

*Just Between Meme and You: Online Memes as Health Communication Tools in
Design and Media Arts Higher Education Curricula*

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Abstract

This study posits that current online trends of mistrust in health policies may be partly overcome through an exploratory employment of memes. It aims at filling a critical gap whereby unexpected communication channels might succeed in addressing subjective bias seemingly immune to fact-based cognitive persuasion channels. We propose that the classroom may be a particularly apt context for this exploration: as part of the core lexica of younger generations, memes may act as pathways to stimulating actual research. Furthermore, by hypothesising that scientific knowledge and policies may incorporate aesthetics and semantics of online media, we aim at unpacking an often polarised debate around health communication – as particularly evident during the recent pandemic. These premises inform a set of assignments under implementation in various higher education Design and Media Arts courses in Portugal; exercises cover a range of approaches to pandemic-related health communication, trust and behaviour, employing visual languages and semantics of memes as a primary mechanism; we aim to create an ambivalence that dilutes expectations of formality and univocal authority, thus facilitating engagement. Assignments include: translation of scientific jargon, unexpected perspectives, before/after dynamics, humour and non-threatening irony, personal testimonies, and random image-text coupling. Visual outcomes and relevant testimonies from participants are currently under validation and will be presented. We further envision a scalability and visibility beyond both the classroom environment and the disciplines in question. The study is developed under the framework of the project “An Infodemic of Disorientation: communication design as mediator between scientific knowledge and cognitive bias.”

Keywords: Health-Related Memes, Graphic Design in Social Media, Public Health Communication, Art and Design Education

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Introduction

In recent years, an empirical consensus has been forming regarding a gradual rise of public mistrust towards reliable health information; this has been particularly visible, and has become particularly poignant, throughout the recent COVID-19 pandemic (2020-23), with multiple theories and practices contesting scientific knowledge on the subject (Lazarus et al, 2002). Concomitantly, citizen adherence to health policies saw a significant decrease, often to the point of hostility, coinciding with the promotion of alternative (and ineffective) therapies, unexpected alliances between wellness communities and conspiracy-driven propaganda, and even outright fabrications (Russell, 2022).

Health policies have often been contested, with the “vaccines cause autism” (Kata, 2011; Walker, n.d.) controversy (Wakefield, 1998; redacted) laying the groundwork for a template narrative branching into multiple, ongoing variations (Germani& Biller-Andorno, 2021); however, the exponential proliferation of social media (Ortiz-Sánchez, 2020) , both in its global technological outreach and its recurring “thought bubble” communities, have amplified the issue to an unforeseen scale (Raballo et al, 2022). This may be partly explained by the exponential ease in sharing subjective, partial, unreliable, unproven or deliberately false content, coupled with a pressing, addictive need for subscribing to graspable, aggregating narratives on the part of online users.

These graspable narratives are often the opposite of what health sciences can readily provide, as methods and advancements entail degrees of epistemological complexity and require an expertise that is not necessarily readily present in the general population; this may become an additional factor in understanding the frequent accusations that health experts and authorities are involved in secretive, punishing activity, when in fact what we see is inevitable epistemological hermeticism.

A great effort is often invested in translating complex health knowledge and phenomena into concepts and linguistic formulations that the general public can understand as the basis for specific health policies; however, health researchers and authorities largely communicate via facts, infographics, statistics and logic, while large segments of the population are currently communicating via deconstructive images, humour, rumours, and individual testimonies. While understandable from a semantic viewpoint, we argue that this chasm needs a degree of dilution in order for health policies to reach skeptic segments of the population.

DiResta (2023) states this dilution as a duty in face of a changed communication landscape, and places the onus on authorities: “Institutional communicators / public health entities do not understand that the way people communicate has changed [...]: you have to begin to understand the power of storytelling” - a point often observed throughout the empirical groundwork of the present research, in how a single testimony of a vaccine reaction gone wrong presented in mainstream media may compromise, in the minds of the audience, the understanding of statistical evidence that points to such occurrence as residual.

