

Exploring the Nature and Evolution of Communication Design: Perspectives from China

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Abstract. The concept of communication design has emerged as a focal point of discussion within the design discourse in China, prompting diverse perspectives on its essence and scope. Within this discourse, divergent viewpoints have surfaced, with some advocating for the classification of communication design as a distinct methodology within the broader framework of design studies, while others advocate for its recognition as an interdisciplinary domain, bridging diverse realms of design expertise. At the crux of this ongoing debate lies the fundamental question of whether communication design primarily concerns the 'design of communication' or the 'communication of design.'? This conceptual ambiguity underscores the complexity inherent in defining and delineating the parameters of communication design within the Chinese context. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the evolving discourse on communication design, examining its current manifestations, and speculating on future trajectories. This paper delves into the evolving discourse on communication design, despite the foundational contributions, communication design remains relatively uncharted territory in the Chinese academic landscape, lacking a universally accepted definition and comprehensive research framework. This paper underscores the imperative of clarifying the contours of communication design within the Chinese academic sphere, emphasizing its potential to enrich the discourse on design theory and practice. By elucidating its unique attributes and theoretical underpinnings, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the evolution and consolidation of communication design as a distinct discipline in China.

Keywords: communication design, design discourse, design methodology, design analysis, Chinese communication design

1. Introduction

The term "communication design" has sparked numerous discussions in China, with varying viewpoints on its nature. Some argue that it is a design methodology, while others claim it to be an interdisciplinary field related to design. There is also uncertainty regarding whether it pertains to "design of communication" or "communication of design." Tibor Kalman provided a broad definition for graphic design in the early 1990s, stating that it is a medium, a form of communication involving the use of words and images in various contexts [1]. Currently, the term "communication design" is not widely recognized, and there is limited research providing a clear definition. Due to this lack of extensive research, there is no universally accepted and precise summary of communication design yet.

Richard Hollis, in his book *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, defines design as a form of visual communication, emphasizing the creation, selection, and arrangement of images to convey ideas [2]. Similar to Kalman, Hollis presents design as a form of visual communication used to transmit thoughts. Design serves as a transparent medium for information dissemination, acting as a conduit to convey messages to target audiences. While communication design is still in its developmental stages in China, it has already established itself in various countries as a discipline and a specialized field of design practice, such as the "communication design" discipline at the University of the Arts London and the "Information design" discipline in Japan. The classification of disciplines or academic fields is crucial in higher education, delineating the boundaries and coverage of a subject, often defined and recognized by university departments and authoritative academic journals.

As a relatively young discipline in China, communication design has yet to distinguish itself clearly from another discipline, visual communication design. However, what sets communication design apart is its incorporation of multiple design concepts such as imagery, communication, and information, enabling the formation of a unique theoretical framework and an autonomous knowledge domain.

2. What to Communicate: Images and Information

2.1. Transparent Images

Most descriptions of "What is design" consider design as a means of communication. Kalman referred to graphics as "means of communication" (1991: 5), while Hollis described it as "visual communication" (1994: 7). Both Kalman and Hollis agree that design involves communication, emphasizing the role of design as a medium or tool for transferring content from one place to another. John Berger highlights the relationship between images and viewing, suggesting that viewing precedes language, serving as a way for humans to interpret, understand, and grasp the world [3]. In the context of communication design, discussions about images and information delve into exploring the relationship between images and viewing, between speaking and seeing. In this process, the content being communicated is usually information or ideas. Designers act as the "senders," while those who view or read the design become the "receivers," simplifying communication design as the transmission and communication between senders and receivers.

There are various interpretations of images, but building upon Kalman and Hollis's understanding of images in communication design, the concept of images being in a "transparent" state emerges. Images become transparent because they do not add or subtract any information; they do not inherently contain information but derive meaning through the construction and interpretation facilitated by communication and design. The term "transparent" implies that anything interacting with the image does not distort it. When images become transparent in communication design, the shift from "graphic design" focusing on graphics to "communication design" emphasizing communication paves the way for a new era where communication takes precedence in design. This transition provides another dimension of understanding the evolution from 'visual communication design' to 'communication design.'

