



COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

**Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo,
Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto
Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp,
Nico Carpentier**

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Visual matters in health communication: A systematic review

Fatma Nazlı Köksal, Fatoş Adilođlu

Abstract

Communication in the information age calls for many skills. The importance of media literacy has taken its position long ago moving further with digital literacy. Health communication has subscribed to the subject matter with the concept of health literacy where the Internet, social media and informatics technologies are vividly dominating the field. This is also where visual literacy meets health communication. The chapter will present an inquiry to trace and track visual matters in health communication. Respectively, the *Journal of Health Communication* is taken as a benchmark with its clear-cut, interdisciplinary conceptualization reflected not only by name but also with its scientific academic credits being published every month. Preliminary research aims to extract the visual weight of these articles by depicting relevant visual aspects. Attention will be paid to articles regarding “*why*” and “*how*” visual imagery is employed in health communication. The study emphasizes the visual construct in health communication and will contribute to the fostering of further research in what is sculpted as the “visual health communication” field.

Keywords: visual health communication, visual image, public health, systematic literature review

1. Introduction: Visual construct and health communication

Today, health communication campaigns demonstrate vivid examples of communication strategy practices with objectives such as the recognition of health services in the community, dissemination of true information about public health and the development of health behaviors. According to Ratzan (1994), health communication is defined as “*the art of informing and motivating the masses about individual and social health problems through planned learning experiences and theories*” (p. 19). Thus, health communication is related to raising individuals’ awareness in society with respect to health issues. Here, the aim is to develop consciousness directed for action. Presentation of true information on health-related issues, on the other hand, entail message design which takes into account how health information is created and transmitted effectively. This ties in with visual argumentation to be used in the field of health communication where this study wants to draw attention. Visual argumentation, as a communicative action, is related with the image itself and the message production process as well as how the image is perceived by the target group. A visual image generally embodies the intended message to work in the mind of the target audience towards the creation of perception. Appropriation of a visual message calls for a formulation, thus a design, of the visual message to be delivered and processed. A visual body is constructed with aesthetic design considerations – visual composition dynamics (visual elements and principles) in material form. Thus, visual construct and the exploitation of imagery is significant.

However, message design seeks message engagement which means considering the target audience contemplation to encourage or to create the tendency to act rather than adopting pure reasoning while directing the target audience. It is as important to subscribe to the rhetorical power of the image used to arise with this contemplation. What is more visual argumentation format introduces aesthetic codes. These codes are related to the types of the design concerns from which that the visual image arises from. Therefore, the used image and the message incorporated to the image as a semantic match and is expected to be parallel and in union with the aesthetic language.

Health communication campaigns practice visual design thinking, design process and design-making:

Visual health communication is an area of theory, research and practice that involves the use of visual imagery (e.g., photographs, illustrations, maps, graphs, diagrams) to convey information about health and disease in order to improve health-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals and populations. (McWhirter & Hoffman-Goetz, 2014: 751)

Visual products, visual tools and thus visual communication are important where message design, appeal and engagement (Lazard, Bamgbade, Sontag, & Brown, 2016) need more attention impact for the protection of personal health with the trajectory of social health issues. Consumption of visual constructs are found in mass media, public health and risk management, patient education practices in medical studies, pictorial warnings, and/or information graphics, drawing a general picture and punctuating the involvement in visual encounters (McWhirter & Hoffman-Goetz, 2014).

As a result, it should be said that the powerful use of visual images in public health campaigns is quite essential.

Talking about an image and trying to decode it is not a decryption process meaning the fact that there will be nothing left to talk after decoding and that the event will be over when the ultimate meaning is casted into the words. Talking about an image is, ultimately, an attempt to associate oneself with the image and the represented meaning of it. (Leppert, 1996: 22)

This is also an endless practice as a demonstrative/interpretative practice.

Based on arguments presented earlier, authors' in the present study lies in "why" and "how" visual imagery is utilised in health communication, with the drive focused on effective communication strategies. Respectively, the *Journal of Health Communication* is taken as a benchmark with its clear notion marked with its reputable conceptualized publication policy and frequency. The study favoured popular public health topics based on visual product exploitation and took shape with visual issues apparent in the various research studies. The inquiry unfolds in two ways: 1) whether the academic articles possess visual issues central to the study or 2) whether visual material is employed instrumentally. Instrumental articles are presented in a chart covering topics of interest, study aim and research design projecting the general landscape (Table 1) tackling the "why" question. The articles with visual matter discussion central to the study are unfolded via figure 2. Thereafter, the how question of the study is to be satisfied with the main goal of the chapter in the sub-questions below.

