

# *A Study of Creative Imagery in Public Service Posters Based on Design Cultural Codes Theory*

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**Abstract:** This study, grounded in design culture code theory, rigorously explores the multifaceted impact of visual imagery on poster design. Uniting theory with practicality, it dissects the strategic, semiotic, and technical aspects of poster creation, illuminating how visual elements are strategically employed, convey nuanced meanings, and adhere to design principles. Notably, it scrutinizes the adaptability of these strategies across diverse socio-cultural contexts. The study enriches our comprehension of how visual choices endow posters with significance and emotional resonance. Furthermore, it contributes novel insights into the technical intricacies of visual design principles. By synthesizing theory and practice, with an emphasis on cross-cultural adaptability, this study advances our understanding of how visual imagery influences strategic, meaningful, and technical dimensions in poster design. It holds implications for design practitioners and offers inspiration for future research in this field. In humility, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge while paving the way for further exploration in the discipline.

**Keywords:** visual imagery; design culture code; public service posters; global warming

## **1. Introduction**

This study delves into the intricate relationship between visual imagery and public service poster design, rooted in the understanding that visual imagery transcends mere perception and extends into memory, emotions, language, desires, and execution. While visual imagery is a concept relevant across various sensory domains, its most common association lies within visual arts. The role of psychological imagery, as a bridge between science and art, becomes particularly pertinent in the realm of poster design, where the effectiveness of conveying critical messages hinges on viewers' correct perception of design concepts.

The primary objective of this research is to explore the effective application of visual imagery in public service posters. These posters, distinct from their political or commercial counterparts, hold the crucial mission of conveying positive energy to the public, guiding the establishment of correct social moral values. In our digital age, they have evolved to adapt to diverse media platforms, from traditional print to digital screens. The introduction of new media has not diluted their essence but has expanded their reach.

Furthermore, this study aims to investigate the application of cultural codes in illustrative posters. By employing culturally significant symbols, imagery, and references, designers establish connections with viewers and communicate intricate concepts effectively. These codes operate at multiple levels, including strategy, meaning, and technique, enhancing the cultural resonance and impact of posters.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the realm of graphic design, offering designers a comprehensive framework to create effective and resonant public service posters. By weaving cultural codes into the fabric of their designs, designers can convey messages that go beyond visuals, eliciting emotions, triggering memories, and fostering a sense of belonging among diverse audiences. Ultimately, this research aspires to inspire and guide design practitioners in their pursuit of creating meaningful and impactful public service posters.

## 2. Exploration of Visual Imagery in Public Service Poster Design

Visual imagery is a concept that permeates various sensory modes, including auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory, and visual perceptions. It plays a crucial role not only in perception but also in memory, emotions, language, desires, and execution [1]. While psychological imagery finds expression in multiple domains like music, literature, and conceptual art, it is most commonly associated with visual arts. Many paintings often exclude parts of the visual scene, prompting viewers to utilize their imagination to complete or extend the artist's unfinished portions. For instance, the 1950 American film "Harvey" features Jimmy Stewart's character, who portrays an alcoholic and imagines a 6-foot-3-inch-tall rabbit as his friend. The movie portrays interactions with this rabbit friend as if it were a real character, shot based on motion paths or leaving spaces in the frame for its presence, making Harvey the rabbit seem tangible. Consequently, when we see Jimmy Stewart's character conversing with Harvey while sitting in an armchair (Figure 1), the compositional layout creates the illusion that a 6-foot-tall creature is genuinely present beside him. This framing is crafted for aesthetics, but its purpose is evidently to stimulate the viewer's psychological imagery.

In this example, viewers deduce the intended psychological imagery from the composition and hints provided by the protagonist in the narrative. Understanding this intention and engaging in imaginative contemplation represents the intersection of psychological significance and visual art.



Figure 1 Stills from "My Friend's Name is Harvey."

Art psychology expert Rudolf Anaheim argues that whenever we contemplate a question, there are underlying thoughts or bases guiding our thinking. According to him, creative thinking in any cognitive field is inseparable from visual imagery, acting as a bridge between science and art, as well as reason and emotion. In the context of poster design, the concept of visual imagery can effectively convey the designer's creative concepts to viewers. Only when viewers correctly perceive these design concepts can the technical and meaningful aspects of the poster design converge, enhancing the poster's visual communicative power.

