

A Study on the Communication Effect of Emotional Identification in Public Service Poster Design

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Abstract: Public service posters, as products of economic growth and cultural exchange, have developed rapidly in recent years. They explore social issues through the artistry and impact of visual design language, delivering ideas that resonate with society. Emotional identification refers to the viewer's sense of belonging to the message based on emotional resonance, transforming information from passive acceptance to internalization—truly reaching from the eye to the heart. In today's emotionally numbing communication environment, traditional public service announcements that rely on simple, straightforward headlines stating facts are less effective and often fail to achieve the communication effect of message internalization. This study attempts to provide a feasible design approach by integrating emotional identity theory into public service poster design to enhance its communication effect. It focuses on the transformation of public service posters from mere information delivery to emotional connection and "empathy." The study examines how affective design theory can be applied to public service posters through the three-level mechanism of instinct, behavior, and reflection, guiding the viewer from sensory attention to value recognition. The research aims to demonstrate that traditional public service posters can enhance communication effects through emotional design strategies, indicating that emotional identity plays a decisive role in improving the communication effectiveness of public service posters.

Keywords: emotional identity; public service announcement

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1.The Importance of Public Service Posters and Problems in Dissemination

1.1 The Emergence of Public Service Announcements

Posters serve as important tools for spreading information. Against the backdrop of dramatic social changes in the twentieth century, various modernist design movements viewed posters as tools for social engineering, and their functions became highly politicized and diversified. After the two world wars, social movements centered on themes such as anti-war, civil rights, and environmental protection also heavily used posters as a medium for expression. This gave rise to the public service-oriented poster type, making public service posters an artful form of social critique.

1.2 The Significance of Public Service Posters

The core of public service posters has always been the power of visual communication to promote social good. The significance of public service posters lies in the public value they carry as social visual media. They reflect public concerns and conflicts, shape public perceptions, stimulate viewers' emotions, and guide social actions through visual communication. They foster concepts in the public sphere that align with public good values and lead society toward positive social consensus. Through design, they awaken specific emotions and a sense of responsibility in viewers, promoting practical participation. The artistic expression of public service posters realizes social education, making them a space for social criticism and ideal expression.

The significance of public service posters goes beyond simple information conveyance; they participate in shaping the spirit of society and promote its development in a more just, caring, and sustainable direction.

1.3 The Importance of Public Service Announcements and Their Social Functions

Public service posters serve the public interest. They influence public opinion on social issues by increasing public awareness, change behavior by transforming thinking, and help solve social problems, thereby maintaining

social stability and promoting social development. Public service posters carry the social responsibility of spreading positive values, and their wide-ranging influence makes them an important form of communication.

Social Functions:

(1) Public service posters guide the public to adopt correct values and morals through visual communication design.

(2) They inspire public sympathy and a sense of responsibility by increasing attention to public service issues, promoting the rational allocation of social resources.

(3) Public service posters foster good social morals, communication, and understanding between people, as well as between people and nature.

(4) In promoting the construction of spiritual culture, public service posters use color, text, composition, and other visual design elements to resonate with viewers, playing an educational and guiding role, improving overall social quality, and promoting the development of social services.

1.4 Problems in Contemporary Public Service Posters

Currently, the main issues in the creation and dissemination of public service posters are the homogenization of creative themes and an overly didactic tone. Society lacks impressive artwork; most pieces are cut from the grand perspectives of "society" and "collective," creating a sense of distance. The lack of human touch makes it difficult to evoke emotional resonance. At the same time, poster content is often formulaic and insufficiently integrated with regional culture, breaking the link to cultural and emotional identity and resulting in weaker viewer appeal. At the communication level, channels remain relatively simple, overly reliant on traditional media and related organizations, with less interactive communication, making it difficult to mobilize deep participation and emotional resonance among viewers.

