

The Aesthetic Components of GIFs in Online Instruction Analyzing GIFs in Help Center Instruction Based Articles

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Abstract

Recent scholarship points to the importance of multimodal media in learning environments, such as instructive How-To articles. This article examines how GIFs present in the YouTube Help Center play a role in effective technical communication with their liveliness and vivacity. After establishing the historical background of GIFs, this article will examine two different uses of GIFs on YouTube's Help Center. By examining GIFs within an appropriate context, the article will analyze how instructional documents combine written text, textual designs, still images, and moving visuals so that audiences can comprehend instructions and construct meaning. Significantly, this approach to meaning-making supports learning in digital environments where all members of society engage with technology and will need to learn how to operate devices and software programs to communicate with their audiences, and most readers of instructions wish to comprehend the material quickly to perform them.

Keywords

GIFs, Vivacity, Textual-Design, Still-Images, How-To Articles

1. Introduction

With the digitalization of media present in nearly every aspect of society, from marketing, website design, educational coursework, and social media, digital literacy has expanded at a rapid pace. Digital literacy refers to the ability to effectively and critically navigate, evaluate, create, and communicate information using a range of digital technologies. It encompasses a variety of skills, including technical proficiency with devices and software, critical thinking about digital content, ethical awareness in online environments, and the ability to engage in

digital communication.

Key components of digital literacy include:

- 1) **Technical Skills:** Understanding how to use digital tools and platforms such as computers, smartphones, and software applications.
- 2) **Information Literacy:** The ability to locate, evaluate, and use digital information critically and responsibly.
- 3) **Communication Skills:** Effectively using digital media to communicate ideas and collaborate with others.
- 4) **Ethical Awareness:** Recognizing and adhering to ethical standards in the digital space, such as respecting intellectual property, understanding privacy concerns, and avoiding misinformation.
- 5) **Adaptability:** Staying current with emerging technologies and adapting to new digital environments.
- 6) **Creative Production:** Creating digital content, such as videos, presentations, and blogs, that is clear, purposeful, and tailored to the intended audience.

1.1. Lively Visuals

In essence, digital literacy equips individuals with the skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly digital world, enabling them to participate fully in academic, professional, and social contexts. One newly developing form of digital media is moving and lively visuals, such as GIFs. As historicized and defined by Kate Milner

GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format) have become a key communication tool in contemporary digital cultures thanks to a combination of their features, constraints, and affordances. GIFs are polysemic, largely because they are isolated snippets of larger texts. This, combined with their endless, looping repetition, allows them to relay multiple levels of meaning in a single GIF. This symbolic complexity makes them an ideal tool for enhancing two core aspects of digital communication: the performance of affect and the demonstration of cultural knowledge (Milner & Highfield, 2017: p. 1)

For Milner, GIFs provide meaning almost instantly since they only last a few seconds, and their repetition allows a reader to insert themselves into the context and comprehend their meaning at any given time. Additionally, a GIF can utilize numerous contexts: movie/TV show scenes, live performances, and even instructions. Due to the versatility of GIFs, many individuals engage with and communicate through GIFs and, even if unintentionally, recognize their immense rhetorical abilities.

1.2. Vivacity in Visual Media

The vivacity and versatility of GIFs or any moving media allow readers to have a different form of meaning-making. Before the expansion of technology, a common instructional-based place that included multiple modes of media was a textbook, with the two modes being still images and written text. However, even text-

books have evolved into online platforms where still images are moving, and now audio is available. Researchers Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress analyze the evolution of the textbook and what multimodalities do for instructions. They state that

A mode is a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, speech, moving image are examples of modes, all used in learning resources. Meanings are made in a variety of modes and always with more than one mode... modes can be used to do different kinds of semiotic work or do broadly similar semiotic work with different resources in different ways. That is, modes have different affordances—potentials and constraints for making meaning. This enables sign makers to do different work in relation to their interests and their rhetorical intentions for designs of meaning, which, in modal ensembles best meet the rhetor's interest and sense of the needs of the audience (Bezemer & Kress, 2008: p. 171).