1. What are the topics of interest?
2. What are the media communication tools used?
3. What is the nature of the visual images (i.e. print, time-based, and interactive)?
4. What is the contribution of the article with respect to visual matter in health communication?
5. Does the article provoke further studies in visual health communication?

2. Method

For the present study, the systematic review is used as a method to extract the visual matters in health communication. “A systematic review attempts to collate all relevant evidences that fits pre-specific eligibility criteria to answer a specific research question. It uses explicit, systematic methods to minimize bias in the identification, selection, synthesis, and summary of studies” (Moher, et al., 2015: 2). Moreover, it is a flow-chart where the screening criteria of articles are described. We also include the information of articles which is framed on the basis of the following criteria: *author, topic interest, study aim, research design, and employment of images* (see Table 1).

2.1. Articles' Search Approach and Selection Criteria

This systematic review was initiated with a direct search using “*visual health communication*” as a key concept to get a snapshot picture of the scene. The search of articles was conducted between 2008 and 2018, and contain visual matters in public health campaigns. The chapter focusing on the importance of visual form in health communication then, proceeding with the first cut, takes into account visual aspects in public health and risk communication topics based on expected popularity with visual encounters. Respectively:

- Publication date had to be between 1 January 2008 and 25 December 2018
- Publication had to involve a public health challenge
- Limited to cancer, smoking, alcohol and obesity
- Sources had to address communication means and visual material
- Visual matter potential as instrumental or central

The research employed search terms as: “*visual communication*”, “*visual media*”, “*visual representation*”, “*visual imagery*”, “*visualization*”, “*visual design*”, “*visual message*”, “*visual form*”, “*photography*”, “*illustration*”, “*pictograms*” and “*visual map*” in an effort to seize visual matter in this filter. The search terms called to work are from the visual communication field per the prior literature review. A total of 1,689 articles were met as reflecting the overall landscape, then, assessing the articles based on title and abstract, 118 articles remained. After applying a selection criterion based on the precise visual matter of: cancer, smoking, alcohol and obesity, the refined number of potential articles came out to be 43. The final cut consisted of 17 articles which based on full text and central use of images. Figure 1 illustrates the flow, or the search process, of the systematic literature review.

Table 1: Overview of instrumental articles

Source	Topic Interest	Study Aim	Research Design/ Method
Kim & Niederdeppe (2014)	Smoking	Television antismoking advertisements' effects on viewers' emotional response	Quantitative, Experimental Research
Cohen, Caburnay, & Rodgers (2011)	Smoking and Alcohol	Frequency of tobacco and alcohol products and control of advertising in black versus general audience newspaper-Comparison-	Quantitative, Content Analysis
Paek, Kim, Hove, & Huh (2013)	Smoking	Message, source, and health information characteristics of e-cigarette videos on YouTube	Quantitative, Content Analysis
Yang, Sangalang, & Rooney (2018)	Smoking	Vaping marijuana - emerging risky health behavior- on YouTube. The content and features' influence on their popularity and retransmission	Quantitative, Content Analysis
Romer, Jamieson, Jamieson, Jones, & Sheer (2017)	Smoking	Health messages to reduce the social acceptability of peer smoking on YouTube despite enhancing its perceived prevalence	Quantitative, Online Survey
Muturi (2016)	Alcohol	Community perspectives on alcohol abuse prevention strategies in rural Kenya	Focus Group Discussions In-depth Interviews
Russell, Russell, Grube, & McQuairre (2017)	Alcohol	Alcohol television storylines impact on young drinking attitudes and intentions Corrective epilogues potential role to moderate the impact	Quantitative, Experimental Research
Stern & Morr (2013)	Smoking and Alcohol	Portrayal of teen smoking, drinking and drug use in recent popular movies	Quantitative, Content Analysis
Tickle, Beach, Dalton (2009)	Alcohol	Risk behavior content quantification in a large sample of popular contemporary films	Quantitative, Content Analysis
Kassan, Williams, Kelly, et al. (2012)	Prostate Cancer Screening	Mechanism by which decision-aids affect decisions	Quantitative Content Analysis
Borders, Suarez-Almazor, Volk, et al. (2017)	Bone Health for Cancer Survivors	Enhancing and clarifying content for an educational website towards decision management	Experimental Study
Mazor, Calvi, Cowan, et al. (2010)	Cancer Screening	Design and interaction strategy for educational tools	Qualitative Analysis
Kenerson, Fadeyi, Liu, et al. (2017)	Cancer Prevention Trials	Pre-testing an educational tool	Experimental
Nan, Briones, Shen, et al. (2013)	Obesity	To report how magazine advertisements use health-nutrition claims	Content Analysis
Choi & Kim (2011)	Obesity	Reviews the landmark studies on ads & analyzes health claims for food products in TV ads	Content Analysis
Turner, Skubisz, et al. (2014)	Obesity	Explores the degree to which people pay visual attention to the information contained in food nutrition labels and front-of-package nutrition symbols	Eye-tracking Research
Choi, & Reid (2018)	Obesity	To examine how perceived brand healthiness, commitment and health consciousness influence responses to print ads for healthy foods	Experimental Research Design

