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Gaze, Space and Symbolism: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Book Covers of Northern Nigerian Literary Writings

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Abstract

This study explores the multimodal representation of characters on the covers of selected Northern Nigerian literary works from the perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). The study addresses a research gap on how the covers of literary works, particularly novels and collections of short stories, represent characters and expose themes that reflect and negotiate societal narratives within the Northern Nigerian literary context. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) and Machin and Mayr's semiotic analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2023), the study examines key visual elements such as gaze direction, spatial layout, inclusion/exclusion, and multimodal resources (e.g., color, clothing, props). The study conducts a qualitative analysis of both visual and textual components of ten covers purposively sampled from publishers' archives, libraries, and online literary platforms. The findings underscore the significance of these covers as multimodal texts that communicate societal narratives and engage audiences both emotionally and intellectually. The study concludes that these covers serve as powerful tools for reflecting the themes of the texts which include

identity, power dynamics, cultural heritage, and gender roles, while also challenging or reinforcing societal norms.

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Visual Grammar, Northern Nigerian Literature, Book Covers, Semiotics

Introduction

Visual representation of characters on book covers plays an important role in how audiences perceive and engage with the book. Like all texts, book covers incorporate different visual resources including gaze, space, and symbols to express meaning. Cover illustrations are not only for aesthetic purposes, they provide an inside into the content of the books, such as sociocultural discourses centered on identity, power, culture, and gender. Through visual strategies on book covers, an audience's expectations and the stories in the books can be examined. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) as well as Machin and Mayr (2012) provided some basic tools for analysing visual artifacts such as book covers by examining the impact of visual grammar and semiotics on meaning construction in visual texts. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) framework focuses on gaze, spatial arrangements, and other multimodal resources that enable narration. An example of such visual elements is the direction in which a person is looking that can invite the audience to either watch or reflect (Van Leeuwen, 2008). For Machin and Mayr (2012), colors, clothing, and gesture convey meaning in themselves and can trigger feelings. Despite the growing body of literature on visual semiotics and multimodal analysis, there remains limited research on the representation of characters on book covers, particularly within the Northern Nigerian literary context. This gap highlights the need for further exploration into book covers.

Nigerian literature attracts more attention for its richly textured exploration of cultural heritage, identity, and gender, Adetuyi (2017). However, the visual representation on literary book covers has gone without proper academic investigation, in spite of being

significant in guiding readers' understanding of the text Yilmaz (2021). Book covers provides visual representation of crucial information on the themes of the books such as values in society, cultural presumptions, and power relations Almosawi & halawachy (2020). This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining the visual practices employed on the covers of Northern Nigerian Literary works. Applying the lens of Multimodal Discourse Analysis, specifically focusing on elements such as gaze, spatial structure, inclusion/exclusion, and multimodal resources, this study aims to dissect and unlock the themes, power dynamics, and social values embedded in these visual constructions.

This research, therefore, argues that the covers of Northern Nigerian literary texts are effective multimodal texts, which make use of calculated design choices to represent characters and narrate society tales. From an examination of the semiotic materials used in cover design, the research shows how the characters visually project and negotiate identities, power, and society norms. In addition to visual elements such as gaze, spatial layout, and color, language plays a critical role in the multimodal construction of meaning on book covers. Thus, titles, subtitles, and other textual elements interact with visual resources to reinforce or challenge societal narratives, cultural values, and thematic focus. This study, therefore, examines not only the visual representation of characters but also how language works in tandem with these visuals to engage audiences and convey deeper meanings

