Aesthetic Education of Art Directors in Spanish University Degrees in Advertising

La educación estética del director de arte en los grados universitarios de Publicidad en España

A formação estética do director de arte nos cursos universitários de Publicidade em Espanha

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MONOGRAPH

Abstract

In the context of advertising creativity, it is art directors who are ultimately responsible for messages' visual facet, a task for which aesthetic sensitivity is an indispensable quality and which constitutes, therefore, a crucial skill in their training. Through a quantitative and qualitative survey organised into four blocks (contents, resources, methods and results) and a sample of 21 professors of art direction from Spanish university degree courses in Advertising, this study seeks to analyse the role of aesthetic education in these subjects, as well as the tools and methods used by teachers in this learning process. Among its conclusions, the research reveals the high relevance of the aesthetic component in these subjects, the teaching of which is supplemented with other subjects from the same study plan; a special role for practical tasks in this area, which—supported by the theoretical analysis of images—focus on the development of advertising campaigns and composition as the main graphic ingredient; frequent use of image bookmarking services, portfolios from qualified professionals and graphic design or creativity blogs as the most common instruments of inspiration; an extraordinary relevance of imitation processes to stimulate visual culture, with priority attention given to respecting the basic principles of graphic design; and, finally, a common perception of positive student growth in aesthetic learning using the above resources.

Keywords: *Art direction; Aesthetics; Visual culture; Graphic design; Advertising creativity; Learning*

Resumen

En el contexto de la creatividad publicitaria, el director de arte es el máximo responsable del aspecto visual de los mensajes, una tarea para la que la sensibilidad estética constituye una cualidad indispensable y, por tanto, se convierte en una competencia fundamental en su formación. Mediante una encuesta cuantitativa y cualitativa organizada en cuatro bloques (contenidos, recursos, métodos y resultados) y una muestra de 21 profesores de Dirección de arte de los grados de Publicidad de la universidad española, este estudio busca analizar el papel que ocupa la educación estética en estas materias, así como las herramientas y métodos empleados por los docentes en este aprendizaje. Entre sus conclusiones, la investigación pone de manifiesto

la elevada relevancia del componente estético en estas asignaturas, cuyo enseñanza se complementa con otras materias del mismo plan de estudios; un protagonismo especial de las tareas prácticas en esta materia, que, apoyadas en el análisis teórico de piezas, se centran en el desarrollo de campañas publicitarias y en la composición como ingrediente gráfico principal; un empleo habitual de los servicios de marcadores digitales (bookmarking) de imágenes, portfolios de profesionales cualificados y blogs de diseño gráfico o creatividad como los instrumentos de inspiración más habituales; una extraordinaria relevancia de los procesos de imitación para estimular la cultura visual, con una atención prioritaria al respeto de los principios básicos de diseño gráfico; y, por último, una percepción común del positivo crecimiento del alumno en el aprendizaje estético a partir de los anteriores recursos.

Palabras clave: *Dirección de arte; Estética; Cultura visual; Diseño gráfico; Creatividad publicitaria; Formación*

Resumo

No contexto da criatividade publicitária, o director de arte é o responsável máximo pelo aspecto visual das mensagens, uma tarefa em que a sensibilidade estética é uma qualidade indispensável e, portanto, torna-se uma competência fundamental na sua formação. Este estudo, através de um inquérito quantitativo e qualitativo organizado em quatro blocos (conteúdos, recursos, métodos e resultados) e uma amostra de 21 professores de Direcção de Arte dos cursos de Publicidade da universidade espanhola, procura analisar o papel da educação estética nestas disciplinas, bem como os métodos e ferramentas utilizados pelos professores na respetiva aprendizagem. A investigação destaca, entre as suas conclusões, a elevada relevância da componente estética nestas disciplinas, cujo ensino é complementado por outras disciplinas do mesmo currículo; um destaque particular para as tarefas práticas nesta área, as quais, apoiadas por uma análise teórica das peças, se centram no desenvolvimento de campanhas publicitárias e composição como principal ingrediente gráfico; um uso frequente de serviços de marcação digital (bookmarking) de imagens, portfólios de profissionais qualificados e blogs de design gráfico ou de criatividade como os instrumentos de inspiração mais comuns; relevância extraordinária dos processos de imitação para estimular a cultura visual, com atenção prioritária

ao respeito pelos princípios básicos do design gráfico; e, por fim, uma percepção geral do crescimento positivo do estudante na aprendizagem estética a partir dos recursos acima referidos.

