Keep Your Distance, Wear a Mask and Stay Safe: The Visual Language of Covid-19 Print-Based Signage

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Abstract

A pandemic introduces multiple factors that must be communicated to the public. The coronavirus outbreak has demonstrated the necessity of effective risk communication during a global pandemic and the importance of communication design within this process. Since March 2020, official and ad-hoc signage reminding the public to keep their distance, wear a mask, to stay safe, and stay at home have become ubiquitous in cities all over the world. This paper analyses the visual language of Covid related signage – those made by designers and those made without – in London, United Kingdom from April 2020 to January 2021. A mixture of compositional interpretation, and semiology was performed on 130 photographs of print-based signage to categorise them under themes. Results categorised these under four broad themes: Thank you, Togetherness, Care; Safety and Security; Heroes and Protection; and Fear, Danger Caution. The findings invite readers to reflect on the effectiveness of the visual communication strategy and ask who these designs are for.

Keywords: Covid-19; visual communication; communication design; health communication; visual language

Introduction

Coronavirus has shifted our ways of living almost overnight. The presence of the virus means that people need to practice vigilance in every activity, including keeping two metres apart, wearing a mask, and sanitising their hands. In the UK, the advertisements we encounter daily went from film adverts and holiday destinations to pictograms outlining how we need to live to be safe and to survive.

These visual communication materials – which have entered our lives almost overnight – aim to persuade users and viewers to comply, to change their behaviour and help

slow the spread of Covid-19 (a form of self-government). The aim, as social theorist Nikolas Rose[1] writes, is to produce conviction, and an extension of authority. However, an effective communication strategy – particularly within risk communication – requires a consistent strategy across platforms and forms (including official public communication through televised statements and press conferences). The stakes of consistent communication are high, "they affect the fundamental issues of managing risk, safeguarding public health and maintaining citizens' trust"[2]. Effective communication should be clear on what behaviours must change and what the public can do to change them[3], particularly when attempting to communicate uncertainty which affects how people "perceive a risk, how they interpret information about it, how motivated they will be to take actions in response to it, and how much they trust the people and institutions responsible for managing it."[4]

In the United Kingdom, lockdown rules have changed 64 times since March 2020.[5] Mixed messaging has led to confusion over the nature of the virus, how it is spread, who is affected, lockdown rules, mask wearing, socialisation, testing, and vaccination. In addition, mixed messaging has contributed to a lack of confidence in the government and its ability to handle the pandemic. Indeed, even within the signage encountered mixed messaging is at play. For example, urging people to wear a mask comes with a caveat: "unless exempt". But exemption requires little proof and enables flouting of the rules and disregard for mask wearing – few warnings and fines are issued. Moreover, the official government message "stay at home" also comes with exemption if you are unable to work from home. We are governed by these visual communication artefacts unless exempt[6], but proof of exemption is not necessarily required, and what qualifies as an exemption and who qualifies for one?

This paper analyses the visual language of Covid signage that have appeared across London, UK, attributing common themes to the signage. The findings invite readers to reflect on the effectiveness of the visual communication strategy and ask who these designs are for.

Risk Communication

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines risk communication as

> the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being. The ultimate purpose of risk communication is to enable people at risk to take informed decisions to protect themselves and their loved ones. [...] It requires a sound understanding of people's perceptions, concerns and beliefs as well as their knowledge and practices. It also requires the early identification and management of rumours, misinformation and other challenges.[7]

In ensuring effective responses to public health emergencies, all WHO member states must abide by the 2005 International Health Regulations (IHR), which states that risk communication is one of eight core capacities to mitigate the effects and outcomes of public health emergencies[8]. The IHR document[9] aims to ensure a real-time exchange of information, to support early and informed decision making, and to ensure the mix of communication and engagement strategies happen before, during and after an event.

A risk communication framework provides guidance for policy makers and designers (to an extent) to develop and test messaging strategies in public health emergencies. Risk communication requires preparedness, response and recovery phases for public health emergencies, with the purpose of alerting people and helping them make informed decisions, reassuring them, to encourage behaviour change, and maintain trust[10]. This is all the more poignant during Covid-19 as the measures required to reduce risk were unprecedented and unfamiliar such as social distancing and closures.

