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How does audience influence illustration across tattooing, advertising, and children's books?

Illustration is an important form of visual communication, a unique form that provides a deeper emotional explanation behind a concept, idea or story – a stronger communication than that of text. Used as a form of artistic interpretation and expression, it has a wide range of applications through book illustration, magazines, advertising, tattooing, and more. It is clear that illustrative techniques can change depending on the audience by adapting the colour palette, style, and communicative messaging style to match the needs of the viewer and what may allow for the information and message to best be absorbed (Mike Kaynov, Medium, 2022). When considering how an illustration must be designed specifically for the appropriate audience, it is crucial to consider the effect of colour, line art, typography, shape, and layout. This ensures that the design is relevant to the audience and more memorable (Staunton Rook, 2025). This variety can be seen clearly in illustration for tattoos, advertising, and children's book illustration. Tattoos are a highly personal and permanent form of illustration which are often designed around individual identity and meaning (Weder, 2023). Within advertising, illustrations are intended to communicate ideas quickly and with a persuasive element and are aimed towards a wider audience (Jain, 2018). Meanwhile, children's book illustration combines imaginative design with informative techniques in order to support learning for a young developing audience which is supported by Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986).

Tattooing is a deeply personal form of illustration which is heavily shaped by the individual audience rather than a wide mass audience. Uniquely, as the audience for the tattoo is the wearer themselves, the image is often designed to reflect and suit the personal identity and memory of the individual and possibly even connect with any significant life experiences. This emphasis on individuality allows for a greater depth in symbolic designs as the importance of the message communicated between the tattoo and the individual is only significant to them – it does not need to fit into the requirements of a clear or immediate communication to others as a wider audience. As DeMello argues in her book, *Bodies of Inscription*, tattoos are used as a ethos of visual self expression by which the individuals can communicate their identities (DeMello, 2000, p.136-159). Illustration in the form of tattooing is also

influenced its audience and its placement or function. Different technical approaches like bold outlines and limited colour palettes are typically used to ensure durability over time as the tattoo ages with the skin.

There are many traditional and symbolic tattoos which are often still kept and simply altered in style or colour palette for a different approach. The history of the meaning behind different tattoos dates back to the ancient Middle East and ancient Egypt where women were found to wear tattoos for childbirth protection and spirituality, also to Polynesia and India where they were worn for identity, bravery, beauty and cultural protection. Traditional Japanese tattoos consist of koi fish for perseverance, dragons for power, and waves and wind for movement and nature. Tattooing then moved to sailors and travellers mostly due to them growing a taboo nature in the Middle Ages and became marks of courage and identity. Then moving to the eighteenth to twentieth century the first electric tattoo machine was patented and so became much more accessible. Then many rockstars, film stars and athletes wore them as an act of rebellion. Tattoos are now seen as an art, a fashion and a place to express spirituality and identity (Inkhub Tattoos, 2025).

Don Ed Hardy perfectly demonstrates how tattooing can be used as an intersection between fine art or illustration and personal identity and narrative, he ensures that his designs remain tailored to the client while still often reinterpreting traditional symbols (Meier, 2019). This reinforces the idea that tattooing is shaped by a specific and unique audience, unlike mass produced forms of illustration, like that of advertising, which allows for greater personalisation and connection through symbolic depth.

Advertising illustration is shaped to fit the requirements of a wider audience as it needs to communicate the appropriate message quickly and clearly to gain attention. This is especially crucial in recent years as the average attention span is reducing at a rapid rate according to Gloria Mark, PhD in an interview with Kim Mills for the American Psychological Association. In 2004, the average attention span was at an average of two and a half minutes, lessening to seventy-five seconds in 2012. Now, in the past six years it has dropped to an average of 47 seconds (Mark, 2023). While the audience is typically quite broad, advertising is also strategically targeted

towards a specific audience. Images are not neutral but are instead full of cultural references and meanings in order to guide how they are perceived. Particularly within advertising contexts where it is seen that images and visuals are designed specifically to convey specific messages (Barthes, 1977). This highlights how advertising is shaped largely by the need to control the audience interpretation.