Literature Review

The study of book covers as multimodal texts has been extensively explored through the lens of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), especially, with the foundational work by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) and Machin and Mayr (2012, 2023) emphasizing the role of visual grammar in meaning-making, particularly through gaze, spatial layout, and multimodal resources like color, clothing, and props. Recent studies have applied this framework

across diverse cultural and literary contexts, revealing how book covers reflect societal narratives, power dynamics, and cultural identity. For instance, Lam and Tran (2025) and Li, Li, and Miao (2019) highlight the influence of cultural and ideological factors on cover design, showing how visual elements are adapted to align with target audiences' expectations. Similarly, Kachorsky and Reid (2020) and Mah and Shin (2023) explore how visual elements like gaze and positioning represent gender roles and characters, with Mah and Shin (2023) specifically examining how feminist fiction covers challenge traditional norms. Zao, Zhang, and Feng (2023) and Xie (2020) further demonstrate how book covers serve as tools for cultural diplomacy and ideological messaging, particularly in translated works, while Wu and Wu (2021) analyze the evolution of Jane Eyre covers in China, revealing how visual strategies reflect changing societal attitudes.

In addition to cultural and ideological influences, studies have examined the role of multimodal resources in engaging audiences and constructing narratives. Oktafiani and Sari (2020) and Ahmad, Daud, and Fitrisia (2021) emphasize the importance of color, imagery, and props in attracting readers and conveying thematic content, particularly in children's and fantasy literature. Sunderland and McGlashan (2013) and Imansari and Harti (2023) further explore how visual elements reflect cultural identity and gender representation, with Sunderland and McGlashan (2013) focusing on the representation of diverse family structures in picture books. Muhassin et al. (2022) and Leenstra (2023) extend this analysis to educational and romance genres, respectively, showing how visual design influences audience engagement and emotional connection. These findings collectively provide a robust foundation for analyzing Northern Nigerian literary book covers, as they highlight the interplay between visual design, cultural context, and societal narratives, aligning with the current study's focus on identity, power dynamics, and cultural heritage in Northern Nigerian literature.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) as its primary analytical framework. MDA allows for the systematic analysis of various semiotic resources, such as language, image, text, and layout, which work together to convey meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2023). The study focuses on Northern Nigerian literary book covers, examining how visual and linguistic elements contribute to meaning-making and reflect societal narratives. The data for this study comprises a purposive sample of 10 book covers from Northern Nigerian authors. The selected covers represent a range of themes, including identity, cultural heritage, gender roles, and power dynamics. The sampling criteria include: Literary works by Northern Nigerian authors to ensure cultural relevance, covers that prominently feature characters (e.g., individuals, groups) as central visual elements and text as title or subtitle and displays a mix of traditional and contemporary visual representations to provide diversity in the analysis. The book covers were selected from various genres, including novels, and short story collections. High-resolution images of the selected book covers were collected from publishers' archives, libraries, and online literary platforms to ensure visual clarity for analysis. The publication years of the selected books range from 2005 to 2020, providing a 15-year span that captures both traditional and modern visual trends in Nigerian literature.

The study applies Kress and van Leeuwen's framework of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) and Machin and Mayr's semiotic analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2023) to examine the visual representation of characters. The analysis is focused on key elements such as the direction of gaze (direct or indirect) analyzed to determine audience involvement. Direct gazes establish a connection with viewers, while indirect gazes facilitate introspection and emotional detachment. The

positioning of characters within the visual frame is analyzed to uncover themes of power dynamics, hierarchy, and balance in relationships. Likewise, the study identifies which characters appear or do not appear on the covers and analyzes the thematic implications of such design choices. In order to achieve the set objectives, elements like color, lighting, apparel, and props are deciphered to ascertain their symbolic worth and role in narrative construction. Titles, subtitles, and other textual elements are examined to ascertain how they interact with visual content to construct meaning.

The analysis involves a close reading of the visual and linguistic elements on each book cover. Each cover is examined individually to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships among visual and textual components. The analytical process follows four steps: A detailed description of the visual and linguistic components, including gaze, spatial layout, and symbolic resources, the semiotic meanings of these components are interpreted within the cultural and societal context of Nigerian literature. Finally, the findings are situated within broader theoretical discussions on visual grammar, semiotics, and societal narratives.