WHO has several reports on effective communication, including a toolkit that provides a framework for developing communications. Unfortunately, aside from the most recent interim guidance document[11], many of the reports dealing specifically with risk communication were published between 2005 to 2017[12], and while the most recent report[13] addresses social media usage, there are few strategies on dealing with misinformation

through these mediums. With the rapid speed in which technological and communication channels develop, these reports appear outdated. While increased channels of communication are an additional challenge to manage misinformation (leading to an 'infodemic'), they can also reach a wide-ranging audience, establish consistent community engagement, and enable measurement of that engagement[14].

Within their documents on risk communication, which are evidence-based, field-tested communication guidance, WHO outlines the following as best practice guiding principles for risk communication[15]:

(1) Create and maintain trust

(2) Acknowledge and communicate even in uncertainty

(3) Coordinate

(4) Be transparent and fast with the first and all communications

(5) Be proactive in public communication

(6) Involve and engage those affected

(7) Use integrated approaches

(8) Build national capacity, support national ownership

These guidelines are similar to the seven best practices for public health risk and crisis communication outlined by the founder and director of the New York based Centre for Risk Communication Vincent Covello[16]. Trust is a recurring strategy in risk communication and a crucial aspect in the process. The rapid increase of information on the virus, coupled with shifting government guidance and rules, and an ineffective and confusing communication strategy, eroded trust and led to disastrous health and social outcomes. Unfortunately, countless studies demonstrate ineffective government responses to several public health emergencies.[17]

In developing trust within communication, the United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advise keeping in mind the following factors: expertise (known experts), good character (truth telling, not omitting information), identification (sharing experiences and values), and good will (care, community)[18]. WHO recommends that to build trust in communication it must be "linked to functioning and accessible services, be transparent, timely, easy-to-understand, acknowledge uncertainty, address affected populations, link to self-efficacy, and be disseminated using multiple platforms, methods and channels."[19]

A strategy for developing trust and persuading viewers is narrative and storytelling. Narrative is a strategy that uses personal stories, anecdotes, and testimonials to persuade viewers. The use of storytelling and narrative is a design strategy for engaging users, to "hook the imagination of users and invite actions and behaviors"[20], enabling people to "process and remember facts" [21], and provides designers with a method to analyse current and future scenarios. Designers use storytelling principles from the research to development and dissemination phase (personas, user journeys, storyboarding, navigating page layouts, etc.,) as a way of emotionally connecting with users and audiences.

In their study of the persuasive effects of narratives for health communication interventions, Shen et al., concluded that narrative messages have an important role within health communication, suggesting "that narratives can be influential in changing attitudes, intentions, and behaviors"[22]. In addition, in their study of Covid-19 television advertisements, Deng et al.,[23] found that the strategies within TV advertising demonstrated a strong focus on narrative and storytelling to persuade viewers, utilising strategies from public service announcements, focusing on transformational messaging over informational that used emotional appeal rather than educating customers on rules such as handwashing, social distancing and mask wearing. Whereas the print medium "is more conducive for rational

information processing"[24], audio and video messages are considered more emotionally evocative and persuasive mediums for narrative communication.

War Metaphors

One of the main frameworks in communicating Covid-19 is the use of metaphors. Metaphors are familiar and provide easy explanations, and world leaders – alongside Covid-19 visual communication materials – have used war metaphors to describe the pandemic[25]. Official government language and media coverage use statements such as "beating the virus", which reflect the hyper securitisation of society since 9-11. It is also reflective of the "war on terror" where people speak about how this invisible enemy (Covid) will be defeated. We must all "do our part", "stay home", and "save lives." Within the UK context in particular however the war metaphors are framed within World War Two symbols and tropes, as argued by Lisa McCormick[26].

