professionals that believe functionality and stability are the only parameters to measure the

quality of information technology. However, we cannot deny the existence of aesthetics nor its positive effects on our cognitive well-being (Norman, 2004). Postrel (2002), argues that, the appeal to our senses are everywhere, they are increasingly becoming personalized and are intensifying. According to Postrel, the use of aesthetics today pleases and liberates the masses. She continued that IT is increasingly becoming a means of transporting aesthetics; the fact is, IT is friendly to aesthetic applications where users can create, edit, transmit, and receive aesthetic designs. In addition, Postrel suggested that “the computer-ushered liberty of design has made more people aware of graphic quality. Slowly, the general public has learned the language of design. Computer has aided the spread of aesthetics to places and professions that were previously out of the reach of aesthetics. The cycle of aesthetics is well in motion, where aesthetic supply creates more demand, which eventually feeds even more supply. “Over time people learn. They discover more about what is aesthetically possible and more about what they like” (Postrel, 2002, p. 55). And as projected by (Maslow, 1970), the more people become aware of aesthetics, the greater their demand for aesthetics will become.

## Theoretical framework

This study used the Self-actualization theory by Abraham Maslow to examine the role of aesthetic appeal in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK****.*

Tractinsky (2004) explains that the Self-actualization theory seeks to provide a basis for why people act the way they do towards something like the need for aesthetic pleasure. Self- actualization is a term that has been cited in several theories of psychology (Tractinsky, 2004).

Before Abraham Maslow brought the term into prominence, Kurt Goldstein used it to refer to expressing creativity as an example of self-actualization (Tractinsky, 2004). According to

Abraham Maslow (1961), the need for aesthetic satisfaction can be categorized in the higher order of needs that manifest after simpler needs have been fulfilled to a certain degree. Maslow (1970) added that, the need for aesthetics increases the more it is satisfied; somewhat like trying to extinguish fire with petrol. It is basic human nature to admire things that are designed to be aesthetically pleasing. For the above reasons, it is imperative that systems be built with aesthetic considerations in order to attract people to patronize the product. It is also important to routinely improve the aesthetics so that it does not lead to the boredom of seeing the same thing all the time.

Maslow’s Self-actualization theory is relevant to this study because it points out that, it is the intrinsic nature of people to be attracted to things that are pleasing to view. The theory also shows a relationship between esthetics and the need for it to be satisfied at all times. The theory also highlights the need to routinely improve the current state of aesthetics in order the satisfy the ever increasing need for aesthetic appeal.

# CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

* 1. **Introduction**

Subsequent to the evaluation of relevant literatures in chapter two, this chapter explains the methods that were used to satisfy the objectives of this research. Also, this chapter reviews the systematic approach and procedures that were employed in every step of the way leading to the findings. In this chapter, the population of the study was defined.

Other parameters of the study that were defined in this chapter include; research design and instruments, sample size and procedures, method of data collection and analysis, description of data gathering instruments, and the validity of the research instruments used.

# Research Design

The fundamental design of this research is based on the use of surveys to collect the opinion of users. Surveys are considered suitable for the generation of data from a large population, which can be used to make generalizations on the entire population (Obukoadata, 2017). According to (McIntyre, 1999, p. 74), surveys are capable of obtaining information from large samples of the population. Surveys can also elicit information about attitudes that are otherwise difficult to measure using observational techniques (McIntyre, 1999, p. 75).

Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that, surveys only provide estimates for the true population, not exact measurements (Salant & Dillman, 1994, p. 13).

# Population of the Study

The core of the American University of Nigeria (AUN) community is the target population for this research. To be specific, members of this community include; staff, students, the faculty, and a small group of alumni. This population contains most of the readership of ***AUNthisWEEK*** because they belong to the mailing list that ensures they all receive a copy of the weekly newsletter. Following a recent study by (Obukoadata, 2017), it was ascertained that the population of staff amounts to 1,169 as per the HR directory; students were 1,116 in number, and faculty are 75. This sums up the total population to 2,360. The above figures are as recent as September, 2017.

# Sample Size and Procedures

From the above population, a sample size of 120 is considered appropriate. This number represents about 5 percent of the population. Stratified sampling technique was used. This was so because it was important to partition the population into three; staff, students, and faculty. This will help distinguish factors in the said groups that are likely to influence the variable. After being partitioned into groups (strata), a simple random sample from each group was selected and data was collected on each sampling unit that was selected at random from the strata. Forty people were selected to represent each of the three groups to satisfy 5 percent of the population.