For instructional delivery, the expansion of digital and multimodal media allowed the authors of these technical communication documents to explore new opportunities for concise information delivery. For GIFs in technical communication documents, a generalized display of a step or a series of steps illustrates the information of multiple bullet points. Despite individuals conceptualizing GIFs as a tool for an emotional reaction (such as those found on social media platforms), Bezemer and Kress emphasize that any form of multimodality can be used effectively in instructional documents.

The dynamic nature of GIFs enhances their aesthetic appeal, as viewers' perceptions are influenced by the motion, color, and repeated patterns inherent in the visuals they engage with. This sense can be found through cognitive and emotional engagement, multimodal communication theory, cultural context and popularity, empirical case studies, and design principles and aesthetics. In his article "Everyday Aesthetics and Artification" Yuriko Saito discusses how everyday aesthetic items shape the world. He states that

At times the aesthetic considerations may move the world-making project toward a more humane and just society and a sustainable future, for example, by creating a certain structure that is designed with care and consideration for the people, materials and surroundings it will affect. Other times, our aesthetic responses work against the creation of a good society and sustainable future...What is clear from these divergent results is the surprising degree to which aesthetic considerations wield power over our attitudes, decisions, and actions (Saito, 2001: pp. 1-2).

For Saito, any experience or design choice that generates an emotion in a recipient has an aesthetic value; it is often not realized. This everyday, sometimes unrealized, aesthetic value allows GIFs to maintain their immense rhetorical capabilities. As Bezemer and Kress further explore, "Moving image uses selection not just in the ways that image does, but also in anticipation of the constraints of time...In moving images social relations are created through forms of interactiv-

ity.” (Bezemer & Kress, 2008: p. 190) It is not just that GIFs provide a quick and effective way for readers to interpret the information but that the vivacity of GIFs transfers readers into the instructions without much mental effort, which provides a sense of ease. Now, readers are not just interpreting information through their mental meaning-making process; instead, GIFs are drastically shaping their perspectives since they eliminate much of the mental frustration involved when interpreting meaning and offer a more straightforward approach through their animation.

2. Background

With the resurgence of the popularity of GIFs and the rapid evolution of technology, users understand GIFs as emotion-provoking or emotion-based responses found on social media. GIFs have also become tools for quick communication. As Milter discusses

GIFs are now ubiquitous in contemporary Internet-based communicative environments, including text messaging, email, social media, dating apps, and workplace management software... The GIF is also part of a wider landscape of visual social media, participation and creativity, and digital cultures. Visual media are used within everyday social media conversations, posts, and activity, whether for personal chats or displays of political activism (Milter & Highfield, 2017: p. 4)

For Milter, GIFs have become a quick communicative option without the labor of selecting and writing out the correct rhetoric. Now, instead of someone articulating that they are being sarcastic, they can choose a moving visual that depicts that expression and their articulation is no longer needed. Additionally, the emotional rhetorical abilities of GIFs expand beyond still images since

The affective capacity of the animated GIF is not limited to the encapsulated moment. Not only do individual GIFs perform a certain moment or a certain type of affect, but selecting and using the GIF format is a performance in and of itself. The act of choosing a GIF has a different meaning than that for an emoji, Bitmoji, or even a static image, all of which may also be used for conveying affect. One reason for this is because the GIF is a community-oriented format, unlike the top-down development of emoji or Bitmoji. While GIFs may be organized by platforms or repositories, their creation is not dictated or constrained by them: users are able to make and distribute their own files (Milter & Highfield, 2017: p. 4).

For modern-age technologies, GIFs have become an asset because users can select a GIF previously saved or used within seconds and also because users do not have to know the exact name of a GIF to convey their emotions or thought-processes, simply typing in “annoyed GIF” in a web browser will generate the correct tone. Additionally, since users regularly engage with GIFs and understand how to interpret their meaning, GIFs can be translated into different environments.