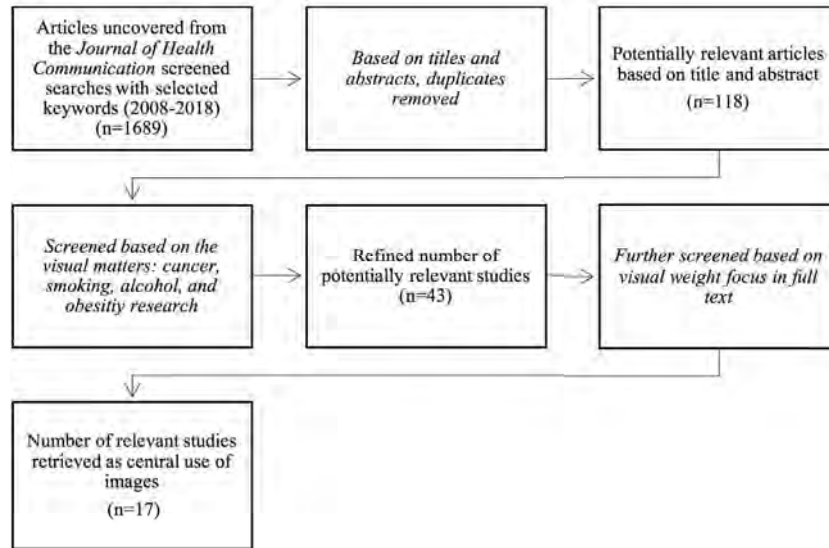


Figure 1: Flowchart for the search and selection process

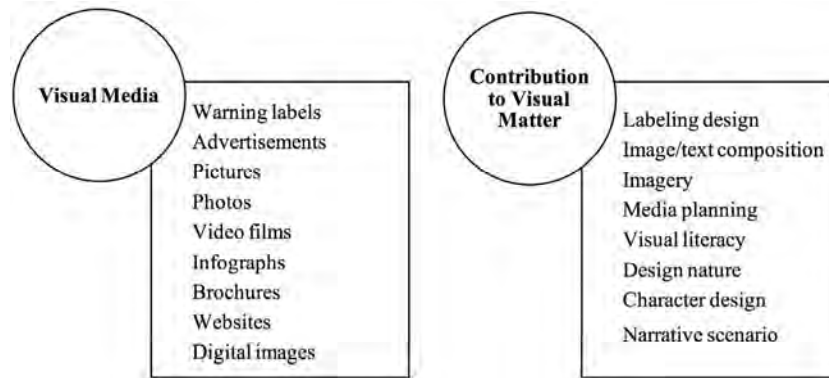


Figure 2: Overview of Central Articles (Smoking, Alcohol, Cancer & Obesity)

The diagram shown in Figure 2 unfolds visual matter which we addressed to play a central role in the discussion of articles. The overview of central articles on smoking draw attention to the importance of alternative interpretations to warnings such as labeling design to motivate quit activity (McQueen, et al. 2016). Key findings on smoking ads also reveal how communication strategies with words and visuals play a role in smoking fear (Kang, et al. 2015). What is more interesting is how pacing of images of products in prevention may work the opposite (Lang et al. 2011). Interpretations cannot be assumed to work per intended spirit (Morris et