Palavras chave: *Direção de arte; Estética; Cultura visual; Design gráfico; Criatividade publicitária; Formação*

Translation by **Mark Athos Franklin Edwards**

1. Introduction

In the professional context of advertising creativity, it is art directors who are "ultimately responsible for the visual facet of the communication work conducted by an advertising agency" (Miguélez-Juan, 2019, p. 42). Developing visual messages in various media, ensuring the correct presentation of concepts, establishing the graphic or aesthetic line of the campaign or managing its correct execution are some of their functions (Tena, 2017).

Consolidated as one of the cornerstones of agencies' creative departments since their emergence in the 1960s (Miguélez-Juan, 2019), art directors' strategic skills, as well as their skills for leadership, management and the direction of creative work (Oejo, 1998, 2004; Seddon and Herriot, 2010; Miguélez-Juan, 2018), seem to constitute the main differential factors concerning the role of the graphic designer. However, Roca (1998) admits that the line between the two profiles is blurred and is only perceptible in larger agencies since, in the more modest ones, these functions—even those related to coordination (Ricard, 2008)—can be considered to overlap. In any case, if their description follows the criterion of graphic expression, there would be no substantial difference between the two (Navarro, 2006; Mahon, 2010).

Among the functions of the art director as a visual communicator are the proper management of the graphic elements or symbols involved in messages, mastering the communicative process and being acquainted with production systems (Ocaña, 2006; Tena, 2017). At this point, a cultural and intellectual background, curiosity and attention to fashions, trends or social sensibilities are especially relevant (Ocaña, 2006), as well as skills directly linked to their profession (advertising and

graphic design), deriving from various disciplines, namely: painting, sculpture, literature, music, marketing, psychology or sociology, among others (Gutiérrez, Martín and Sueiro, 2015).

Regarding their training, Roca (1998) and Navarro (2006) note that, at the end of the 20th century, most art directors were professionals who had spent years learning their trade, coming from degrees outside of communication studies (mostly Fine Arts), private design schools or digital graphic production studios. More recently, Miguélez-Juan (2016) paints a very different picture of the current situation of this discipline in Spanish universities: more than half of the institutions with communication studies teach some subject related to art direction, the presence of which has increased with the implementation of the European Higher Education Area.

The functions outlined in these studies are closely related to the professional skills listed above. As part of an educational process aimed at conceiving, designing, managing, and executing the visual aspects of the campaign, Miguélez-Juan (2016) refers to the need to foster a set of faculties (creativity, flexibility, aesthetic sensibility, ability to work in a team, etc.) originating in three areas (advertising, fine arts and graphic design). While Frascara (2018) advocates a design-centred teaching philosophy based on the balance between thinking and doing, capable of stimulating visual sophistication and sensitivity to materials, González-Mardones (2016) alludes to the need to increase the weight of practical training, due to the project-based nature of this discipline.

Within the formative and professional requirements of the art director, a large part of the cited literature agrees on the relevance of aesthetics, a science that reflects on the relationship between the sensory elements of form and the receiver's judgments (Villamizar-Duarte and Osorio-Contreras, 2016) and which in turn is related to the definition of style proposed by Satué: "a peculiar way of 'saying' something graphically" (1999, p. 299). Concerning the relevance of aesthetic education for training in graphic design, Presol-Herrero and Pérez-Manzanares (2020) allude to the benefits of cross-curricular teaching—through the coordination of specialised, more practical subjects, with other subjects of a discursive, formal and critical nature—and the need to give attention to historical-social aspects as a

basis for understanding the usefulness of certain universal formulas of communication and design that are linked to the Western tradition.