Miscommunication with GIFs

Despite the vivacity, versatility, and accessibility of GIFs in the age of technology, they can cause miscommunication. For users of GIFs, the correct one has to be selected, and the timing of the GIF has to be appropriate to convey the accurate rhetorical message. As Jiang states, “The abundance of meanings in GIFs can be a double-edged sword. Just as we might misinterpret the meaning behind a facial expression, or an emoji, interpretation poses a problem with GIF communication... people can have diverse interpretations of the same GIF.” (Jiang et al., 2019: p. 2) For Jiang, moving visuals provide new rhetorical methods of communication, but, like other rhetorical devices, the usage must be appropriate and fit into a specific context for an audience. As GIFs become more widespread and used in different genres, the possibility of miscommunication increases. Jiang further argues that the reason for miscommunication behind GIFs is because “Message receivers have idealized perceptions of senders, not only due to the receivers’ over-reliance on minimal cues such as word choice and punctuation usage, but also because the senders can selectively present themselves.” (Jiang et al., 2019: p. 3) For Jiang, when examining GIFs within social media, the personal aspects of GIF usage impact how it is received. Additionally, based on Jiang’s research, GIFs should ideally exist within a given context with some word usage, and a mere facial reaction is often not sufficient to convey everything the sender or the receiver wish to say. Although Jiang’s research primarily focused on GIF usage on social media platforms, his point of GIFs needing some written words to build a cohesive and holistic context also correlates to GIF usage in instruction-based documents.

Although there is the possibility of miscommunication on social media sites when using GIFs, this miscommunication occurs because of unclear cultural contexts. While instruction manuals use GIFs of websites or devices that the users often have in front of themselves, they do not require much cultural-based context to confer meaning from the visual. The reliance on only context within a document instead of widespread pop-cultural knowledge decreases the chance for miscommunication. The lower risk for miscommunication evokes a positive embracement of multimodal media in instruction manuals. For example, researcher Jorg Marrenbach discusses the positive possibilities for multimodal media in car manuals. He states

Animations are used to visualize dynamic sequences. In the animations only outlined graphics are used and only relevant details are shown. Moving parts are colored dark gray, all other parts stay white. These methods ensure that the user only concentrates on the action he has to perform and the resulting action of the car. (Marrenbach et al., 2001: p. 43)

For Marrenbach, moving visuals offer a concise method to deliver information, and this mode of technology enables the user to receive concise methods of instruction. Marrenbach continues, stating that multimodal media allows users to receive information and effectively find it in manuals. He claims “The user is able

to select a menu item in the navigation area by using the static input device... the user can use the speech recognition system to select a menu item directly. This modality enables the user to directly access the desired items.” (Marrenbach et al., 2001: p. 43) Moving visuals and other media modes reform how instruction manuals are received and organized. Now, a user has concise methods of delivery and a method to find specific forms of information. While multimodal media, such as GIFs, still rely on some context and written words to provide a holistic instructional delivery approach, the concerns about miscommunication are not present since the instruction manual offers a small piece of information; but, the user does not have to understand the cultural or historical context of an entire system to perform their desired changes.

3. Methodology

In this article, I analyze Help Center articles on YouTube’s webpage, focusing on how GIFs contribute to and enhance the delivery of written instructions. The analysis examines how instructions are structured to guide users toward a specific goal, with visuals like GIFs and images clarifying each step. Effective instructions should build gradually toward the intended outcome, with GIFs either clarifying individual steps or illustrating a series of actions. This study explores whether the “liveliness” of GIFs enhances the instructional experience by making users feel more comfortable and confident as they can immediately verify their progress. The guiding research question is: What does liveliness do for instruction and presentation? I propose that the dynamic nature of GIFs offers a more efficient form of technical communication by reducing the time needed to interpret visual information. Additionally, GIFs foster a sense of identity and community among users by creating a more interactive and relatable experience.

3.1. Analysis of Specific GIF Instances

The article focuses on several instances of GIF usage in YouTube Help Center articles to evaluate how these animations aid comprehension and user engagement.

1) “Learn how to use expanded analytics reports”

This article includes two GIFs that serve specific instructional purposes:

- **First GIF:** Demonstrates how to filter viewer data by geography. An animated arrow moves through various chart options, helping users visualize the steps needed to modify chart types.
- **Second GIF:** Guides users in viewing data by age or gender. It starts at a general homepage and navigates to the advanced settings section, illustrating how users can locate and interpret detailed analytics.