### 3. Application of Visual Imagery in Public Service Posters

Posters, as functional visual design mediums, play an indispensable role in modern information exchange [7], and they are deeply intertwined with visual imagery. Among them, public service posters aim to convey positive energy to the public and guide the establishment of correct social moral values. They represent an artistic expression of social public service. With the comprehensive development of the digital age, the presentation of public service posters has become diversified. From traditional printed posters to electronic screens on the streets and even software splash screens, the diverse output methods have not altered the essence of public service posters. These posters remain distinct from political or commercial posters, serving the public and not commercialized. They target the widest audience across different poster categories.

The emergence of new media has expanded the scope of posters beyond paper. It has significantly promoted and diversified the ways in which posters can be disseminated through various media such as social media, mobile media, internet media, and outdoor media. The advent of mobile media, which primarily relies on visual content, has sparked a new round of innovation and development in the field of graphic design, including public service posters.

Figure 2.

Figure3



"Imagery is not an object, but a product of artistic expression. It does not depict the present reality, but rather represents it through imagination, memory, and other forms. It is a form of visual consciousness containing image intention. However, the generation of imagery can originate from visible phenomena in the external world.[3]" As previously mentioned regarding compositional techniques, leaving appropriate blank spaces or trends for extension in an image guides and triggers the viewer's mental imagery to fill in the missing parts of the picture. This process encourages viewers to actively contemplate the information the creator intends to convey, rather than passively accepting it. This decoding process is undoubtedly interactive and enhances the viewer's impression of the artwork.

In the realm of poster design, utilizing bold brushstrokes and expansive blank spaces, artists craft distinct visual imagery to convey their messages. For instance, in Figure 2, a poster created by the artist Yanchen, the character "风" (wind) is written using the vigorous strokes of the brush tip, showcasing the beauty of the Chinese character with a combination of strength and flexibility. The word "风" (wind) embodies both gentleness and strength, similar to how wind can be both soft and forceful. Similarly, in Figure 3, in the poster "生生不息" (Life Continues) crafted by artist Cheng Zhaohui, the character "生" (life) is depicted using soft and silky brushstrokes, fully embodying the resilience of life. Despite employing the same compositional style and technique, these works convey different styles and meanings, yet all elicit a captivating impression. This is attributed to the creators'

use of the compositional technique of blank space and the extension of the main subject, coupled with color choices and other design elements, culminating in these outstanding artworks.

Until now, research on visual imagery in graphic design has mainly focused on color analysis and symbolic interpretation. The author believes that visual impact and clear thematic representation determine whether the audience is left with a lasting impression, thus becoming a measure of a poster's success [2]. A designer's conceptualization ultimately engages with the audience through the final artwork. Preliminary research, user profiles, data analysis, surveys, UI design, and increasingly refined design processes are all aimed at achieving this objective through more objective and effective means. Proper utilization of the resonance brought about by visual imagery can provide designers with creative strategies to enhance the effectiveness of poster design.

Visual design is a predominantly emotive activity. Incorporating various theories and methodologies into the design process is intended to mitigate subjectivity and facilitate objective and efficient communication of messages.

#### **4. The Application of Cultural Codes in Illustrative Posters**

The term "cultural codes" was initially introduced by the French literary scholar Roland Barthes in his 1970 work "S/Z." [3]. It refers to the interpretation of cultural expressions beyond linguistic phenomena through a semiotic lens. In design, cultural codes focus on visual symbols and their derived or concealed meanings. Within the realm of semiotic design theory, cultural codes can be categorized into three levels: cultural code strategy, cultural code meaning, and cultural code technique [2].

In the context of illustrative posters, cultural codes play a pivotal role in conveying nuanced messages and resonating with the target audience. By incorporating culturally significant symbols, imagery, and references, designers can establish a connection with viewers and communicate intricate concepts effectively. These cultural codes operate on various levels:

**Cultural Code Strategy:** Designers adopt cultural codes strategically to appeal to specific demographics and evoke cultural associations. For example, using traditional patterns, colors, or motifs in a poster can trigger a sense of nostalgia and familiarity among viewers.

**Cultural Code Meaning:** The symbols and visuals within a poster carry meanings that resonate with certain cultural beliefs, values, or historical references. Integrating these symbols allows for deeper engagement and understanding. For instance, incorporating an iconic landmark can instantly evoke a sense of place and identity.