2.2. Information and Persuasion

Communication design must primarily fulfill an informational function, as a significant aspect of design is to convey information. To ensure effective interpretation and communication, the content of information must be clearly articulated. In the book *Design Criticism and Its System Construction*, it is mentioned that "the function of communication design is information transmission, addressing the rapid and accurate dissemination of information" [4]. The audience receiving the message, or the receivers, are impacted by the information, which influences and changes them through active or passive interpretation, ultimately leading to persuasion. The persuasive function of communication design induces changes in the thoughts or behaviors of the receivers. Essentially, all designs possess a persuasive function aimed at altering human thoughts or behaviors in some way, elaborated further in the semiotic theory section of the next section.

3. The Communication of Design

3.1. Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of the meaning of symbols and serves as a method to analyze symbols. Symbols can inherently carry any meaning, but achieving consensus on the meaning of a specific symbol relies on culture. According to semiotics, communication is a part of social interaction, wherein meaning is constructed or constituted through social interactions among individuals and their cultures. Before the receiver interprets information and generates meaning, there is no inherent meaning; it is through this interpretation that meaning emerges, shaped by the receiver as a member of a cultural group. This mutual exchange of meaning and communication is indivisible [5]. Semiotic theory posits that symbols and codes form the dual cultural foundation of information and meaning. Communication involves the construction and exchange of semiotic meaning, where meanings are explicated through symbols. In semiotic theory, a symbol embodies what the linguist Saussure termed "signifier" and "signified," where the signifier represents the material carrier, and the signified denotes the related concept. Given the vastness of semiotic theory, only a concise exposition will be provided in this paper. Analyzing communication design through semiotic interpretation can also involve using communication theory to elucidate the significance of symbols. However, the approach and understanding differ across various theories. Thus, for semiotics, communication involves the genesis and exchange of information and meaning rather than just the transmission and dissemination of information. This fundamental distinction lies in the fact that transmission is unidirectional, whereas communication and exchange occur bidirectionally, even multidirectionally—showcasing the spatial nature of communication design. Information or meaning is constructed through communication, rather than existing prior to communication (unlike the concept of an "information source" discussed later). The "receiver" in semiotics is not a true recipient; in actively interpreting information, meaning and the receiver are constructed and represented based on the sender's cultural identity. Therefore, for semiotics, communication is a cultural phenomenon, not a rational process as discussed in the subsequent section on communication theory.

3.2. Communication Theory and the Transmission of Design

The issue of communication design should not be viewed as a choice between communication and design, as design is a requirement for effective communication. In the book *Type and Image*, Meggs elucidates the communication in design from the perspective of communication theory. He interprets "communication" as the transmission of information between individuals. Moreover, he posits that design is not only a part of our communication methods but also a unique language of information exchange within communication [6]. There is a diagram in the book that clearly sorts out the whole process (see the picture below):

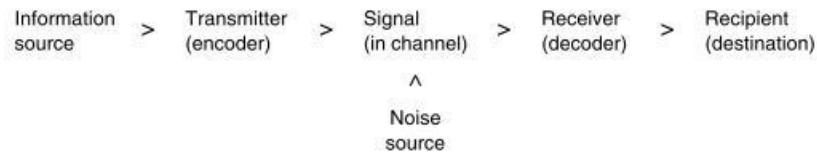


Figure 1. An explanation of communication in design (*Type and Image*)

Initially, the "information source" produces the "original information" to be transmitted, which the sender (encoder) transforms into information suitable for communication. The receiver (decoder) then converts the signal back into "information interpreted subjectively by themselves," eventually reaching the endpoint—the receiver receives the information. The diagram includes a disruptive element called "noise," signifying those signals throughout the process are constantly influenced by potential "noise."

The concepts of "information" and "noise" in communication design originate from communication theory, and discerning the relationship between information and noise aids in understanding certain issues within communication design. The essence of communication lies in effectively transmitting the desired content from the information source, yet design itself typically does not serve as an information source but as a medium; and sometimes, design's absence can actually help mitigate noise in communication. Employing a distinct artistic style to identify designers may introduce noise during communication, affecting the decoding process for the receiver. At this point, regardless of the excellence of the design content, the significance of communication diminishes to a secondary level. For instance, artists like Andy Warhol or Huang Hai in China tend to create images that represent themselves predominantly when designing posters. Consequently, the focus shifts from the intended message to the interference caused by "noise," diverting attention to the identity of the artist.