2) “Upload YouTube Videos”

This article contains a single GIF showing how to upload vertical videos via the YouTube app in YouTube Studio. The GIF offers a device-agnostic guide, appearing under the iPhone, Android, and Desktop sections, showcasing the similarity in settings and interfaces across devices. By doing so, it ensures consistent instruc-

tions regardless of the platform. The animation demonstrates every step of the process, allowing users to see the progression and end result of uploading a video.

The analysis examines whether these GIFs, with their quick animations and concise visual representation, provide users with greater comfort and confidence throughout the instructional process. For example, they allow users to see the correct steps performed in real-time, which can reduce confusion and reinforce understanding.

3.2. Objectives of the Article

The analysis of these Help Center articles focuses on two key objectives:

1) Effectiveness of Dynamic Visuals

The first objective is to determine if lively, moving visuals like GIFs help the audience construct meaning more efficiently than text alone. Dynamic animations may reduce cognitive load by allowing users to process instructions more intuitively compared to reading lengthy text explanations.

2) Comparative Analysis of GIF Types

The second objective is to evaluate differences in the instructional impact of GIFs that focus on a single step versus those that illustrate an entire process. For instance, shorter GIFs may provide clarity for a specific task, while longer GIFs offer a comprehensive overview, including the desired end state of the process. This comparison will explore how the scope and duration of GIFs affect their instructional value.

Broader Implications

The two Help Center articles demonstrate how simple, short instructional documents can effectively use animated and lively media to communicate with their audience. By integrating different modes of communication, such as text and GIFs, these resources aim to minimize confusion and enhance understanding. GIFs, in particular, play a crucial role in illustrating instructions and reinforcing key concepts in a concise and visually engaging manner. Holistically, this multi-modal approach promotes clear and effective meaning-making, offering users an intuitive way to interact with technical instructions.

3.3. Intricacies of the Investigative Process

The investigative process outlined in the text involves a systematic analysis of the use of GIFs in Help Center articles on YouTube's website. Below is a detailed breakdown of the process and its key components:

3.3.1. Scope of Analysis

The investigation focuses specifically on YouTube's Help Center articles, with the primary goal of understanding how GIFs contribute to the effectiveness of instructional materials. The selected articles include:

- “*Learn how to use expanded analytics reports*” (featuring two GIFs).
- “*Upload YouTube Videos*” (featuring one GIF).

3.3.2. Guiding Research Question

The research seeks to address the question: *What does liveliness do for instruction and presentation?* This question drives the analysis by focusing on how GIFs, as animated visuals, enhance or supplement written instructions.

3.3.3. Objectives of Analysis

The analysis is structured around two main objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Assess whether lively, animated visuals (GIFs) enhance audience comprehension by allowing viewers to construct concise meanings more effectively than text-based instructions.
- **Objective 2:** Examine the differences in GIF usage, focusing on short, step-specific animations versus longer GIFs that demonstrate the entire process, including the final outcome.

3.3.4. Methodology

- **Selection of Data:** The analysis includes three specific GIFs embedded within two Help Center articles. Each GIF represents a unique aspect of the instructional process, such as filtering data, navigating settings, and uploading videos.
- **Content Analysis:** The study evaluates the placement, duration, and liveliness of the GIFs to determine their role in clarifying or illustrating steps for users. Key criteria include:
 - Whether the GIF simplifies understanding of a single step.
 - Whether the GIF provides a comprehensive overview of the process.
 - Whether the liveliness of the GIF creates a sense of comfort for users by visually validating correct execution of tasks.

3.3.5. Detailed Case Studies

- **Article 1: “Learn how to use expanded analytics reports”**
 - GIF 1: Demonstrates filtering by geography with an arrow navigating charts.
 - GIF 2: Guides users through viewing data by age or gender, navigating from a homepage to advanced settings.
- **Article 2: “Upload YouTube Videos”**
 - A single GIF shows the process of uploading vertical videos using the YouTube Studio app across iPhone, Android, and Desktop.