al 2011). It is a surprise to find out that exposure to magazine ads might support smoking habits and increased intention to smoke (Burton et al. 2010). Varying responses to pictures of alcoholic drinks between heavy and light users are noteworthy. Research can be furthered with images of nonalcoholic beverages (Lang, et al. 2014). Films have been found to be engaging to impact knowledge as in the case of Haitian women in South Florida regarding cervical cancer development (Frett, et al. 2016). What is more messages can be more positive on awareness and narrative space can influence attitude and intention on cancer (Occa, et al. 2016). The construction and perception of visual messages are matters to attend in cancer studies (McWhirter, et al 2016). Unintended effects could arise from certain visual messages (King, et al. 2016). Imagery and text discontinuity might affect the cognitive processing to reflect cancer diagnosis (Phillips, et al. 2011). Attention is called for obesity with communication strategies that are capturing for children (Cheyne, at al. 2013). Portrayal of characters with various physical features might attract target markets (Buller, et al. 2018). On the other hand it is important to understand how negative photographs can yield attitudes toward obese people (McClure, et al. 2011). On line news photographs and news videos on obese individuals and children can be stigmatizing (Heuer, et al. 2011; Puhl, et al. 2013).

This systematic review of public health research yielded two classifications, namely instrumental and central, and is gathered in table 1 and figure 2 according to the employment of visual imagery. “Topic of interest”, “study aim”, and “research design” were addressed listing approaches and attitudes in the first table. Visual matters issue in the articles as we have address as central is presented in Figure 2. Research methods and approaches for visual studies call for interdisciplinary teamwork. Research relating to smoking and drinking (alcohol) generally considered visual imagery instrumental and are found to exercise quantitative and experimental research, practicing content analyses, surveys and focus groups. Articles on breast, skin, prostate and cervical cancer follow a variety of research approaches such as quantitative, experimental ones besides qualitative content analyses, focus groups and surveys. Here, the visual matter practice is central, revealing visual tracks and traces.

Imagery employed in print, digital print, time-based and interactive media can be regarded as communication design products. Instrumental visual imagery coming to surface in web sites, videos and films are notable for engaging content and interaction strategy. It is remarkable to see the development of educational tools towards cancer screening, cancer surviving, decision aids, and prevention trials. Visual products such as magazine ads, newspaper ads, online imagery, visual texts, and labels are utilized in motivating attempts to quit, emerging risky health behavior, communication of health risks, interventions and health activism. Visual

constructs involve graphic design products that can be designed. Therefore, a viewer's emotional response, message design, message source, content, and features are important considerations. Encounters include television advertising or control advertising in newspapers, websites, popular movies or via popularity and re-transmission of videos on YouTube. Graphic warning labels, online ads, newspaper ads, photographs, info-graphics, magazine ads, video and film, and brochures are visual materials that circulate and can be developed, tailored, formulated and/or designed. Thus, visual communication design dynamics can contribute to effective public health communication via the employment of imagery. Labeling takes into account alternative interpretations. Communication strategies call for the composition of image and text, exercising harmony, correlation and resonance. Media planning, exposure and the nature of design are related to visual literacy and multiple interpretations. Imagery design involves image appropriation, including the void between text and image. Time-based design practices with character design, narrative space, and scenario. Image and text discontinuity, character design, mise-en-scene are all communication design issues with visual matters.

3. Discussion and implications

In general, health communication campaigns attempt to reach individuals who are expected to acquire and modify a health behavior or practice to influence large audiences while exploiting multiple channels. It is not surprising that the main aim to ensure that the consumers accept the aimed behaviors through affection is achieved through visual communication. Nowadays, communication strategies are faced with the pressing challenge of social media dynamics, visual pollution and post-truth issues, which require visual communication effectiveness and have become crucial for health communication. The literature review carried out for the preliminary research in this chapter showed that print and/or digital magazines, digital media-Internet-web-YouTube, videos, and films are utilized to communicate health messages, absorbing visual matter, or better yet, taking the "visual design" matter for granted. The closest approach to design-thinking is found in the "tailoring" of visual material in film regarding scriptwriting, storytelling (didactic or narrative in nature), whether it be viral or professional production. The practice of design-thinking, design process and design making call for arts and design professionals and researchers. None of the articles have included visual material analysis in the body of its research. Visual evidence depiction is recorded only in one article. However, all authors acknowledged visual matter (without documentation) and advocate for further studies in social and health-related problems in cancer, smoking, and alcohol use. The review, in all, has portrayed different meth-

odological approaches. Visual analysis and methodology should be called to work and asserted as complementary, if not central. Visual construct and visual material should be composed, exercised, improved or developed to serve the specificity of health topics. Therefore, the interdisciplinary nature of health communication should bring visual arts and design, visual analysis and researchers together around health topics for effective communication strategies.

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