Regarding this aspect—both in aesthetic learning and in the professional execution of graphic design—many authors allude to the importance of imitation and inspirational resources: Zeegen (2013) or White (2014), for example, assert the relevance of the observation, reflection and referencing phases. Kleon emphasises that "nobody is born with a style or a voice. We don't come out of the womb knowing who we are. In the beginning, we learn by pretending to be our heroes. We learn by copying" (2012, p. 33) and he quotes the designer Yohji Yamamoto to illustrate this process: "start copying what you love. Copy, copy, copy, copy. At the end of the copy, you will find yourself" (in Kleon, 2012, p. 33). The popular designer Bruce Mau shares this view: "imitate. Don't be shy about it. Try to get as close as you can. You'll never get all the way, and the separation might be truly remarkable" (in Bader, 2015, p. 114). For less well-off designers, Strom (2020) argues that copying can even produce results comparable to education at schools. As Fontana assures, "you learn by studying those who, for one reason or another, are or were benchmarks (…), people who passed on experiences that broaden our minds, the analysis of which makes it possible to learn" (2019, p. 107).

Concerning this point, Suárez-Carballo and Muñiz-Velázquez insist on differentiating between plagiarism (an act of fraud) and copying (a legitimate alternative) and advocate the learning benefits of the latter: "in the end, creativity is a habit. It begins with copying, continues with inspiration and ends with originality" (2008, p. 116). Transferring this approach to the field of art, it must be remembered that, since the 18th century, imitation has been the basis of the academic system governing art education in Europe. As stated by Shore, "copying is the cornerstone of art creation and the impulse to copy the work of other artists is the engine of the evolution of art history" (2017, p. 80). This process of *rehabilitation* of pre-existing elements is especially conducive to facilitating the tasks of creating new messages when they present a different function from the original ones (Rambla, 2007).

Lastly, the aesthetic issue also encompasses the debate on the need for art directors to have their own style—*styling*, according to Zimmermann (2002). In

the field of design, several authors (Frascara, 2004; Navarro, 2006; Ricard, 2008; Roberts, 2009) criticise solutions centred on designers' personal expression, a position linked to their status as "author"—dubbed *egocentric design* by Rock (1996). In his words, the more obvious the author's influence on a project is, the further it will be from functionality and necessity and, therefore, the closer it will be to art. Nive Flórez, however, approves of this attitude in those disciplines, projects or contents that allow for a more "artistic or cultural" design (2015, p. 39).

2. Material and methods

Inspired, among others, in the work of Labio-Bernal, Romero-Domínguez, García-Orta and García-Prieto (2020)—regarding the usefulness of journalism as a tool for digital informational competence—, methodological design uses two research techniques: a secondary data analysis, aimed at collecting information on those responsible for these matters, and a quantitative-qualitative survey concerning these same teachers.

2.1. Goals

The study's main goal is to analyse the role of aesthetic education in art direction subjects in advertising-based university courses at Spanish universities, as well as the methods and tools used by educators when teaching.

This main goal manifests itself in several secondary goals:

- Analysing the importance given to aesthetic education in these subjects, as well as its methodology, resources, content and teaching processes.
- Researching the relevance of copying or imitation in the development of visual culture.
- Revealing the approach used in matters such as the adoption of one's own style or respect for the basic principles of graphic design.
- Assessing the learning results of these skills, based on the procedures and instruments used.

2.2. Hypothesis

In line with the above goals, the research sets forth the following working hypotheses:

- H1: Aesthetic education plays a core role in art direction subjects in advertising-based university degree courses in Spain.

- H2: This teaching process is based on a balance between theory (where the analysis of the history of art and design is an essential tool) and practice, using exercises in many different disciplines and employing typography as a crucial ingredient.

- H3: Teachers rely on *bookmarking* services and consulting blogs or portfolios of graphic designers as key resources to attain these skills.

- H4: In this learning process, teachers consider it especially important for students to imitate or copy qualified designers, learning the basic principles of graphic design and being stylistically versatile.

- H5: Through the above methods, students substantially improve their level of visual culture at the end of the subject.

2.3. Sample

The first phase of the research consisted of collecting data from the educators who teach art direction subjects in advertising-based degree courses in Spain in the 2020-2021 academic year, according to the information provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (n.d.). Based on these requirements, a ratio of 23 subjects from 21 universities or university centres was obtained. Of these, contact was made with 25 *(N)* teachers linked to these subjects, and they were invited via email to participate in the research.