3.3.6. Hypothesis and Proposed Impact

The article hypothesizes that:

- GIFs’ liveliness reduces cognitive load and enhances technical communication by providing immediate visual feedback.
- GIFs foster a sense of identity and community among users by presenting universal, platform-consistent instructions.

3.3.7. Implications for Instructional Design

The research aims to demonstrate that instructional GIFs:

- Serve as a dynamic complement to textual instructions, minimizing misunderstandings.
- Showcase the effectiveness of multimodal communication, even in concise, straightforward documents like Help Center articles.
- Emphasize the importance of tailored visual aids in creating a clear and comfortable user experience.

This approach reflects the systematic analysis of multimodal instructional strategies and underscores the potential for GIFs to bridge gaps in comprehension while enhancing engagement with instructional content.

4. Analysis

In the first article, “Learn how to use expanded analytics reports” (YouTube Help Center, 2024a), two GIFs are featured: one with an animated visual that shows how to filter the data by geography and another showing how to view the data by age or gender. These GIFs are both animated with brighter colors while the irrelevant material is in a light gray on the screen. Both GIFs are less than ten seconds long and only display specific labels and tabs that instruct readers through the process that the written bullet-point text above the GIF also discusses. For example, in the GIF relating to filtering by geography, there is a generalized home screen of the YouTube App, and an animated mouse selects the analytics tab, then the see more options tab, and then selects a specific country and filters down even more by states or regions. Similarly, the GIF about viewing data by age or gender also shows each step with specific tabs as a mouse clicks through each one; however, some tabs not needed for this process are grayed-out lines, which allows the reader to immediately find the analytics tab (three down from the first option). The animated and lively aspect of each GIF directly translates the instructions for the readers, while also providing clarity. These GIFs offer a quick and efficient narrative effect for the audience. If users choose to skim the written bullet-point text, based on the visualization of the title of each tab in the GIFs, the user could follow the entire process by following the steps provided in the animation, without ever deeply reading the written instructions. The two GIFs also create the narrative of quick and effective setting navigation by their selective color choices: the tabs that the users need to select are in bold colors such as red or bright blue, while the tabs that users need to ignore for those processes are either lines where the title does not exist or light-gray font-colored text, which the user most likely will ignore. The color choices and the live moment of a mouse moving and clicking tabs on the screen build the narrative of a quick and effective approach since it shows less than five steps to complete the tasks and narrows down what the user is looking through on their screen to the specific tab. Both of these GIFs offer technical communication values through the animation of quick, efficient communication, and concise information.

4.1. Benefits of GIFs for Readers

GIFs also provide value to the field of technical communication because their vi-

vacuity results in mental ease for readers when the moving visuals appear at the end of the instructions, and readers understand how the results appear on the screen for them to verify that they followed the instructions correctly. In the second article, “Upload YouTube Videos” (YouTube Help Center, 2024b), a GIF shows how a user can upload a vertical video, check its visibility settings, and verify if the content is or is not appropriate for children before the user sees how it will appear on their account. The same GIF is present under the iOS, Android, and Desktop tabs, and customizations are not present to signify that the GIF is generalized for all users. The GIF is less than ten seconds long, and the users must have read the instructions to understand what the different settings mean before they select one for their video. For example, it shows the visibility tab and gives three options: public, private, and unlisted. Although the users may be able to infer what the private and public settings mean, they must read the text in the article to understand how the unlisted and public settings differ. The GIF also shows how each visibility setting appears as an icon next to the video once users have uploaded it onto their accounts. For example, the public setting appears as an open lock, the private setting appears as a closed lock, and the unlisted option is an open paper clip. Now, instead of a user reading through the settings on their video description to verify they selected the correct visibility, the GIF allows them to scan for an icon. These GIFs continue to offer a quick, efficient, and effective way for readers to receive and comprehend information. However, this GIF included specific icons that require additional contexts to be understood. To avoid miscommunications, users should read the instructions before viewing the GIF, and YouTube’s document design decision to place the GIF at the bottom of the article likely reflects this sequence. Lastly, this article exemplifies how moving visuals show the result of a process once all steps are complete. Therefore, GIFs offer a lively quality of quick meaning-making while minimizing mental stress on users, who now know they followed the steps correctly for their desired outcome.