# Description of Data Gathering Instrument

Data for this research was collected through the use of a planned questionnaire. The questionnaire was printed and distributed manually across all samples from the groups. Distributing and retrieving the questionnaires took a fortnight to complete. The questionnaire is made up of ten (10) structured questions that were designed to draw a wide range of answers from respondents thereby giving the study more information to bite from in an effort to answer the research questions and objectives.

# Method of Data analysis

The data collected after distributing a structured questionnaire was analyzed by the use of simple percentages. The data was transformed to graphs and tables for presentation. Simple percentages are calculated with this formula:

Percentages =

(𝑥∗100)

𝑁

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Where ₓ | = | items in the strata |
| ***N*** | = | Total number of responses. |

# CHAPTER FOUR

**DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION**

## Introduction

In this chapter of the study, the data collected from the questionnaire were presented, analyzed, and the findings were discussed. In this section, findings that were relevant to the question posed by the research question were discussed and pertinent conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made. The data collected from administering the questionnaire are shown below in the form of graphs and table and incisive analysis were carried out to enable the research reach several conclusions. The results below provide a platform in which conclusions were drawn and research questions were answered. The results are a representation of the responses collected after administering the questionnaire.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Gender of Respondents.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Categories | Number of response (x) | Percentage (%) |
| **Male** | 82 | 68.3 |
| **Female** | 38 | 31.7 |
| Total | **120** | **100** |

The table above shows the percentage of the population based on the gender of respondents. The population was divided unevenly with an overwhelming percent of male respondents (68.3%) to the 31.7% of female respondents across the population. The obvious contrast in the gender of respondents is largely due to the fact that the questionnaires were

distributed manually in hard copies. Situated in the northern parts of Nigeria where Islam is widely practiced and females are more reserved in their interaction with their male counterparts as preached by the religion. For this reason, access to more female respondents was restricted to a particular group of others that do not have such orientations imbedded in them. This restriction was absent in male respondents and there was no restriction to their population.

Table 2: Department of Respondents

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Categories | Number of respondents (x) | Percentage (%) |
| **Students** | 72 | 60.0 |
| **Staff** | 36 | 30.0 |
| **Faculty** | 12 | 10.0 |
| Total | **120** | **100** |

Sixty (60) percent of the respondents were students, 30 percent were members of staff, while the remaining 10 percent were faculty members. Because the questionnaires were administered manually, access to students was easier compared to that of staff and faculty. This is so because most members of staff and faculty do not reside on campus which made it difficult to reach them after working hours. On the other hand, most students live in the confines of campus. Faculty had the lowest percentage of respondent and can be attributed to the fact that faculty members have a strict schedule and adhere to their office hours. Basically, time conflict played a major role in restricting access to faculty members.

Furthermore, 30 percent of staff members were available to fill in the questionnaire making them relatively easier to reach when compared to faculty members. The schedule of staff members however, is not as rigid as that of faculty members or as flexible as that of students.

The above table reveals that the student population for the study. However, the study set out to obtain responses in a way that the various departments will have an equal number of respondents to enable the study see whether there are patterns in how members of different departments rate ***AUNthisWEEK***. But because faculty members were harder to access, students and staff were chosen to compensate the data collected.

Table 3: Remark on the use of aesthetics in ***AUNthisWEEK***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Categories | Number of Respondents (x) | Percentage (%) |
| **Excellent** | 35 | 29.2 |
| **Satisfactory** | 61 | 50.8 |
| **Poor** | 19 | 15.8 |
| **Indifferent** | 5 | 4.2 |
| Total | **120** | **100** |

From the above table, respondents gave their opinion on the use of aesthetics in ***AUNthisWEEK***. Twenty-nine (29) percent of the population was of the opinion that there was excellent use of aesthetics in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK***. Majority (50 percent) of the population felt the use of aesthetics in the newsletter is of an acceptable standard. Furthermore, 15.8% believed the aesthetics of ***AUNthisWEEK*** was poor while a small section of the population (4.2%) were unable to decide citing reasons that suggest content is the only important variable. Majority of the population are satisfied with the aesthetic standard of ***AUNthisWEEK*** while the second highest percentage is of respondents that believe the aesthetics to be excellent. Combining those that believe the newsletter to be excellent and those that were satisfied with it, it can be suggested that the use of aesthetics in the production of the newsletter meets the goals and objectives of AUN. However, the 19 percent that suggested the aesthetic was poor were mostly affiliated to the computer and multimedia departments of the university suggesting that respondents with a deeper knowledge of the computer and multimedia environment felt that more could be done to further improve the aesthetic standard of the newsletter.