Additionally, the expectation that the cognitive process is purely rational has by now been debunked by psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists; Goel (2022) encapsulates it as “The Reasoning Mind Recruits the Instinctive Mind.” In the present context, this phenomenon translates as the duty of health authorities to take into account subjective components in their engagement processes with the population. It is fair to recognise that an appeal to emotional components has been present in public health campaigns - particularly gratitude to health

professionals, and fear of death; however, they remain staunchly within the parameters of the expected semantics of authoritative discourse.

Given the above premises, the present research has posited and rehearsed a disruptive hypothesis to the aforementioned chasm: current online trends of disinformation and mistrust in health policies may be partly overcome through an employment of social network aesthetics and semantics on the part of authorities. Furthermore, Communication Design and Media Arts may assist in this process by capacitating students and professionals in both technical and semiotic skills required. As such, the design course classroom may be an apt context for an exploratory re-purposing of social media source materials such as and reels. As part of the native lexica of younger generations, these may act as pathways to stimulating actual knowledge-seeking by citizens, while diluting pre-emptive expectations of formality and univocal authority, thus facilitating cognitive and behavioral engagement.

Development

In order to test the aforementioned hypothesis, and following a series of anonymous interviews with COVID-19 deniers and vaccine-hesitant citizens, a set of meme-related assignments were developed in four higher education Design and Media Arts courses in Portugal, on a BA, MA and PhD level. The assignments were preceded by an introduction that addressed the above issues. The workshops were conducted with teams of one to three students using a team-based learning approach. Students of an international background (namely Portugal, Brazil, Argentina and France) were thus invited to generate memes and reels that addressed pandemic-related content under four possible categories: testimonial, informative, instructive, and deconstructive. These were further unpacked as a pragmatic set of directives, including: translation of scientific jargon, rendering complex data accessible, and employing humour and non-threatening irony.

The framework involved a series of core concepts familiar to design students: tactical media, figures of speech, storytelling, edutainment, activism, remix cultures, subvertising, culture jamming, and hacktivism; students were invited to pursue one or more of these concepts. Workshop length varied between one and two hours, and discussion was encouraged, both during the briefing and the execution. Despite the provided guidelines and frameworks, workshops tended to be open-ended and intuitive, as the exploratory nature of the hypothesis demanded further, unexpected insights to surface throughout.

Conclusions

A preliminary assessment of the conducted workshops has revealed the following evidence:

1. Humour and irony were the most popular approach; this is concurrent with the prevailing stream of semantics in social media contexts, thus revealing a compatibility of the generated specimens with the desired locus of their circulation;
2. Workshops focusing on infographics as translation of complex data and knowledge required a more structured, pedagogical approach - particularly as a measure of quantitative rigour was at stake; this balance between intuition and fact-based information is at the crux of the challenge, and will need further refinement;
3. A noteworthy number of students resisted the challenge of revisiting the recent pandemic; however, rather than a purely retrospective exercise, the research aims at laying a groundwork in communication templates that may prove useful in future instances,

health-related or otherwise. As such, resorting to the experience of the pandemic should be regarded as a mechanism for rooting the resulting specimens on empirical, lived experience, while clarifying that health (and scientific) knowledge and policy communication as a whole will ultimately be the added value emerging from the various exercises;

4. Responses have ranged from a hesitancy to participate, to a substantial commitment to testing a pedagogy of health; this is concurrent with classroom dynamics, accordings to students' interests and skills;
5. Students have learned the basic premises of ascertainment of credible sources of scientific information, identify red flags and manipulation techniques commonly used in disinformation, and recognize the value of evidence-based reasoning. They can therefore themselves act as pedagogues, throughout the learning process, and as future design professionals.

Further validation will occur through a public exhibition of selected specimens, in partnership with the University of Porto's Science and Technology Park, in October 2023; surveys will be conducted with visitors, in order to systematize the outcomes into a second iteration of creative production. The process of systematization is itself contributive to a model, in progress, identifying the various issues in scientific knowledge and policy, their causes and contexts of operation, and the potential roles of design in overcoming said issues. The model will ultimately form the basis of a set of recommendations regarding health communication in social media environments, aiming at content integration in design and digital media art courses, as well as policy recommendations to researchers and health authorities, including a set of core principles in communicating health information and policies beyond facts and statistics, and the presence of design and activism as consulting agents in communication processes.

A first, critical selection and taxonomy of workshop outcomes can be viewed at: <http://tiny.cc/memeandyou>

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