3.3. Society, Culture and Consumption

Design inevitably intertwines with society and culture, acknowledging its functional role in both domains. The specific societal and cultural functions of design can be broadly categorized into two relationships: society and culture as the backdrop for design or design reflecting the society and culture it inhabits. While these two aspects emphasize different focal points, they collectively illustrate that design evolves and operates within the context of society and culture, shaping and reproducing elements of society and culture. Analogous to the concept of the "body," which is subdued within the societal and cultural framework, design mirrors and embodies societal and cultural norms. From a sociological perspective, the body serves as a "site" where cultural norms, economic systems, and political rights are manifested [7]. On one hand, design can be seen as supporting the interests of the ruling class, catering to those with economic and political power. On the other hand, design may also align with the interests of the lower classes. Combining these perspectives, design can be viewed as a mechanism for replicating, diffusing, and contesting power within society. The relationship between society and communication dates back to the early Middle Ages, where the early Christian church utilized popular communication methods, akin to contemporary design and illustrations, to establish and maintain its power within society. Conversely, there are instances where design has been employed to challenge societal norms: the development of printing from the 13th century led to widespread paper usage, rapid proliferation of handwritten materials, and the invention of movable type in 1450, disrupting and challenging prevailing ideologies and posing a threat to authority.

"Visual culture studies are significantly influenced by cultural studies, if not a part of it. Cultural studies discuss contemporary cultural realities, highlighting the increasing importance of visuals in various cultural forms, emphasizing their role in meaning production. Various visual materials continuously provide perspectives on society and life, enabling individuals to narrate, organize, interpret, and govern social existence through visual forms. Thus, visual culture becomes an integral component of cultural studies" [8]. Culture emerges from human interaction, and design is one of the ways through which people communicate, showcase, interpret, and control social life. Therefore, design is a constituent of culture. In other words, communication design constitutes a cultural endeavor, and the study of communication design is fundamentally a study of culture.

4. The Design of Communication

4.1. Metaphor: Constructing and Representing Meaning

"Communication/Exchange is the reason for the existence of communication design and the source and purpose of all work in the design field" [9]. Communication design often functions as a metaphor, constructing and representing meaning, operating as a specific mode of communication that may entail various misleading or inaccurate ideas. A metaphor in design involves visually transforming ideas and objects. As Derrida pointed out, communication can only be described through metaphors (as conveyance or transmission), but the metaphor itself is a form of conveyance, leading to problems when using expressions like 'is' [10]. The word "metaphor" itself possesses metaphorical qualities, as the English word "metaphor" derives from the Greek "meta," meaning beyond or across, and "phero," signifying transport or conveyance. Hence, "communication" is considered a metaphor, signifying the transfer from one place to another, from the construction of meaning to its representation, with the metaphor itself constituting a form of communication or transport.

Derrida acknowledges the complexity of reflections on metaphor and communication. At times, even a brief sentence necessitates repeated reading and contemplation to discern the interrelations among its constituent words. Nonetheless, this complexity serves as a reminder of the issues involved in various communication patterns, suggesting that communication cannot exist without metaphor and transformation. Communication here refers to the transmission of information, not the receivers, as individuals who do not reinterpret the received information cannot be labeled as communication's recipients [11].

4.2. The Grammar of Communication Design: Communication as Design or Design as Communication

How does communication design differ from design communication or communication of design? The earlier discussion on "design communication" mainly refers to a specific or completed design form, analyzing concepts and histories of design, design processes, techniques, and historical contexts with design as the central focus and communication as the carrier. On the other hand, attempting a direct comparison with "design communication," framing this chapter as "communication as the main subject, designing communication theories, processes, techniques, and histories" would be entirely inaccurate. Communication design should amalgamate communication and design, dissecting the implicit grammar and layers therein. Hence, this paper boldly postulates that "the design of communication" may better align with disciplinary and research nomenclature considerations.

As previously stated, communication design combines several concepts, necessitating a focus on dynamics over statics for a proper understanding. Emphasis should not solely be on an object because it merely serves as a means to an end. Fundamentally, designers generate communication events to foster interaction, where individuals engage with design. The designer's goal shifts to creating the contextual design for communication events. Furthermore, the primary focus should lie not in the act of communication but in the impact of this communication on cognition, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus, the core of design and research centers on studying the interaction between information and individuals, rather than merely focusing on visual elements, images, or graphic features. Clearly, "information" encompasses more than "visuals," explaining the transition from "visual communication design" to "communication design." As an area of knowledge information design has a solid foundation, which can be expressed using four basic statements, or prerequisites: Multidisciplinary, Multi-dimensional, Theory and Practice, and There Are No Firm Rules [12]. While visuals remain vital, they function as a tool and method of communication, as previously discussed in relation to the concept of "transparent carriers." The visual aspect is not discarded but incorporated differently within "communication design."