The list of teachers who ultimately answered the questionnaire consisted of 21 professors *(n)* of art direction belonging to the following 17 institutions: CEU San Pablo, CESAG-Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, ESIC, Universidad de Málaga, Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia, Universidad Complutense de Madrid,

Universidad a Distancia de Madrid (UDIMA), Universidad de Alicante, Universidad de Sevilla, Universidad de Valladolid, Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), Universidad Nebrija, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Universidad San Jorge, Universitat de Girona, Universitat Ramón Llull and Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca.

2.4. Data collection instrument and variables

Regarding the second methodological technique—a quantitative and qualitative survey of a specific or cross-sectional nature, according to Eiroa and Barranquero (2017)—, the study is based on a questionnaire consisting mainly of closed questions (with multiple or dichotomous responses), Likert scales and open questions. These questions constitute the set of variables used to verify the hypotheses and can be grouped into four large blocks:

a. The Contents Block attempts to gather information on the skills addressed in each subject and the relevance of the aesthetic component therein; the presence of this learning process in the curriculum's other subjects; the visual ingredients used and their weight in teaching; the number of theoretical and practical exercises employed; the goals and contents of the latter, as well as the graphic design disciplines in which they are situated; and lastly, the importance given to the history of design, advertising and art in aesthetic education. It is linked to hypotheses H1 and H2.

b. The Resources Block is associated with hypothesis H3, and seeks to study the instruments used by teachers for aesthetic learning. Among these, it specifically asks about the use of blogs or professional portfolios from different disciplines (graphic design, advertising creativity, art, illustration or photography) or other inspirational resources; the bibliography or most important online references; and, lastly, the digital tools used for this purpose.

c. The Methods Block is linked to hypothesis H4, and analyses techniques or processes aimed at expanding visual culture or improving aesthetic education. An assessment is made of the usefulness of imitation or copying for aesthetic learning; the relevance of acquiring a certain style on the part of the student in this learning process; and, lastly, the suitability of respecting

or transgressing the basic principles of graphic design (proportion, legibility, hierarchy or grid systems, for example).

d. The Results Block tries to quantify how the previous strategies contribute to improving the student's visual culture. It pertains to hypothesis H5.

Along with these four blocks, a final generic open question is included to supplement the foregoing ones, aimed at reflecting on students' aesthetic learning. Table 1 shows the variables used, organised according to the described headings.

Variables (questions)	Values (responses)
CONTENTS BLOCK	
Skills addressed, specifying the most relevant *	_Conceptualisation (creativity, "ideas") _Visual and aesthetic language _Production _Team management _Coordination with the verbal aspect ("copy") _Other
Relevance of aesthetic education in skills *	[Scale 1-5] _0-1 Low relevance _2-3 Medium relevance _4-5 High relevance
Existence of other subjects in the degree course involving aesthetic education *	[Open question]
Visual ingredients used, specifying the most relevant *	_Typography _Colour _Composition _Drawing or illustration _Photography _Decoration or locations _Apparel _Other
Number of theoretical and practical exercises addressing the aesthetic component *	_No exercise _1-3 exercises _4-6 exercises _7 or more exercises
Type of theoretical and practical exercises	[Open question]

Variables (questions)	Values (responses)
Scope of these exercises *	_Advertising design _Poster design _Editorial design _Visual identity _Packaging _Interactive design _Audio-visual design _Editorial illustration
Importance given to learning the history of design, graphic advertising and art *	_Less important _Important _Very important
RESOURCES BLOCK	
Use of blogs or portfolios concerning graphic design, advertising creativity, art, illustration or photography for aesthetic learning	Yes / No
Other areas of inspiration	[Open question]
Most important digital references	[Open question]
Most important bibliographic references	[Open question]
Other resources used	[Open question]
Digital tools used	_Image bookmarking tools _General bookmarking tools _Blogging tools _Other
METHODS BLOCK	
Usefulness of imitation for aesthetic education *	[Scale 1-5] _0-1 Low relevance _2-3 Medium relevance _4-5 High relevance
Usefulness of imitation (explanation)	[Open question]
Importance of acquiring a certain style by the student *	[Scale 1-5] _0-1 Low relevance _2-3 Medium relevance _4-5 High relevance
Importance of respecting the basic rules of visual language *	[Scale 1-5] _0-1 Low relevance _2-3 Medium relevance _4-5 High relevance

Variables (questions)	Values (responses)
Importance of subverting the basic norms of visual language *	[Scale 1-5] _0-1 Low relevance _2-3 Medium relevance _4-5 High relevance
RESULTS BLOCK	
Level of visual culture before and after starting the course *	[Scale 1-5] _0-1 Low level _2-3 Medium level _4-5 High level
OTHER	
Other reflections on the object of study not previously considered	[Open question]

Table 1: *Questionnaire addressed to art direction teachers in Spanish advertising-based degree courses (2020-2021 academic year). Source: own work.*

3. Results

In this chapter, a descriptive analysis of the participants' responses is carried out based on the four-block structure proposed in the previous section. The graphs pertaining to the quantitative responses can be consulted in the Annex.