**Cultural Code Technique:** Design techniques rooted in cultural aesthetics, such as the use of calligraphy, brushstrokes, or traditional art forms, contribute to the visual language of the poster. These techniques can imbue the artwork with cultural authenticity and artistic depth.

By skillfully weaving cultural codes into the fabric of illustrative posters, designers harness the power of shared cultural knowledge to convey messages that go beyond mere visuals. This approach enables posters to evoke emotions, trigger memories, and foster a sense of belonging among diverse audiences. As cultural codes are embedded in every society, effectively utilizing them in poster design ensures that the message resonates with viewers on a deeper cultural level.

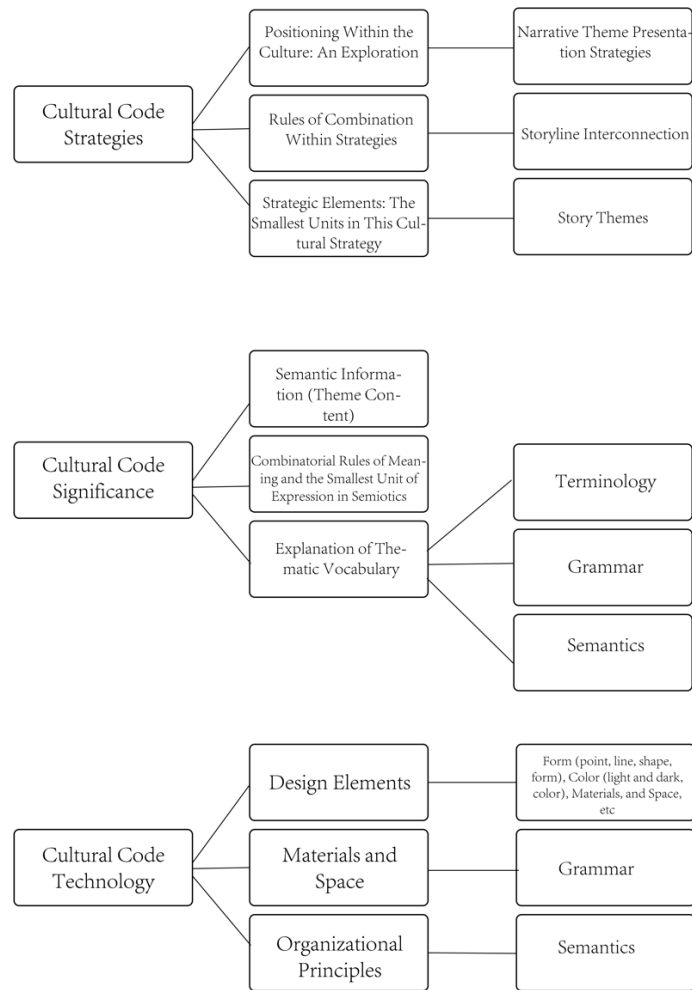


Figure 4 – Cultural Codes in Symbolic Design

By applying the theory of design cultural codes, designers can approach the visual image design of posters from both technical aspects (such as color, composition, typography, graphics, etc.) and the aspect of meaning (subject matter). This design approach and methodology provide designers with more efficient and multifaceted design and creative strategies, effectively enhancing the effectiveness of poster design. This article primarily focuses on studying the visual image design of public service posters from the aspect of meaning. It explores topics selection, conveying the intended purpose of the chosen topics accurately and effectively to the audience, and how to incorporate visual imagery into the design process.

By adopting the principles of cultural codes, designers can enhance the communicative power of their designs. This involves understanding the cultural context and symbols that resonate with the target audience, strategically using colors, typography, and composition to evoke specific emotions, and aligning the visual elements with the intended message. Additionally, choosing the right subject matter and effectively conveying its underlying message ensures that the poster captures the viewer's attention and encourages engagement.

Incorporating visual imagery into the design process is a key aspect of this approach. This includes using imagery that resonates with the cultural codes associated with the chosen topic, ensuring that the visuals support and enhance the intended message. By tapping into cultural symbols, traditions, and collective memory, designers can create posters that connect with viewers on a profound level, making the message more memorable and impactful.