Academic Constanca Musu[27] argues that war metaphors and imagery can be compelling tools: "It identifies an enemy (the virus), a strategy ("flatten the curve," … "save the economy"), the front-line warriors (health-care personnel), the home-front (people isolating at home), the traitors and deserters (people breaking the social-distancing rules)." The war metaphor is problematic because while it may

> evok[e] some images with positive connotations, like resistance and heroism, it also dredges up others which denote conflict, like confrontation, obedience and enemy. Likewise, it is unclear why other frameworks associated with care, empathy and solidarity are not being used in a healthcare emergency[28].

The latter frameworks have been used in some campaigns – but they remain within the war metaphor when alluding to heroes in battle on the frontline[29]. Within communication, "...metaphors are important rhetorical devices, especially when the aim is explanation or

persuasion."[30] In the case of Covid signage, the aim is to explain what we must do and persuade people to socially-distance, wear a mask and follow the rules.

War metaphors, according to Elena Semino, are used to talk about Covid because it is seen as an aggressive invader that must be dealt with, and the most extreme method of dealing with invaders is through war. This, she argues, is why war metaphors are prominent across communication citing cancer and climate change as examples[31].

While war metaphors can be effective ways of communication to the public, they can have potentially damaging effects, as in framing Covid-19 as a foreign invader (such as former US President Donald Trump calling it a "Chinese Virus"), shaping prejudice and xenophobia against certain minority groups[32].

Methodology

From April 2020 to January 2021, I documented Covid related signage across London, UK, capturing over 130 photographs of signs across the city. The signage I focus on is print-based, a category that I also apply to static adverts on a digital screen. Within print-based signage, user behaviour cannot easily be observed, therefore, the works rely largely on intuition and experience, and the user is more fittingly referred to as an audience in this context[33]. Print-based signage generally views the audience as consumers, "somewhat passive beneficiaries of the designer's expertise"[34].

The audience for the communication is general and broad and the signage demonstrated a range of professionally produced works to ad-hoc signs made without the presence of designers. This paper features a range of visual communication materials across London – from official government communication to the diversity of signs that interpret government messaging or develop their own rules of communication to customers and passers-by. The research was guided by the question: What is the visual language of print-

based Covid-19 signage? Since "[t]he graphic form itself is seldom analysed"[35], I focus on visually deconstructing the elements of the signs to reveal the visual language, examining symbols used over the textual language.

Data Collection and Selection

This paper examines the visual language of Covid-19 print-based signage. Data was collected from April 2020 to January 2021 across London, UK. Throughout the lockdowns, I chose new walking routes to collate a diversity of signs across the city. The process of selection was any new print-based signage I came across that I had not photographed before, and that signage must relate to Covid rules and regulations. I did not choose signs for their aesthetic value but took photographs of any new signs I came across, and carefully avoided replicating signs I had previously photographed. The main constraint in my selection criteria was that these signs were in public spaces and visible on shop fronts across the city. Data was collected during my walks throughout three lockdowns and images were captured either on my phone camera or digital camera. I captured a mixture of works – sanctioned government campaigns to more informal signs from individual proprietors.

Analysis

The open nature of the collection process required several methods to describe the visual language of Covid signage and ensure validity. I first used data display – a process of presenting data in an organised and visual format, to help with the analysis. This took the form of physically printing all the signage as photographs and coding, by hand, the recurring elements that appeared. Data display was effective in acquiring insights and understanding into the data set[36]. While analysing the images via data display, I utilised compositional interpretation – a method focused on five elements of image composition within still images (content, colour, light, spatial organisation and expressive content)[37] – to describe the content

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and colours of the images. This method was used as careful attention was given to the image symbols, colours and content to develop codes. Despite being a method that relies on concepts such as connoisseurship, genius, or art, the use of compositional interpretation is useful in describing the visual impact of an image[38].

In further considering visual meaning, compositional interpretation was coupled with semiology – the study of signs – to analyse the meaning of images and tracing how they function within broader systems of meaning that "searches for the dominant codes or myths or referent systems that underlie the surface appearance of signs"[39].

I looked carefully at elements of the image and at their interrelations several times and began to code recurring elements/codes. I then analysed the images using thematic analysis, however, there was no particular size to construct a theme, because as stated by Braun and Clarke[40] "...more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial", where I focused on key elements/codes captured with signage. Some signage had overlapping themes, however, any signs that did not specify a theme or overlap with other themes were not considered.