3.1. Contents Block

In the syllabi of art direction subjects, particular importance is given to skills concerning conceptualisation (creativity or nurturing of ideas), visual language and aesthetics, which are covered by almost all subjects. In only one case, the second aptitude was omitted. There was less emphasis on production tasks (the most technical aspect, linked to learning how to use software or preparing the final art) and coordination with the verbal part, both with more than three-quarters of the responses. Lastly, less than half of teachers consider leadership or team management tasks to be significant. Other responses emphasise the inextricable link between creativity and visual language or multilingualism as a relevant crossover skill.

Concerning the previous section, regarding the priority scope of the subject, opinions fluctuate between conceptualisation and aesthetic training—together accounting

for 71.4% of the answers, with a slight superiority of the latter (7 cases compared to 8)—and a significant distance from the technical section, which stands out in only 3 subjects. With an average of 4 points and a standard deviation of 1.18, the majority of respondents (15) give high or very high importance (values 4 and 5 on the Likert scale, respectively) to aesthetic training in the subject, while 6 teachers (28.6%) assign it a moderate significance (corresponding to values 2 and 3). With the exception of a teacher who expressly declined the invitation to participate—as the research had little bearing on the contents or goals of his subject—, no participant considers this aspect to be of only marginal importance in their training, despite the fact that this aesthetic component is already addressed in other curriculum subjects. Among these can be highlighted concepts such as design (7 cases), art (5), aesthetics (5), creativity (4) or the adjective *visual* (9) and, more generically, advertising (12) and poster (3). Only one participant indicates that these skills pertain exclusively to the subject of art direction.

With regard to the visual language ingredients contributing to aesthetic education, the fundamentals of composition, typography and colour stand out very clearly, all of them present in more than 90% of cases. A little less relevant is the involvement of images such as photography (16 cases) or illustration (highlighted by 11 participants). Other, more specific answers refer to the mastery of further basic elements of the visual alphabet (lines, shapes or textures) or to the design of lettering. Among the above ingredients, there is an obvious consensus in attributing the greatest importance to the compositional section (16 teachers).

Regarding the nature of the proposed tasks, all the subjects include exercises of a practical or theoretical nature (in the latter case, with only 3 exceptions), although the number of the former is slightly higher. The areas of graphic design in which they are located are very varied, although graphic advertising campaigns (with 90.5% of responses) and poster design stand out very noticeably. Other disciplines with a strong presence (although notably lower than the foregoing) are visual identity, packaging and interactive design (all of them addressed by approximately half of the participants) and, to a lesser extent, the publishing and audio-visual sector.

In relation to the theoretical exercises, there was an emphasis on those focusing on visual analysis (14 participants) of pieces of graphic excellence (e.g. those

receiving awards at creative events), designed to appreciate the role of graphics resources in the meaning or effectiveness of the piece and later integrated into the development of creative works. In two cases, this analysis is carried out through comments in the classroom based on the presentation of the students' own work or on a certain sector and its corresponding skill. Among the theoretical disciplines that guide these works, the premises of figurative and plastic semiotics, rhetoric or aesthetics itself are studied. In other cases, mention is made of the usefulness of the search for visual precedents and the compilation of professional pieces, examples or references to illustrate the different principles of graphic design or to decipher the narrative intent or the *visual key* of the message.