Table 4: Most Attractive feature of ***AUNthisWEEK***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Categories | Number of Response | Percentage (%) |
| Content | 62 | 51.7 |
| Aesthetic Design (font style, image quality, video, etc) | 32 | 26.7 |
| Functionality (ease of use, reliability, efficiency, etc) | 26 | 21.7 |
| **Total** | **120** | **100** |

In this category respondent were asked about the feature that was more attractive to them in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK***. The categories included include, content, design, and functionality. This question was designed to get an insight as to which feature of ***AUNthisWEEK*** attracts readers. Based on the response gathered, big bulk of the population (51.7%) responded that content is their biggest motivation to read the newsletter. More people are concerned with the information that the newsletter provides than they are with the design and functionality of the electronic newsletter. There was only a slight difference in the percentage of people that found design or functionality more attractive. The design content of the newsletter was able to sway 26.7% of the population while functionality attracted 21.7% of the total respondents.

Table 5: Most attractive design feature of ***AUNthisWEEK***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Categories | Number of responses (x) | Percentage (%) |
| **Graphics** | 70 | 58.3 |
| **Use of color** | 12 | 10.0 |
| **Layout** | 31 | 25.8 |
| **Text font** | **7** | 5.9 |
| Total | **120** | **100** |

Of all the design features of ***AUNthisWEEK***, the graphic content came out on top as the most eye-catching design feature. With 60% of the population choosing graphics over the use of color and layout, it shows where the interest of the majority lies. Ten percent of the population chose the use of AUN’s traditional colors in the e-newsletter. The next majority opted for the layout as the most attractive design feature. A handful from the population (5.9%) was influenced by the font used in the text of ***AUNthisWEEK***. Graphics in this case include visual images and designs. The table above shows a predictable result with most of the population finding graphics to be the most attractive feature of ***AUNthisWEEK***. This is so because the newsletter is decorated by images and videos at first glance. The quality of the pictures and videos are excellent making it more appealing to view.

## 4.2 Discussion of findings

RQ1. **Does the use of aesthetic appeal in *AUNthisWEEK* meet the goals and objectives of AUN?**

The overwhelming majority of the population was of the opinion that the use of aesthetic is either excellent or satisfactory. Twenty-nine (29) percent of the population was of the view that there was excellent use of aesthetics in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK***. Majority (50 percent) of the population felt the use of aesthetics in the newsletter is of an acceptable standard.

One of AUN’s strategic goals is to develop and encourage the effective use of technology to support learning. The satisfaction of the population as shown in Table 3 is a testament that the institution is certainly moving towards the right direction. Another objective of the university is to create social and political environments that are in support of its goals. This objective is best achieved through the constant dissemination of information through mediums like ***AUNthisWEEK***. For the population to have the natural urge to read this newsletter, it must be attracted by some key aesthetic features which in the case of ***AUNthisWEEK***, it is the graphic content as observed in Table 5. The university always strives for excellence and it reflects on the production of ***AUNthisWEEK*** since most of the population expressed satisfaction with the electronic newsletter.

## RQ2. Are there specific features of *AUNthisWEEK* that readers find aesthetically attractive?

When the population of this study was asked to select from three options (Graphics, use of color, and layout) which was the most attractive design feature of ***AUNthisWEEK***, 60% of the population chose graphics to be the foremost aesthetic appeal feature of the newsletter. The second best feature was the layout of the newsletter that won over 30% of the population.

Judging by these results, it can be said that the graphic content of ***AUNthisWEEK*** is one of the most aesthetically appealing features of the e-newsletter. This can be attributed to the fact that

every new edition comes with different image and video content from the last to give the newsletter an element of versatility that readers are attracted to. If the graphic content of this newsletter was to remain the same through several editions, readers will grow bored and gradually withdraw their patronage.

Furthermore, the graphic content allows readers to witness events they could not be present for. The ability of graphics to portray the message carried in ***AUNthisWEEK*** gives it an edge over other design features of the e-newsletter. The next best feature according to the population was the layout of the e-newsletter. Even though the layout managed half the vote of the graphic content, it is worthy of note since 30% of the population cared enough for the layout to the point of acknowledging it on the questionnaire. Also, given that the questionnaire was administered manually (hand-hand), it was an opportunity to probe the respondents for deeper insights.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that majority of the population seemed attracted to mostly pictures. A respondent was noted to have said “the pictures lead me to the news”. The most surprising finding however is related to the response gotten for the attractiveness of the text fonts used in the e-newsletter. The text font should be going head-head with graphics for the most attractive design feature because majority of the content is covered by text. Most graphic content in the newsletter has text supporting it to help explain further. This means readers come across text just as much as they do pictures. The respondents must have found the text font to be basic and mostly uniform throughout the newsletter.