Findings and Discussion: The Visual Language of Covid-19

Repeated active readings of the signage were conducted and demonstrate that the signage can be categorised under the following themes (key messages), where signage also overlaps within themes:

- Fear, Danger, Caution

- Safety and Security

- Thank you, Togetherness, Care

- Hero, Protection

Based on the analysis, we can assign the following purposes/goals of these signs:

- Remind people to wear a mask

- Remind people to keep their distance

- Communicate restrictions in place

- Communicate changes to operations

- Requesting compliance

Coronavirus affects everyone, meaning the audience – who designers are attempting to communicate with – is not always clear. Therefore, the goal of the communication strategy is to effectively communicate to a broad and general audience where the designer must address multiple contexts. While we are spending more time at home, our engagement with print-based signage reinforces the messaging while we queue up to enter the shop and remind us of how to behave upon entering. The sections that follow report and discuss the themes of Covid print-based signage. Under each theme, I discuss recurring elements that make up the visual language, weaving the findings from the analysis with discussion in relation to the literature analysed.

Thank you, Togetherness, Care

The **Thank you, Togetherness, Care** theme demonstrates some key similarities in the visual language. The first is the use of ***Design Trends and Illustration***. The windows at the department store Selfridge's (figure 1), created for the reopening of shops in June 2020, were designed by Selfridge's staff to celebrate the people who kept the country going during the pandemic[41].

Figure 1 – Selfridge's London windows signage. Photograph by author.

Featuring several posters with personalised messages from staff, Selfridge's commissioned designers and illustrators to produce these works that – in contrast to other signs encountered across the city – focus on capturing people's emotions, using recognisable graphic design trends and centring typography and illustration. The approach is similar to signage found across the King's Cross area, which uses lighter colours, humour, an emphasis on *we*, and positive language to encourage compliance (figure 2).
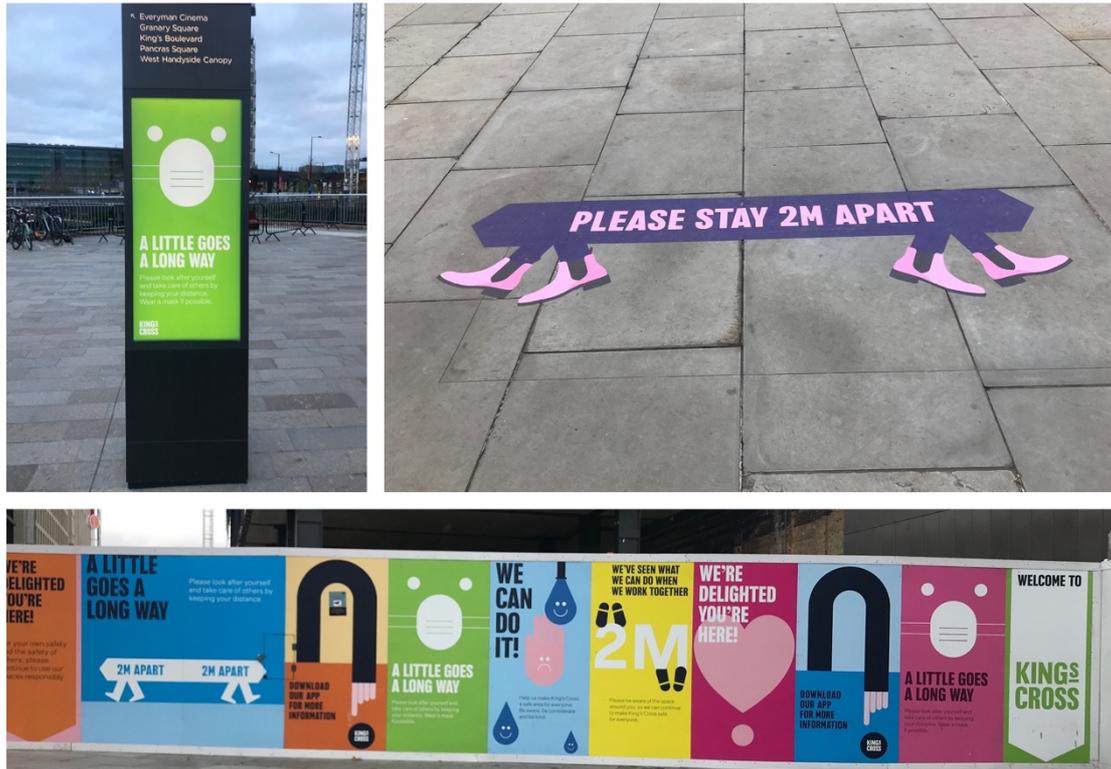
Figure 2 – King's Cross signage. Photograph by author.