Data Analysis

Interaction between Characters and Audience Engagement

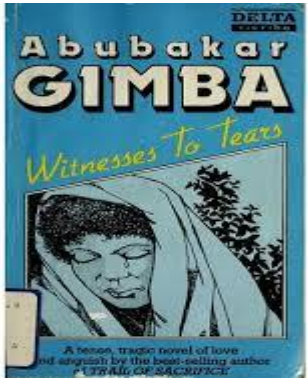

Figure 1: ***Witnesses to Tears***

The interaction between characters on the covers varies significantly, shaping how the audience connects with the narratives. For instance, in *Witnesses to Tears,* the lone female figure gazes downward, avoiding direct eye contact. This introspective pose conveys vulnerability, sadness, or submission. By distancing herself from the audience, she invites them to observe her emotional journey as outsiders. This choice encourages viewers to empathize with her, drawing them into the narrative through a sense of curiosity and contemplation. Similarly, in *Habiba*, the woman's downward gaze and reflective posture enhance the mystery surrounding her. Her traditional attire further emphasizes her cultural background, making the audience question the relationship between her personal story and societal norms.

In stark contrast, the cover of *The Undesirable Element* features a young woman directly engaging the audience with a confident and welcoming smile. Her direct gaze fosters a sense of connection, encouraging viewers to delve into her story. Alongside her, an older man gazes away from the audience, reflecting introspection or detachment. This combination of direct and indirect gazes adds complexity to the interpersonal dynamics and suggests generational tensions or differences. The background figure's gaze is ambiguous, hinting at mystery or conflict within the narrative, further engaging the audience's curiosity.

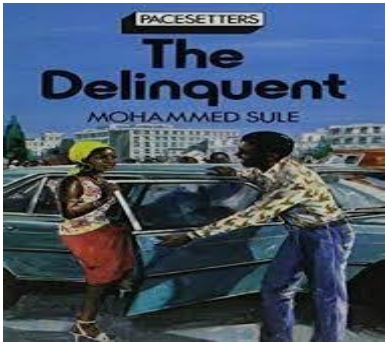

Figure 2: *The Delinquent*

The Delinquent exemplifies interaction through an interpersonal gaze between two characters. The male character actively engages the female character by opening a car door, symbolizing an invitation or persuasion. His gaze, directed at the woman, indicates dominance or an assertive role in their interaction. The female character's returned gaze, combined with her leaning posture, reflects hesitation or internal conflict. This interpersonal dynamic mirrors the title's themes of rebellion and negotiation of power, creating an immersive visual narrative for the audience to interpret.

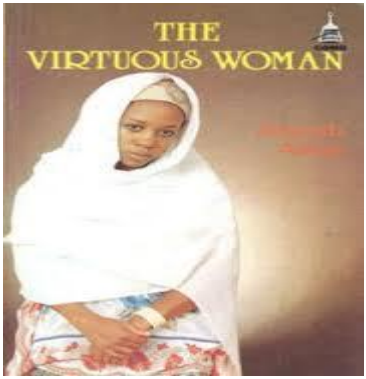

Figure 3: *The Virtuous Woman*

The Virtuous Woman presents a more balanced engagement. The woman's direct gaze is calm and composed, projecting confidence and humility. Her connection with the audience is subtle yet profound, aligning with the moral and reflective themes of the book. The serene expression encourages viewers to reflect on the qualities of virtue while feeling a personal connection to the character. This engagement is further emphasized by her modest attire and symmetrical positioning, reinforcing the narrative's emphasis on purity and dignity.

Van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of "gaze" as a communicative tool aligns with these observations. Direct gazes invite audience participation, while indirect gazes foster introspection and

emotional engagement. Research by Machin and Mayr (2012) underscores the impact of gaze direction in shaping audience interpretation, demonstrating how visual narratives use this element to evoke specific emotional responses.