RQ3. **What role does aesthetics play on the readers of *AUNthisWEEK*?**

According to a recent study conducted by (Obukoadata, 2017), it was discovered that 72% of the population in his study responded with a “yes” when asked about if they like the production, design, and content of ***AUNthisWEEK***. Presly (2017), went on further to discuss that studies have confirmed that the aesthetic appeal of a text has the highest likelihood to influence the readership of such texts.

In Table 4 of this study, it can be seen that aesthetics plays a supporting role on the readers of ***AUNthisWEEK*** behind the content of the newsletter. Most people seem to be concerned with what the newsletter has to announce rather than the style it announces it in. This can be attributed to the mentality the university instills on the population. The university holds efficiency in high regard and elegance comes second. For most, aesthetics plays the role of the catalyst that guides readers to the content they are most interested in and keeps them immersed in the content through the use of aesthetics.

Despite the supporting role aesthetics play, it plays a critical role in adding value to the e- newsletter. Without aesthetically appealing elements, the contents will appear drab and uninteresting to readers. Aesthetics is the piece that holds it all together even though the response of the population suggests otherwise. It will be hard to imagine a newsletter with just text and in black and white. The standard in the technological environment is at a point where so much attention is paid to aesthetic quality of the user interface. People tend to easily associate with things they find aesthetically pleasing. Therefore, it is important to recognize the fundamental role of aesthetics so that it can be worked on and improved to catch the eyes of readers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION**

## Summary

The study evaluated the role aesthetics play in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK*** as well as on the population that frequent the newsletter. Evaluating the effects of aesthetics was important because blind spots can be identified and rectified to help keep the interest of readers very high. To be able to understand the importance of aesthetics in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK***, the research came up with objectives as follows:

* + 1. To find out if the use of aesthetics in ***AUNthisWEEK*** agrees with the University’s goals and objectives.
    2. To identify what aesthetic elements appeal most to readers in the production of

***AUNthisWEEK***.

* + 1. To evaluate the effects of the use of aesthetics in ***AUNthisWEEK*** on readers.

For the evaluation of these objectives, opinions of readers were collected through a structured questionnaire containing questions that are directed at satisfying the research objectives. After data was collected from the questionnaire, they were analyzed with the help of simple percentages. The data analysis was able to show that:

* + - 1. The use of aesthetic appeal in ***AUNthisWEEK*** is in line with the institutions goals and objectives to build an elegant technology based environment.
      2. Graphics and layout are the top features readers are interested in because of their high appeal to the aesthetic demand of readers.
      3. Aesthetics plays a central role in terms of attracting and keeping the attention of readers.

Readers are more inclined to patronize the newsletter because of some key aesthetic features of the electronic newsletter.

* + - 1. Readers are satisfied with the current use of aesthetics in the ***AUNthisWEEK***.
      2. Despite the importance of aesthetics, more readers are concerned about the content of the newsletter than they are about the aesthetic design.

## Conclusion

To conclude this study, it is clear that aesthetics is still not completely playing the role of swaying readers. Instead, aesthetics play a supporting role behind the actual content of the newsletter. The study set out to examine the mechanisms that contribute to an active readership especially the aesthetic appeal factor. The study collected data from 5% of the population in the university in order to observe the patterns in their response to enable the study reach relevant conclusions as to the role aesthetics play in the production of ***AUNthisWEEK***. Respondents to the structured questionnaire were mostly satisfied with the design features currently employed by the newsletter.

Content was found to be the leading reason why readers patronize the newsletter which is not such a bad thing for the study considering the fact that the aesthetic features is the second most attractive feature of ***AUNthisWEEK***. As for the most eye-catching design feature, graphics plays the foremost role in attracting readers which is exactly what is was meant to do. However,

so much attention seems to be focused on just the graphical aspect of the design while other features suffer from repetitiveness. Respondents were of the opinion that the newsletter is in line with the goals and objectives of the university meaning the newsletter is up to the acceptable standard in terms of design quality.

## Recommendation

Corresponding to the objectives of this study, the following recommendations were made:

* + 1. The newsletter can benefit from a versatile design features rather than the cyclical nature of its current design. People welcome change and the constant use of similar design features will bore readers over time.
    2. Functionality of the newsletter needs to be improved in terms of an immersive user interface that will provide several tools for navigating through the newsletter.

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