Characteristics of advertisements typically utilise bold, bright colour palettes, simplistic illustration forms and a strong composition to ensure the message is communicated and received instantly. For example, Nike campaigns frequently utilise the effectiveness of high contrast imagery and other elements to evoke energy and motivation in the viewer – this encourages the viewer to associate these qualities with the brand. Tattooing focuses on personal and layered meanings behind each illustration while advertising reduces this to maximise communication clarity and accessibility to a wider audience. This demonstrates the function and commercial purpose behind the style of illustration – the success in this style is measured purely by its ability to persuade a wide audience to a particular view or product. Therefore, advertising provides an example of how illustration can become more controlled and a persuasive method of communication when addressing a mass audience – prioritising a clear message over personal meaning and interpretation.

Children's book illustration is built on the foundation of clarity, educational purposes, and imagination as is required by the developing audience. It must guide the viewer through understanding the book while still being engaging and holding creative qualities – a strong contrast to that of tattooing with its extremely symbolic and personal connection, and advertising due to its persuasive nature. For children at varying stages of emotional and cognitive development, it is a necessity that the imagery used in children's illustrated books is easily interpreted while still being fun and visually stimulating and engaging. Perry Nodelman argues in his book *Words About Pictures* that illustrations in children's books play a crucial role in how a text and narrative is perceived. He specifically looks at Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are*, as he often reads this to adults without the illustrations and they deem it inappropriate and too scary to be considered a children's book as their machination creates the 'Wild Things' as things they find scary – this is until they are shown the illustrations which shape their interpretation of the text (Nodelman, 1988,

p. 197). This does, however, highlight a similarity between children's illustration and advertising as it does involve a certain level of control over how the images are interpreted, although the purpose behind it is educational rather than commercial and persuasive.

This style of illustration typically features bright colours, overly expressive characters and clear, thought-through compositions to support the narrative and to maintain the child's engagement. The work of Quentin Blake is a clear example of this approach with his attention to loose, expressive, energetic line work and exaggerated characters and figures to convey clear emotion all while remaining easy for a child to interpret and to understand. In his illustrations for *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, he effortlessly demonstrates how an illustration can extend communication past the narrative and written word as he communicates Matilda's personality and tone through the character design. Children's book illustration must ensure that the imagery and text be easily understood and clearly comprehensible to the reader and child, but it must also be balanced to still encourage creative thinking and imagination. Therefore, illustration in this form and context is thought through in depth as it is shaped by its audience, this reinforces the idea that audience inherently influences how visual meaning behind illustration is constructed.

The comparison between tattooing, advertising, and children's book illustration highlights the extent to which audience shapes the function and meaning of an illustration not only the visual style on a surface level. Tattooing, as discussed by DeMello (2000), prioritises personal identity and connection to the art which allows for symbolic depth. In contrast, advertising illustration must communicate instantly and clearly to a broad audience. It uses carefully constructed imagery in order to control the audience's interpretation and uses persuasive techniques to encourage specific responses and engagement (Barthes, 1977). Children's book illustration occupies a position between these two opposing extremes as it balances clear communication and clarity with imagination and creative experimentation and engagement in order to both guide and inspire the developing audience (Nodelman, 1988, p. 197). As John Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing*, the meaning of an image is not fixed but shaped by the way it is seen, reinforcing the idea that audience plays a central role in how illustration is interpreted (Berger, 1972).

In conclusion, these comparisons and contrasts demonstrate that illustration is not defined by a singular visual approach but instead by the needs of its audience, reinforcing the idea that an audience is a central factor in shaping the outcome and how an illustration will be created and understood. Understanding audience is essential to understanding how illustration functions across different contexts.

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