5. Conclusion

The discussion remarks underscore the multifaceted nature of communication design, which encapsulates temporal and spatial dimensions spanning the past, present, and future, as well as physical and digital realms. At its core, communication design encompasses a synthesis of vision and media, integrating diverse elements to create cohesive narratives. This integration extends beyond mere aesthetics, delving into the intricate interplay of societal dynamics, consumption patterns, and cultural influences. Central to this narrative construction is the delicate balance struck between materiality and information. While material elements provide tangible forms and structures, information serves as the conceptual substrate upon which meaning is constructed. This dialectic between the tangible and the conceptual imbues communication design with its transformative potential, enabling it to shape individuals' cognition, attitudes, and behaviors. Moreover, the influence of communication design extends beyond the realm of individual perception, permeating collective consciousness and societal norms. As such, further exploration into the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of communication design promises to enrich our understanding of its role in contemporary society.

In conclusion, communication design embodies a multiplicity of time (past, present, future) and space (physical and digital). Its fundamental elements entail vision and media, encompassing various complex factors like society, consumption, and culture, entails a comprehensive narrative process that involves balancing materiality and information to construct meaning, thereby influencing individuals' cognition, attitudes, and behaviors.

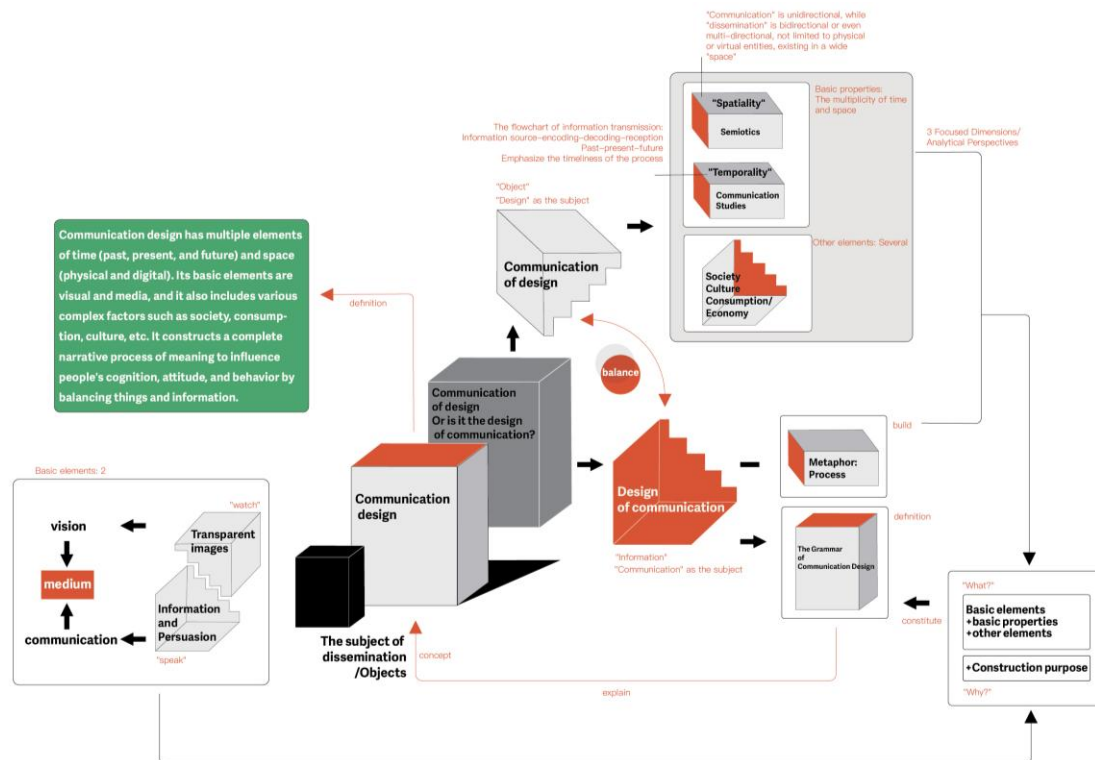


Figure 2. An explanation of communication design (drawn by the author)

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