Regarding the practical exercises, the heterogeneity of the answers can be synthesised in several options: in most of the subjects (17), they consist of creative exercises (of differing length), individual or in teams, geared towards the creation of concepts and the application of visual ingredients (colour palettes, typography, layout), especially simulating real situations in various (static, dynamic or interactive) advertising campaign formats, but also in other areas of graphic design: brand design and applications, posters, interactive design, packaging, integrated communication or audio-visual design. These exercises usually start from a briefing (real or imagined) or using materials and models provided by the teacher (photographs chosen at random, for example). In some cases, the proposal is based on the brief and copy of pieces that have won awards in competitions, the graphic solutions of which are subsequently compared with the solutions created by the students. On other occasions, these visual concepts are tackled with a freely chosen theme with no relation to any specific discipline or need. Among the latter, we could mention the creation of creative colour palettes, typography design or the creation of portfolios. Lastly, in one subject, the learning of technical skills took centre stage.

There is also a certain diversity of opinions regarding the role that the learning of history (of advertising, art and graphic design) plays in shaping students' visual culture. Approximately half of the respondents consider this to be important or very important, compared to a second group that gives little importance to this area (one option, the latter, highlighted mainly in the three fields). Attention to history is especially weak in the artistic field and is slightly stronger in the area of advertising.

3.2. Resources Block

To enrich the visual culture of students, teachers mostly resort to the use of blogs and, above all, portfolios or pieces of advertising or design (used by almost all participants), which elicit significantly greater interest than other areas: photography, illustration and art (in this order). Along with these tools, numerous additional sources of inspiration are mentioned, such as advertising festivals, creative contests, and advertising awards; art and design magazines; museums, exhibitions and artist communities; videos and images on social networks (mainly Instagram, YouTube or Pinterest); podcasts; urban art; marketing and branding portals; or other cultural areas (architecture, industrial design, cinema, fashion, literature, gastronomy, interior design or even cocktails). One answer expressly asks after the relevance of the constant observation of everyday motifs: nature, light, or, directly, society.

Regarding the supporting bibliography, the 16 responses pointing to the use of specific references in the subject—optional or compulsory consultation—reveal a multitude of titles, although, depending on the subject, those related to art direction and advertising design, graphic design and visual communication, visual syntax, art, aesthetics or creativity yearbooks (such as those of D&AD) stand out. Of all the references, only 3—Dondis (1998), Mahon (2010) and Montes Vozmediano and Vizcaíno-Laorga (2015)—were cited twice. Similarly, an abundant collection of digital references is given, pointing to inspirational resources (mainly blogs) in the areas of graphic design, advertising creativity, visual identity, typography, trends and festivals or awards (Cannes, CdeC, El Sol, Laus, One Show or D&AD). Of the vast resulting list, only 5 are mentioned on more than one occasion: 3 graphic design platforms—Gràffica (https://graffica.info), Brandemia (https://brandemia.org) and Designspiration (https://designspiration.com)—and 2 pages specialised in creativity and advertising such as Yorokobu (https://yorokobu.es) and Criatura Creativa (https://lacriaturacreativa.com).

Along with the bibliographic references and online resources cited, the teachers point to other tools that they consider essential for this aesthetic training: among them, presentations in class; graphic examples of a different nature analysed in a group in the classroom; documentaries on design; a list of must-see movies; advertis-

ing-based "making of" videos or other areas where images are especially significant (photographs, lighting, colour); or, lastly, projects created by the teachers themselves.

Among the specific tools used for inspiration and visual culture, a majority of teachers (71.4%) use image collection platforms (such as Pinterest) and, to a much lesser degree, blogging (4) or general bookmarking tools (2). Two other teachers also mention the use of Instagram as a basic inspiration resource.

3.3. Methods Block

Regarding the most important techniques to stimulate aesthetic learning in students, there is a notable consensus in pointing out the relevance—very high (15 individuals) or high (9)—of imitating the work of professionals, compared to 5 participants who assign a moderate (corresponding to values 2 and 3) or low (a single response) utility thereto. On the 0 to 5-point Likert scale used to assess this question, the average is 3.9 points and the standard deviation is 1.2. To justify the advantages of this teaching strategy, following the line of the contributions collected in the introductory point, the majority opinion considers analogy to be a highly-useful classic teaching technique to increase visual culture, improve the management of the visual alphabet and achieve one's own approach. On several occasions, the importance of selecting appropriate references to appreciate good design is underscored. Some teachers resort to other terms to define this work more precisely: among them, they highlight the need to "learn to observe and get excited" or "identify the elements used by professionals to develop their creative techniques". On one occasion, the Scamper method is also explicitly referred to, consisting of changing or combining pre-existing ideas as the germ to create a new product.