4.2. Sense of Identity

The GIFs also establish a sense of identity through the vivacity alongside the quickness and efficiency of their rhetorical delivery. The GIFs assume the reader/viewer is a YouTube content creator whose identity includes being well-versed in video production and the YouTube App. First, GIFs mobilize forms of identity since they communicate to digitally literate individuals who understand the concept of GIFs and how they convey information. Additionally, the GIFs visualize advanced settings, which do not introduce nor discuss video production steps or low-level instructions on how to use the YouTube App. For example, the GIF that depicts how to filter by geography starts by going to the analytics tab, and the user should know how to sign into YouTube Studio to view this information. The GIF about uploading vertical videos also depicts the selection of the audience (such as if the content is appropriate for children), which visualizes that the creator has a choice about their audience, which further establishes their iden-

tity through their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs, to a desired community that they integrate into. Lastly, the specifics within each GIF offer a sense of mental ease for the user to quickly comprehend the instructions and connect to their identity as a creator. With crucial aspects of a creator publishing their videos and understanding and engaging with their audience, the precise instructions that only depict the needed information, such as a specific tab, allows creators to connect and get in touch with their creative identities faster. The rhetorical effectiveness emerges quickly since the animated aspects of the GIFs allow creators to understand aspects of their identities and provide answers to the needs of these identities.

4.3. Sense of Community

The GIFs also establish a sense of community through their vivacity since the live-moving visuals are the same experience for all different types of users. Not only do the GIFs build the identity of content creators, but they also display a community of viewers. For example, the GIFs on viewing particular demographics show a group of people who, despite geographic distances, have found a similar experience to create, post, view, and interpret. Additionally, GIFs include a live visual, and no matter the uniqueness of the device-user, the instructions apply to the entire group of creators, no matter any differences. The aspect of vivacity present in all GIFs shows the same experience for anyone who views the GIF, and despite any contrasting interpretations, the colors, images, and movement in each GIF are the same for all readers. Lastly, the second article establishes the communal bond through the vivacity of GIFs. The live-moving visuals offer an accessibility component, where creators can film, edit, and now publish their videos through the same process on different devices. Initially, the article seems to create three communities: iOS, Android, and desktops, but it is the GIF that brings all types of users together. The example of the GIF depicting uploading vertical videos is the same on all devices, which implies that the process is simple for everyone and that particular devices do not have an advantage. The GIFs create a unique experience for viewers, and those viewers bond together over that experience. The vivacity within GIFs creates an efficiency that allows a viewer to quickly connect with their identity while offering a universal experience that further connects people.

5. Conclusion

The vivacity of GIFs creates quick and concise methods of instructional delivery. For viewers, the biggest obstacle when interpreting meaning from GIFs is understanding the context that GIFs are representing. Fortunately, unlike previous GIF usage on social media, neither large amounts of historical nor cultural knowledge are required to understand the meaning of the moving visual. Instead, the GIFs in instructions require a sense of familiarity with the system the user is operating. This accessibility broadens the potential audience for instructional content, making it easier for users with varying levels of expertise to engage effectively with the material.

GIFs and other moving visuals are also the best at representing a specific setting modification. For a longer process, GIFs may not be the ideal delivery method; instead, a video or a form of multimodal media where users can either follow through the entire process or skip to specific areas may be better adapted. However, the brevity and precision of GIFs allow users to focus on key steps without being overwhelmed by unnecessary details, thus promoting efficiency and reducing cognitive load. GIFs allow for a narrowed lens for users to construct their interpretation, which may eliminate areas of confusion or frustration. The advantage of including GIFs in instructional documentation involves the animation transporting the viewer into their desired niche in the software to complete their changes. From a social perspective, this fosters a sense of empowerment and autonomy among users as they can independently troubleshoot and make modifications without external assistance. Practically, integrating GIFs into instructional media streamlines the learning process, enhances user satisfaction, and may reduce the volume of technical support requests by addressing common issues more intuitively.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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