2.Theoretical Basis of Emotional Design and Case Study in Public Interest Posters

2.1 Theoretical Basis of Emotional Design

"There are two ways in which human beings know the world: the emotional way, which relies on intuition and past experiences, and the cognitive way, which relies on analysis and reason." Donald A. Norman, a renowned American cognitive psychologist, categorized design and design goals into three levels in his classic book *Emotional Design*, based on differences in how the human brain processes information: the instinctive level, the behavioral level, and the reflective level. Emotions play an important role in design. The instinctive level corresponds to humans' most immediate instinctive reactions, serving as the birthplace of emotions. It relies on initial sensory stimulation through immediate impact, using visual elements such as color, imagery, and composition in public service posters to create a first impression through the five senses, appealing to viewers' visual attraction and emotional arousal. The behavioral level represents a period of emotional sublimation, giving viewers a sense of fulfillment and pleasure. Designers can change viewers' roles from information receivers to participants through simple interaction, deepening their understanding and cognition of expressed values. The reflective level focuses on constructing emotional enhancement, emphasizing the communication of ideas and values. It aims to internalize the values advocated by the poster into viewers' own values, triggering emotional resonance, promoting value alignment and socio-cultural meaning construction, and fostering social progress from within.

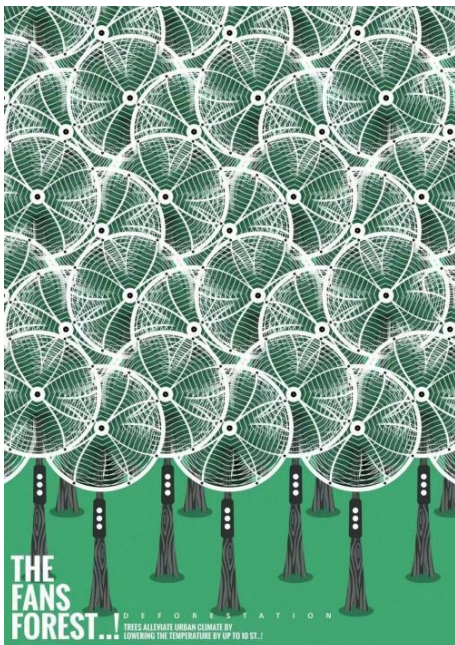
2.2 Case Studies

The colors and slogans in posters evoke similar experiences and memories for viewers, creating empathy that stimulates positive thinking and allows viewers to maximize attention and self-reflection. Emotional identification in public service poster design conveys the poster's values to viewers, guiding them to accept and agree with these concepts.

For example, in the entry for the Posters For Future 2024 German poster competition:

Poster 1: "Fan Forest" uses colors symbolizing nature at the instinctive level to associate forests and ecosystems. At the behavioral level, the familiar forest is replaced by fan blades and tree trunks, alluding to deforestation and the urban heat island effect. Color contrasts emphasize dissonance as forests are replaced by industrialization. The large white lines of the fan instinctively evoke a heavy, depressing emotional response. The prominent slogan, a pun combined with the absurd imagery of a forest replaced by fans, gives viewers a sense of industry brutally replacing nature. The text is simple and satirical, making a scientific statement about the environment and the connection between deforestation and the urban heat island effect. At the reflective level, viewers' thinking is awakened to rational knowledge and guilt about the "neglect of the ecological value of forests," internalizing the message.

Poster 2: Viewers may interpret the design as a zipper or a boat leading the way, but in either case, it brings hope for the future. A black background emphasizes the main theme, while white text and green patterns form the visual focal point. The color shifts from "depressing" to "bright" from bottom to top, imparting a positive sense of action at the instinctive level. Slogans serve as call-to-action expressions with oversized fonts dominating the visual center. At the behavioral level, the text layout guides the natural flow of the eye, making it easy to quickly grasp core information. Subsequent phrases add the value of action, shifting from the individual to the collective and emphasizing the group aspect of environmental protection. This public service poster gathers strength through hopeful empathy. The slogan and visual imagery convey the positive belief that collective action can bring about change while making viewers feel the weight of environmental issues. This fosters a sense of belonging and action—that "participation in environmental protection creates value"—leading to the reflective level and promoting environmental public welfare actions.