This general support for imitation as a teaching resource is maintained in the perception of the importance of mastering the basic principles of graphic design, to which almost all teachers assign very high (17 answers) or high (3) importance and, in any case, slightly higher than the option of subverting these norms (12 and 5, respectively). The greater heterogeneity of opinions regarding experimentation is demonstrated by their highest standard deviation—1.38 compared to 0.53, which reveals respect for the norm—and their least support, with a lower average

(4.14 compared to 4.76, respectively). Only two teachers express a preference for this attitude of transgression against the predominance of a more academic visual language, versus seven answers which are positioned in the opposite direction. In any case, there is a high general interest in simultaneously serving both goals.

Faced with the homogeneity of the previous assessments, the perception of the relevance of acquiring a personal visual style is more varied: on the same Likert scale, an average of 2.9 points and the highest standard deviation of this block (1.6 points) are obtained. Nor is a particular correspondence between this perception and the above aspects observed, especially those concerning the importance of copying or violating the principles of good design.

3.4. Results Block

The Likert-scale numbers reveal a generally mild growth in the level of students in the aesthetic chapter: 1 point (9 cases), 2 points (8 cases) or 3 points (3). The average growth is 1.62 points (a score of 1.95 before starting the course compared to an estimate of 3.57 at its conclusion). Only one teacher does not perceive improvement, although it is true that, in his case, the previous level assigned to students exceeds the rest of the respondents (4 points), probably due to the greater experience obtained in a previous subject on the fundamentals of graphic design.

No stable correlation is observed between the results of this section and the variables analysed in the previous blocks and, in general, any information which could in any way justify a greater or lesser degree of progress by students.

3.5. Other reflections

In the last section of the questionnaire, the participants were offered the possibility of carrying out an open assessment of the aesthetic experience of the students in the subject. Here are some additional reflections specifically formulated by some teachers:

- The need to give a greater role to these skills in advertising-based degree courses to proportionally reflect the relevance of this professional profile.

- A greater significance of practical rather than theoretical work, often based on a global creative process (from the briefing until the final art) and based on key aspects such as the correct understanding of the visual concept, image reading and graphic expression using different methods.

- The importance of sharing activities, researching or fostering critical thinking, empathy and "learning to think" to effectively solve a communication problem.

- The unequal level of interest of students and the demanding dedication of the teacher to provide quality learning.

- The perception of greater aesthetic sensibilities of students in recent years, especially in specific contexts (on Instagram, for example).

- Despite the importance given to this area, one participant suggests avoiding the concept of "aesthetics", due to its excessive connection with "subjectivity" or "taste".

4. Discussion

The results represented in the previous section allow the hypotheses of this study to be partially confirmed. In the first place, the answers show a clear prominence of the aesthetic field in art direction competencies, despite the fact that this training is not exclusive to this subject and is included in other subjects of advertising-based study plans, with various goals and names that tend to refer to design, art, aesthetics and creativity. In matters of art direction, visual confection is seen as the core skill, closely followed by conceptualisation (two goals that seem closely linked) and above skills or abilities such as production, coordination with the verbal part and team monitoring or management; the lukewarm assessment of this last trait—the one which best differentiates the art director from the graphic designer—seems to suggest that most of the teachers see no significant difference between the two profiles in their subjects.

Among the areas in which academic activity is focused, advertising and poster design indisputably stand out, as do—to a lesser extent—visual identity, packaging and interactive design. Together with the goals and peculiarities of the academic field (advertising), this singular preference for advertising campaigns in

practical content can be explained by its relationship with the other areas, possibly acting as an umbrella for various supports, formats or disciplines (such as interactive or editorial design, for instance). In its teaching, tasks of a practical nature acquire special prominence, with exercises frequently aimed at the design of pieces or visual concepts (from real or invented briefs or materials provided by the teacher) for which the theoretical training (with an equally central presence) provides an essential basis, mainly through the analysis of real pieces or projects.