Figure 4: ***Love in the Afternoon***

The girl on the cover of *Love in the Afternoon* is making direct eye contact with the viewer. This is classified as a "demand" image in Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework, meaning it establishes a direct interaction between the subject and the audience. The direct gaze suggests engagement, inviting the viewer into the emotional or narrative world of the book. It can also create a sense of intimacy, making the reader feel personally addressed by the subject. The girl is smiling slightly, conveying warmth and a welcoming demeanor. This aligns with the book's theme of love and suggests a positive, affectionate, or emotionally engaging storyline. The expression is soft and gentle, potentially evoking curiosity and encouraging the reader to explore the book. The girl's attire, including a hijab, suggests cultural or religious elements that may be significant in the novel. The combination of gaze and attire may indicate themes of identity, tradition, or personal experience within a specific cultural setting. The title "LOVE IN THE

AFTERNOON" suggests romance or relationships, which contrasts with the innocence and youthfulness of the subject. This contrast may intrigue the viewer and encourage them to engage with the book to uncover its themes. The choice of colors (red and yellow) further enhances this sense of warmth and passion, reinforcing the themes of love and emotion.

On the cover of *Starlet*, the female character's gaze is directed at the audience, creating a strong sense of presence and self-awareness. Her confident expression aligns with themes of independence and ambition, which the title implies. Unlike other covers, her direct engagement challenges traditional portrayals of female characters, positioning her as an empowered and assertive figure. In *From Fatika with Love*, the young woman on the cover is making direct eye contact with the viewer, classifying this as a "demand" image. This direct gaze creates engagement and interaction, making the viewer feel personally addressed. The intensity of her gaze, combined with her slightly serious or neutral facial expression, conveys confidence, strength, and cultural pride. Unlike in *Love in the Afternoon* where the subject had a warm smile, the woman here has a composed and confident look.

This may suggest themes of dignity, heritage, or self-assurance, aligning with the possible cultural and historical significance of the book's title, *From Fatika with Love*. The gaze does not appear confrontational but rather poised and inviting, encouraging curiosity about the book's narrative. The woman's traditional clothing, jewelry, and decorated calabash reinforce a strong cultural identity. Her gaze, in combination with her attire, suggests a representation of heritage and pride, positioning the book as potentially engaging with themes of tradition, love, and identity. The phrase *From Fatika with Love* implies an affectionate or meaningful connection to a place (Fatika), possibly referencing cultural roots or a romantic storyline. The direct gaze paired with

the title may suggest a narrative centered on heritage, love, and cultural transmission.

Positioning and Spatial Layout

Positioning and spatial layout significantly influence how characters are framed and interpreted on the covers. In *The Virtuous Woman*, the woman's central placement underscores her importance within the narrative. Her symmetrical pose conveys balance and stability, which aligns with the book's themes of morality and virtue. The white hijab enhances this representation, symbolizing purity and spiritual cleanliness. The minimalistic background shifts the audience's focus entirely to the woman, ensuring that her role as the central figure remains undisputed.

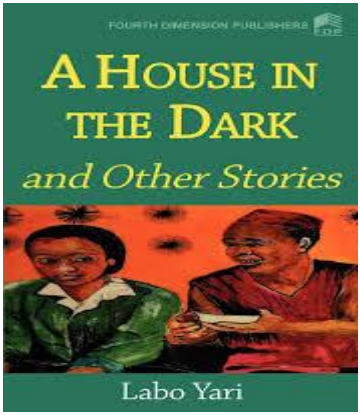

Figure 5: *A House in the Dark and Other Stories*

In *A House in the Dark*, spatial layout highlights intergenerational relationships. The older man's background placement symbolizes his role as a mentor or guide, while the younger individual's prominence suggests a focus on learning and growth. The two characters' side-by-side positioning emphasizes their connection, while the absence of additional characters creates an intimate dynamic. This spatial arrangement draws attention to themes of

mentorship and the transmission of knowledge, central to the book's narrative.

Conversely, *The Delinquent* employs positioning to reflect power dynamics and decision-making. The male character, positioned closer to the car, takes an active role by opening the door, symbolizing agency and authority. The female character, standing outside the car, occupies a more passive position, indicating hesitation or a critical decision point. This spatial arrangement mirrors the gendered power dynamics often explored in narratives of youth and rebellion. *Witnesses to Tears* uses spatial elements to emphasize isolation and constraint. The central placement of the woman within a triangular frame encloses her, symbolizing restriction or entrapment. The sparse background further amplifies her emotional vulnerability, ensuring that the audience's focus remains entirely on her internal struggles. Similarly, in *Habiba*, the woman's central positioning and detailed attire highlight her individuality and cultural significance. The absence of other characters ensures that her story takes precedence, allowing the audience to explore her personal journey without distraction.