Overall, the application of design cultural codes theory provides designers with a comprehensive framework to create more effective and resonant public service posters. It encourages a thoughtful exploration of meaning, cultural significance, and visual representation, leading to designs that not only attract attention but also leave a lasting impression on the audience.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

The dominant style in recent years for award-winning public service posters remains photography paired with text. Even though photographic posters still constitute a significant portion of public service campaigns, one cannot disregard the undeniable shift towards diversification in the presentation of such posters due to the changing landscape of modern life in the era of new media. While photographic posters continue to be mainstream, the evolving nature of public service posters is an inescapable reality, reflecting the impact of the digital age on our lives.

In this context, the integration of illustrations into public service posters aligns more closely with the demands of contemporary society. Posters featuring illustrations or utilizing illustrative elements offer the advantage of existing in both static and dynamic forms, catering to the coexistence of various media platforms. Moreover, elements within illustrated posters are more adaptable for separate use and further development.

The use of illustrations introduces a dynamic visual language that can effectively convey messages with creativity, emotional resonance, and conceptual depth.

Illustrations, whether in traditional or modern styles, have the flexibility to transcend language barriers and resonate with diverse audiences. They can capture attention, tell compelling stories, and evoke emotions, all of which are essential for effective public service communication. [5]

Furthermore, illustrated posters have the potential to engage viewers in a more interactive manner. With the integration of digital platforms and augmented reality technologies, illustrated elements can come to life, creating immersive experiences that draw the audience into the message. This dynamic engagement enhances the impact and memorability of the public service campaigns.

In conclusion, while photographic posters continue to be a significant approach in public service advertising, the increasing diversity of media and the changing demands of modern society have driven the integration of illustrations into public service posters. This evolution provides new avenues for creativity, engagement, and effectiveness in conveying important messages to a wide audience.





Figure 8

Figure 9

In contrast to the minimalist color schemes seen in Figures 6 and 7, Figures 8 and 9 are surrealistic illustrations crafted by Spanish illustrator Cristina Daura. With her bold use of intense, high-purity colors, dynamic lines, and continuous imagery, Daura creates illustrations that possess a compelling narrative. This style of color palette and composition exhibits distinct thematic and visual impact, leaving a strong impression on viewers.

When considering the original intentions of public service posters, such as projects aiming to raise awareness about global warming, their goal is often to deliver a visually striking effect that captures the viewer's attention. This effect triggers an emotional response and utilizes the reach of various media channels to create awareness and drive action. This aligns well with the intentions behind Daura's illustrations – to convey a visual shock that sparks emotional resonance.

The synergy between the objectives of public service posters and the visual impact achieved through illustrations is evident. Just as the illustrated artworks intend to captivate the audience and stimulate emotional engagement, public service posters seek to achieve similar visual effects.

By utilizing the power of strong visual storytelling and evocative imagery, both can effectively communicate vital messages and encourage meaningful responses from the audience.

In essence, the choice of vibrant colors, intricate lines, and imaginative compositions in these illustrations is in harmony with the strategies often employed in successful public service posters. This convergence of intent and impact underscores the potential of illustration as a potent tool for delivering important social messages through captivating visuals.

## 5. Creating Public Service Posters Based on the Design Culture Codes Theory

In this series of public service posters, the author employs compositional techniques and basic geometric shapes to depict the current global state due to environmental pollution. The series comprises four illustrations, each addressing a distinct issue arising from the aforementioned factors: 1. Rampant wildfires; 2. Rapid decline of animal habitats; 3. Marine pollution; and 4. Depletion of water resources. With this foundation, the author corresponds each issue with a thematic animal: koala, elephant, whale, and deer.

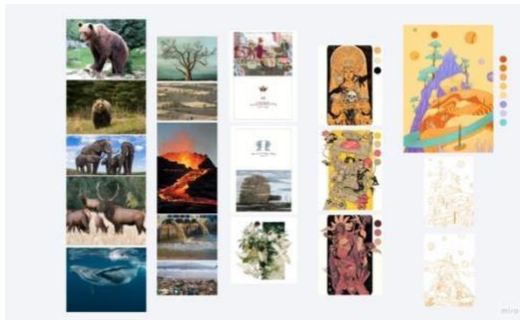


Figure 10

To facilitate the creation of the poster illustrations, the author first develops an inspiration board (Figure 7) as a guiding framework for the subsequent design process. This approach ensures that the subsequent illustrations remain aligned with the initial intentions.

Central to the design of these public service posters is the emphasis on reinforcing memory points through repetition. Consequently, the creator employs similar compositions and color palettes throughout the series of illustrative posters. This approach aims to amplify the impact of each poster by fostering consistency and cohesion in design, thereby strengthening the message conveyed.