Regarding the contents addressed, contrary to expectations expressed in the hypotheses (which predicted that the typographic component would be the most relevant element), special attention is paid to composition as the fundamental visual ingredient, above other essential elements in the graphic piece (the aforementioned typeface, colour or photography). This preference may be due to the greater semantic versatility of the composition or its ability to integrate the remaining components in its definition. For the development of these practices—in which students' visual literacy and the evolution of their visual culture play a key role—one of the most outstanding contributions to the study points to the extraordinary interest of the processes of imitation or copying in aesthetic education—with a special emphasis on the work of prestigious professionals or award-winning pieces—wherein identifying good design and determining correct or incorrect uses of graphic language is paramount. To achieve this, a variety of tools are used, chief among them online image bookmarking and blogs and portfolios in the areas of graphic design and advertising creativity, as well as books or digital references, though, with some exceptions, the catalogue of titles of the latter is very diverse. Likewise, while insisting on the value of constant observation of reality and other disciplines (such as cinema or architecture), there is no common position on the relevance of history in this discipline, perhaps due to the existence of other subjects that include this component, as stated by Presol-Herrero and Pérez-Manzanares (2020).

Lastly, aesthetic learning attaches special value to familiarity and mastery of basic principles of graphic design—these being valued to a greater degree than a transgressive attitude that, in any case, would be derived from knowledge of norms and is meant to coincide with more advanced skills on the part of students. At the same time, in contrast to the forceful comments made in the introduction, there are

notable discrepancies on the relevance of acquiring a personal style in the visual language used by the art director, an aspect that is directly related to the very definition of the discipline—which attempts to meet a certain communicational need or problem—and its relationship with art. We can observe how the adoption of the previous methods and tools leads to a generalised (although modest) improvement in students' aesthetic judgment, according to the perception of the teachers involved.

Thus, this study confirms the relevance of the aesthetic variable in art direction subjects of Spanish advertising-based degree courses, the learning of which is supplemented by other subjects in the study plan (H1); a special role of practical work in this area, based on the theoretical analysis of works, focusing on advertising campaigns as the main area of work and pointing to composition as an essential ingredient (H2); a special focus on digital image bookmarking services, graphic design and creativity blogs and the portfolios of qualified professionals in these fields as the main instruments of inspiration (H3). On the basis of these resources, the processes of imitation or copying are considered highly relevant to stimulate visual culture, with priority attention given to the mastery of the basic principles of graphic design (H4); and, lastly, there is a common perception of—generally moderate—growth on the part of the student in their aesthetic education (H5).

Finally, some limitations or problems encountered when conducting this research should be mentioned. First, it should be noted that four universities have been represented by two professors from the same centre, a variable that has led to a degree of similarity in certain answers. On the other hand, although they are mentioned spontaneously by the participants, the survey does not pay enough attention to the relevance of social networks—especially image-focused platforms like Instagram, Behance or YouTube—in students' aesthetic education and in the development of their visual culture. This aspect, of particular interest to the subject matter of the present paper, is expected to be addressed in more detail in future research. Regarding this point, it seems appropriate to assess whether some platforms (such as Instagram) help shape the aesthetic criteria of students and to what extent the difficulties of the latter in differentiating between good and bad design are related to our current hyper-visual society, where it is probable that the flood of stimuli leads users to immediate consumption of images, not allowing them to examine the images in greater detail.

Another of the doubts raised by this research paper points to the unequal performance of students, as can be seen from their answers. It seems appropriate to analyse the factors (related to visual perception, predisposition or surroundings, for example) leading to these diverse standards. In this line, although it is estimated that the survey method provides reliable and illustrative findings, it would be convenient for it to be complemented in later work with other qualitative techniques (individual interviews or a detailed analysis of academic results, for example), focused mainly on students' points of view, which would allow the effectiveness of the formulas highlighted by teachers to be contrasted and reveal their possible benefits in the development of new skills: the ability of the aesthetic component to enhance creativity, its weight in the conceptualisation process or its usefulness shaping the meaning of the message are some aspects that are thought to be especially relevant in the learning of the subject of art direction, but are not addressed in a rigorous or objective manner in the survey data.

Lastly, as evidenced by an observation made by one of the participants, one might even wonder to what extent the term *aesthetic* is the most relevant expression or if, on the contrary, it should be replaced by another option alluding—in a broader way—to the solvent and consistent use of visual language in art direction and graphic design.

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Annex

[1] https://summa.upsa.es/details.vm?q=id:0000135859