Figure 6: *The Starlet*

The cover of *Starlet and other short Stories* prominently features a young woman in the foreground, positioned centrally. She is dressed in traditional attire, making her the focal point of the visual

composition. Her facial expression appears neutral or slightly serious, drawing attention to her presence. Behind her, slightly to the left, is a man wearing a hat and holding a stick. His presence in the background creates a layered effect, suggesting a social or relational dynamic between the two figures. The background consists of a lush, green natural setting, possibly indicating a rural environment. The blurred trees and water contribute to depth perception, emphasizing the characters. The title, "*The Starlet*", is large, bold, and placed at the bottom center of the cover. The font size and white coloring make it highly visible, ensuring that it draws immediate attention. The subtitle, "and other Short Stories", is in a smaller font beneath the main title, providing additional context about the book's content. The author's name, "Aliyu Kamal", is placed at the very bottom in a smaller font, subtly acknowledging the writer without overpowering the visual elements. The top right corner contains a logo, possibly of the publisher, reinforcing the book's authenticity. The spatial arrangement of the characters suggests a possible narrative tension or relationship between the two. The woman's centrality and the man's background positioning might symbolize different levels of agency or focus in the story. The contrast between the bright white dress and the darker background further highlights the female figure, reinforcing her significance in the book's themes. The setting (greenery and water) might symbolize nature, tradition, or a rural setting, hinting at thematic concerns in the stories.

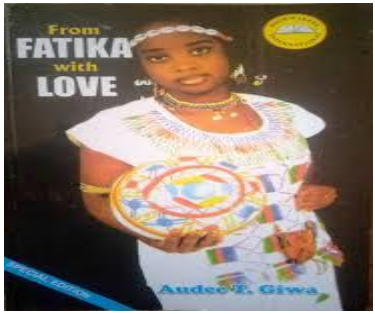

Figure 7: *Fatika with Love*

The woman on the cover of *From Fatika with Love* is the central visual element, positioned prominently to draw attention to her cultural identity and significance. Her direct gaze establishes a strong connection with the viewer, exuding confidence and pride, while her traditional attire, jewelry, and the decorated calabash reinforce themes of heritage and cultural authenticity. The contrast between her white dress and the dark background further highlights her presence, making her the dominant focal point. The spatial layout supports this emphasis, with the title positioned at the top left, aligning with the "ideal" in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework, suggesting a thematic focus on love and identity. The author's name at the bottom serves as the "real," grounding the book in credibility. Additionally, the bold typography, especially the emphasis on "FATIKA," signals the cultural or geographical significance of the story. The overall composition ensures that the woman remains the primary semiotic resource, with other elements complementing and reinforcing the book's central themes of love, tradition, and cultural pride.

These spatial arrangements align with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) framework of visual grammar, where positioning and layout shape audience perception of importance, relationships, and themes. These design choices reflect broader societal narratives, emphasizing themes of individuality, mentorship, and power.

Inclusion and Exclusion

Inclusion and exclusion of characters on the cover play a pivotal role in conveying thematic focus. For instance, *I'd Rather Die!* features a solitary female character, emphasizing her personal struggles and resistance to societal norms. The exclusion of other characters reinforces themes of isolation, individuality, and resilience. Her traditional attire connects her to cultural expectations, while the bold title hints at defiance, creating a narrative tension that invites audience engagement.