By employing common visual elements across the series, the posters collectively cultivate a stronger visual identity, enhancing the viewer's ability to connect with the underlying environmental issues being portrayed. The strategic use of design culture codes theory empowers the author to construct a coherent and impactful series of public service posters that effectively communicate the urgency of environmental concerns.

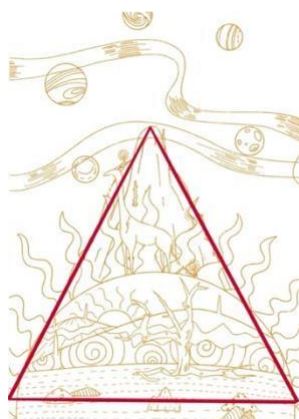


Figure 11

#### Fifth. The Significance of Composition and

Narrative in Public Service Poster Design Composition refers to the arrangement and layout of the entire visual scene, as well as the connection between scattered focal points. The central subject image holds the most crucial role in conveying the theme of the illustration. It is both the core of the visual composition and a symbol representing the essence of the content. The arrangement of all background elements should revolve around this core subject. The relationship between the main subject image and the background is vital. This relationship not only clearly conveys the main subject but also strategically guides the storytelling sequence and the development of the narrative.

In the context of these illustrations, the artist employs a triangular composition to draw the viewer's visual focus to the center of the triangle. Moreover, the artist integrates the essential subject matter with the illustrative form to unfold the narrative in a cohesive manner. The illustrations vividly portray the profound impact of environmental pollution on Earth, highlighting the plight of animals forced to migrate due to their deteriorating habitats.

The choice of a triangular composition serves multiple purposes: it effectively directs the viewer's attention to the core subject, enhances the visual impact of the illustrations, and serves as a compositional framework that supports the narrative. By skillfully utilizing composition and narrative techniques, the artist captures both the viewer's attention and empathy, creating a poignant depiction of the consequences of environmental degradation and the urgent need for action.



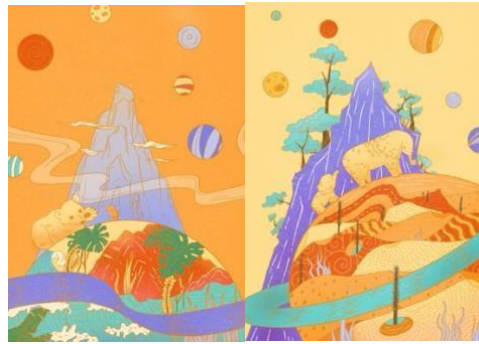


Figure 12

Figure13

In figures 12 and 13, we can observe the seamless continuity of the visual composition. The artist skillfully uses sweeping curved lines that encircle the main subject, resembling both planets and their orbits. This artistic choice metaphorically conveys the idea that the once hospitable planet for these animals is no longer the same. The sweeping lines, reminiscent of planetary orbits, symbolize the changes that have altered their habitats, rendering the previous living conditions unrecognizable. This visual approach serves to emphasize the environmental crisis faced by these animals and the urgent need for conservation efforts. The deliberate use of curved lines and circular forms not only contributes to the aesthetics of the illustrations but also aids in conveying a deeper message about the planet's transformation and the consequent challenges for its inhabitants. The artist's ability to evoke emotion and narrative through visual elements further underscores the power of design to communicate complex ideas and invoke empathy in the audience.

## 6. Conclusion

In the context of rapid economic development, the intensified destruction and exploitation of the natural environment have increased society's responsibility for environmental protection. Awareness and promotion of environmental conservation become even more crucial. With the evolution of society and changes in aesthetics, design creativity and expression need to adapt accordingly. Utilizing the approach of design culture code theory to analyze topics before creating designs, employing visual imagery to generate interaction with viewers, and ultimately delivering the intended message to the audience, public service posters can evoke emotional resonance and stimulate a sense of social responsibility. The integration of cultural code theory in the imagery research of public service posters establishes an aesthetic paradigm of "meaning communication," "coexistence," and "emotional transmission." This approach forms a more systematic and comprehensive framework for studying environmental protection posters, elevating the research to a more holistic level. By employing this methodology, public service posters can effectively convey the importance of environmental protection, fostering emotional connections with the audience and inspiring collective action.

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