The pandemic is an emotionally charged ongoing event, and emotional engagement is central in health messaging for behaviour change. However, as Chou and Budenz[42] argue, "a message intending to activate one type of emotion may instead activate other emotions", therefore, messages can trigger multiple emotions within people.

The second commonality is **Photographing Front-Line Workers**. Covid signs are heavily typographic with illustrations predominantly taking the form of pictograms. Photography is rarely used. During the first UK lockdown (March-June 2020), thank you messages from official government and NHS channels were text based (figure 3). During the second lockdown, photography became more prominent. Two separate campaigns by Transport for London (TfL) and Co-op food retailer emphasise thanking the real frontline workers saving lives during the pandemic by featuring photographs of people local to the area

where the signage is placed with their names included, adding an additional layer of the

human element to the campaign and connecting with people (figures 4 and 5). The care

element is reinforced via use of the words please, thank you, kindness and respect, implying

one's duty to protect ourselves and each other.

Figure 3 – Thanking key workers via typographic signs. Photograph by author.

Figure 4 – Photographing front-line workers, Co-Op. Photograph by author.
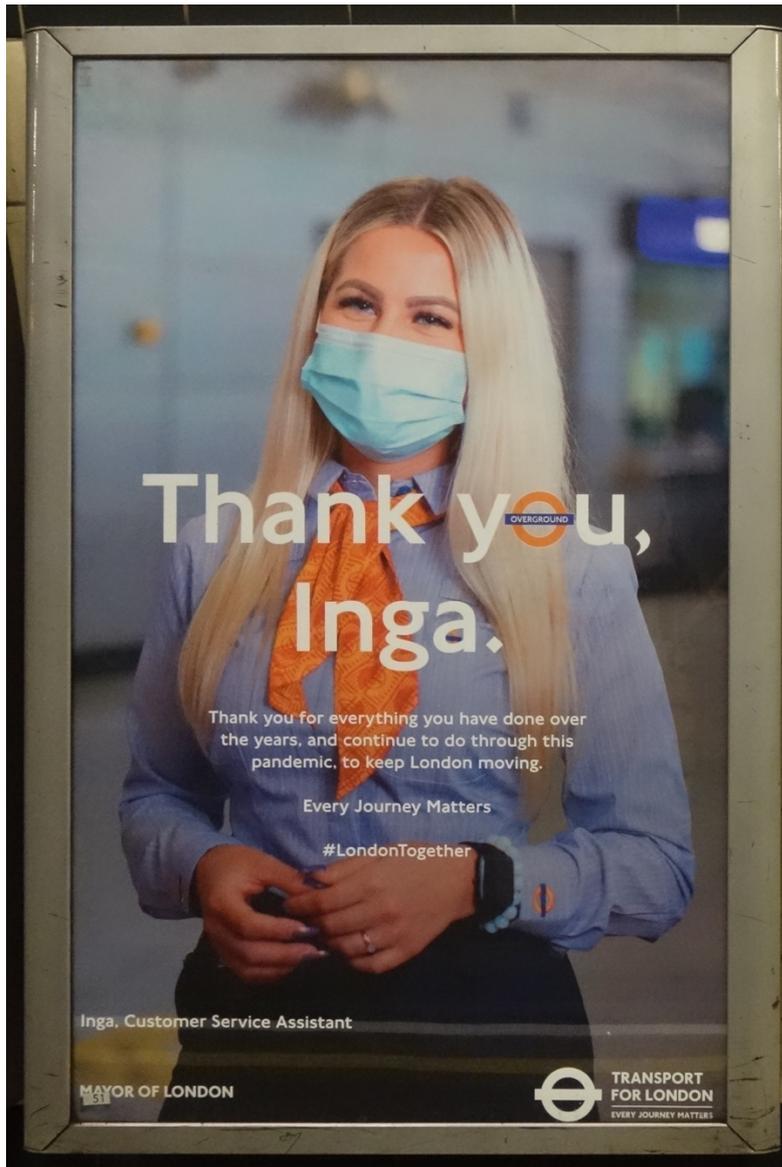
Figure 5 – Photographing front-line workers, TfL. Photograph by author.