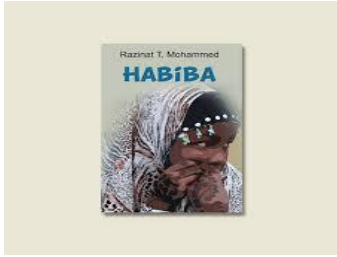

Figure 8: ***Habiba***

Similarly, *Habiba* excludes additional characters, centering the narrative entirely on the woman's personal journey. Her traditional Fulani attire and henna-adorned hands highlight cultural heritage, while the minimalistic background shifts the focus to her introspection. The exclusion of external settings or characters enhances the audience's ability to connect with her internal struggles, emphasizing themes of identity and self-discovery.

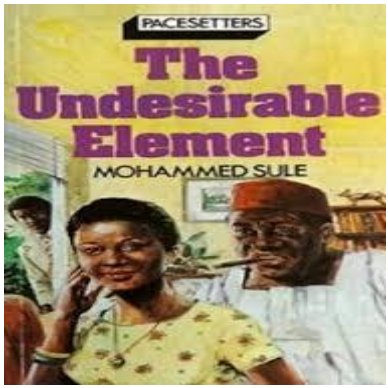

Figure 9: ***The Undesirable Element***

In contrast, *The Undesirable Element* includes three characters, representing interpersonal and generational conflicts. The young woman's central placement and confident demeanor signify her role as the focal point, while the older man's proximity suggests authority or tradition. The partially obscured third character hints

at marginalization or hidden perspectives, reflecting broader societal hierarchies. This inclusion of multiple actors creates a layered narrative, encouraging viewers to explore themes of conflict, agency, and societal judgment. *Witnesses to Tears* highlights exclusion through its singular focus on a veiled woman. Her isolation within the triangular frame emphasizes themes of constraint, vulnerability, and introspection. The sparse background further accentuates her emotional depth, inviting the audience to ponder the societal or personal factors contributing to her sorrow. This exclusionary approach aligns with van Leeuwen's (2008) framework, where the deliberate absence of additional actors shapes audience interpretation by focusing attention on a central figure. These visual strategies reveal how inclusion and exclusion reflect societal narratives, emphasizing themes of individuality, conflict, and cultural identity.

Multimodal Resources

Multimodal resources such as color, clothing, and objects contribute richly to meaning-making on the covers. In *Witnesses to Tears*, the woman's white headscarf symbolizes purity and modesty, while the blue background evokes melancholy, reinforcing the narrative's emotional undertones. The triangular frame enclosing the woman adds a sense of entrapment, symbolizing societal or personal constraints. These elements work together to create a visual narrative that aligns with the book's themes of emotional struggle and resilience. In *The Virtuous Woman*, the protagonist's white attire symbolizes morality, virtue, and spiritual cleanliness. Her serene expression and symmetrical pose reinforce themes of dignity and composure. The muted background ensures that her character remains the sole focus, emphasizing her role as a moral exemplar. Similarly, in *Habiba*, the use of vibrant patterns on the woman's dress and her henna-adorned hands highlight cultural pride and femininity, while her downward gaze adds emotional depth.

The Delinquent employs contrasting colors to highlight individuality and urbanity. The male character's patterned shirt and the female character's yellow headscarf create visual dynamism, reflecting modernity and youthful vibrancy. The car, as a central prop, symbolizes freedom and mobility, while the muted urban background underscores the challenges of modern life. Similarly, in *A House in the Dark*, the warm, earthy tones of the background create a serene atmosphere, complementing the interpersonal connection between the older man and the younger individual. Lighting also plays a significant role. In *The Virtuous Woman*, subtle lighting enhances the protagonist's features, emphasizing her moral standing. In contrast, the stark contrasts in *I'd Rather Die!* heighten the emotional tension suggested by the title. These multimodal elements align with Machin's (2010) emphasis on the semiotic significance of visual design in constructing complex narratives.

Cultural and Social Implications

The covers reflect cultural and social contexts, particularly regarding gender roles and identity. For instance, *The Virtuous Woman* emphasizes traditional femininity through modest attire and a serene pose, reflecting societal expectations of women in Northern Nigeria. Similarly, the traditional Fulani attire in *Habiba* underscores cultural pride and heritage, connecting the protagonist to her ethnic background.