Designers: Hossein Abdi



Designers : Victoria Riabenka

–2024 Posters For Future German Poster Contest TOP 50

3. Emotional Identity in Public Service Posters: Strategies for Enhancing Communication Effectiveness

3.1 The Key to the Approach of Public Service Announcements: The Shift from "Informing" to "Emotional Connection"

As altruistic public posters, public service posters can no longer rely on grand, empty slogans. A design scholar once noted, "Only public service posters that are creative, unique in artistic approach, and well-produced will stand out and capture the audience's eyes and hearts." Traditional public service poster design prioritizes information

accuracy and focuses on process-oriented operations. In one-way communication modes, traditional public service announcements often use simple information and warnings to emphasize clarity and authority, opting for straightforward textual descriptions and figurative shapes to directly convey ethical norms. This approach focuses more on social regulation, leaving viewers in a state of passive acceptance. In traditional posters, viewers are educated in a passive role, which can easily trigger psychological resistance due to the didactic tone. Moreover, compared to emotionally designed public service posters, traditional designs are less likely to account for viewers' psychological differences, making it difficult to establish emotional links and achieve empathy. At the heart of a public service announcement's power is the broad emotional resonance it evokes. It uses visual symbols to directly touch viewers' deepest emotions by displaying real emotions from real life. To shift public service posters from simple information delivery to emotional connection and "empathy," designers must start from a humanistic perspective, understanding the public's perceptions of environmental and social issues as well as their personal feelings. They must choose methods that can touch viewers, foster emotional identity through psychological connection, establish emotional links, and internalize information to promote changes in thinking and social progress.

Looking ahead to 2026, the future of communication lies not in "telling" louder but in "connecting" deeper. A deep understanding of human nature and a commitment to communication with emotional and value resonance are inevitable trends for effective future communication. Public service posters need to capture attention at the instinctive level, optimize experience at the behavioral level, and internalize values at the reflective level. All three levels work together to realize the core of public service poster design: returning to humanism to trigger emotional identity, so that the values conveyed by the message are not only seen but also felt, understood, and recognized.

3.2 How to Incorporate Emotional Identity Strategies in Public Service Poster Design

In public service poster design, emotional design elements first require designers to understand the target audience and establish an emotional connection with viewers. Designers should identify the emotional interactions and resonance of the target audience with the social issues addressed by public service posters through interviews or research. Based on the emotional triggers of the target audience, designers can build design concepts and frameworks through storytelling while avoiding a preaching tone.

Designers can use visual communication strategies such as color, slogans, text, and composition to enhance empathy in public service posters, calling on viewers to generate a chain reaction toward public service activities. By applying Norman's three-level emotional design to public service posters and linking familiar colors or localized elements, designers can guide viewers through the instinctive, behavioral, and reflective levels, prompting them to recall their own experiences. The emotional memory formed not only breaks down information filters, turning external information into matters of personal concern, but also helps viewers think deeply and remember the message long-term. It creates social consensus, allowing strong emotional experiences to become collective memories that influence long-term social cognition. If public service posters focus on general societal sentiment and resonate through real stories and vivid visual representations, they can transform passive preaching into active acceptance, inspiring viewers to feel a sense of responsibility and belonging and develop positive social attitudes. If public service poster designers achieve this, the visual symbols in the posters will become tools for social reflection, making the spread of emotions not just short-term emotional mobilization but a deeper, long-term investment in societal building.

4. Concluding Remarks

Whether a public service poster can achieve a deep emotional connection with viewers depends on whether it can implement a three-level emotional design through visual communication elements such as color and text, transforming abstract social issues into perceivable visual language. If so, public service posters can penetrate the noise of information to reach the heart, completing the journey from attracting viewer attention to deep empathy,

thereby triggering positive action. Only by being rooted in a deep understanding of people's emotional needs and cultural background can public service posters better fulfill their social functions of education and guidance, subtly promoting social consensus cohesion and civilized trends.

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