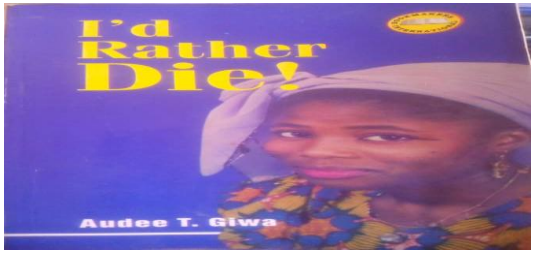

Figure 10: *I'd Rather Die!*

However, some covers challenge these norms. In *I'd Rather Die!*, the provocative title juxtaposed with the protagonist.

Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that Nigerian literary book covers employ a range of visual strategies to represent characters and communicate societal narratives. Through the use of gaze, spatial layout, inclusion/exclusion, and multimodal resources, these covers convey themes of identity, power, cultural heritage, and gender roles. This discussion situates the findings within broader theoretical and cultural contexts, highlighting the significance of visual design in shaping audience engagement and meaning-making. Gaze direction emerges as a critical element in the representation of characters on book covers. Direct gazes, as seen in *The Undesirable Element* and *Starlet*, foster a sense of connection between the characters and the audience. These covers invite viewers to engage actively with the characters, creating a sense of intimacy and emotional investment. In contrast, indirect gazes, such as those observed in *Witnesses to Tears* and *Habiba*, encourage introspection and emotional detachment. The downward gazes of the female characters reflect vulnerability, submission, or contemplation, aligning with themes of introspection and societal constraints. These findings align with Van Leeuwen's assertion that gaze direction shapes the relationship between visual texts and their audience (Van Leeuwen, 2024; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

The positioning of characters within the visual frame reflects themes of hierarchy, agency, and relational balance. For instance, in *The Delinquent*, the male character's proximity to the car and assertive posture signify dominance and agency, while the female character's hesitant stance indicates negotiation and power imbalance. Similarly, in *The Virtuous Woman*, the central placement and symmetrical positioning of the female character emphasize balance, morality, and composure. This spatial layout reinforces traditional gender roles and societal expectations. In contrast, covers like *Starlet* challenge these norms by positioning female characters as central figures, symbolizing independence and empowerment (Sarani & Kord, 2020). Moreover, the

deliberate inclusion or exclusion of characters on book covers highlights themes of individuality, isolation, and interpersonal relationships. Covers such as *Habiba* and *Witnesses to Tears* focus exclusively on female characters, drawing attention to their personal struggles and cultural identities. The exclusion of additional characters creates a sense of isolation, allowing the audience to connect deeply with the central figures. Conversely, covers like *The Undesirable Element* include multiple characters to depict generational tensions and societal hierarchies. These design choices reflect broader cultural narratives and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in Nigerian society (Sarani & Kord, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2024). Finally, multimodal resources such as color, clothing, and props play a significant role in constructing meaning on book covers. For instance, the white attire in *The Virtuous Woman* symbolizes purity and morality, while the vibrant patterns in *Habiba* highlight cultural pride and femininity (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Findings

The findings reveal recurring strategies where direct gazes foster audience engagement, while indirect gazes encourage introspection. Positioning conveys hierarchy, agency, and relational dynamics, reflecting societal power structures. Regarding inclusion/exclusion strategy, singular representations emphasize individuality and isolation, whereas multiple actors highlight interpersonal or generational dynamics. Finally, multimodal resources such as colors, attire, and props carry cultural and emotional significance, enriching the narrative embedded in the visuals.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Nigerian literary book covers serve as powerful tools of visual storytelling, reflecting and negotiating societal themes such as identity, gender, and culture. Through strategic use of visual elements, these covers engage audiences

both emotionally and intellectually, inviting them to interpret deeper social meanings. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature in multimodal discourse analysis and visual semiotics by highlighting the cultural and social significance of book cover design within the Nigerian context. Future research can expand on this by incorporating readers' responses to these visuals or exploring visual representations across other cultural and literary domains.

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