The use of real people in photographs is prevalent in advertising campaigns, print-based signage, and even fashion magazines (Vogue honoured frontline workers on their cover in their July 2020 issue). Adopting guidance from the CDC and WHO mentioned earlier, this strategy attempts to build trust by demonstrating expertise and good will (community) and involves the community in their communication. The use of photographs draws on a narrative to highlight the heroism and sacrifice of front-line workers (by putting faces and names to the workers), linking to the use of war metaphors in government rhetoric about the virus.

Safety and Security

The **safety and security** theme (figure 6) mirrors official government language and media coverage, with war metaphors present in the language used on signage rather than the visual symbols. The practice exceeds the language of risk, feeding on anxiety and fear, as demonstrated in the latest UK government campaign *Look into my eyes* that uses high contrast imagery to focus on the eyes of patients' sick in hospital with Covid (figure 7). This campaign uses narrative to tell a story; the hospitalised patient could be your relative or friend. It relies on emotion and evokes heroism (stay at home, save lives).

Safety and Security theme

Figure 6 – Safety and Security theme. Photograph by author.

Figure 7 – Look into my eyes government campaign. Photograph by author.

The Mayor of London's *We'll face this together* poster (figure 8), featuring a collage of Londoners coming together with the subheading "together we can beat this virus" alludes to the invisible enemy war narrative. While language has been the most prominent demonstration of the war metaphor, the imagery of TfL's cleaning campaign is a direct nod to war (figure 9), albeit more reminiscent of science fiction films, where a worker in a hazmat suit appears to be fighting off aliens. These two campaigns attempt to involve good will

(featuring Londoners) and good characters (signals transparency) by providing assurance that there are constant cleaning measures using high grade cleaning materials.

Figure 8 – Mayor of London's We'll face this together campaign. Photograph by author.

Figure 9 – TfL cleaning campaign, fighting aliens. Photograph by author.

Safety and Security also includes signage touching on the concept of ***Covid Secure***, which aims to reassure visitors of their safety and counter uncertainty. For example, sticking unopened elements to everyday objects is a feature of this theme. The ***illusion of security*** is shown through an untampered seal, reflected in the Hilton's door seal sticker (figure 10 [1]), TfL sticking signage over the lift button and branding it "Covid safe" (figure 10 [2]), and businesses claiming they are Covid secure (figure 10 [4]), as though the virus cannot enter in

these spaces. The strategy attempts to establish trust by reassuring visitors that staff is taking all measures to ensure safety including washing their hands, deep cleaning spaces, and temperature checks (figure 10 [3], figure 11).

Figure 10 – Illusion of security. Photograph by author.

Figure 11 – Safety measures in place. Photograph by author.

Several pictograms are used to illustrate new measures and trust. Through the use of

the ***ultrastructural morphology exhibited by the virus*** image (as illustrated by the CDC)

(figure 12), which connotes following the science and the advice of experts and the ***heart***

symbol – symbolising kindness, care and staying safe – a recurring iconic sign within this

theme (figure 13). The concept of safety is reflected both ways – staff ensure the spaces are

cleaned and Covid secure and visitors are asked to abide by the rules. Staying safe has

become part of our everyday lexicon, and Covid signage reinforces this.
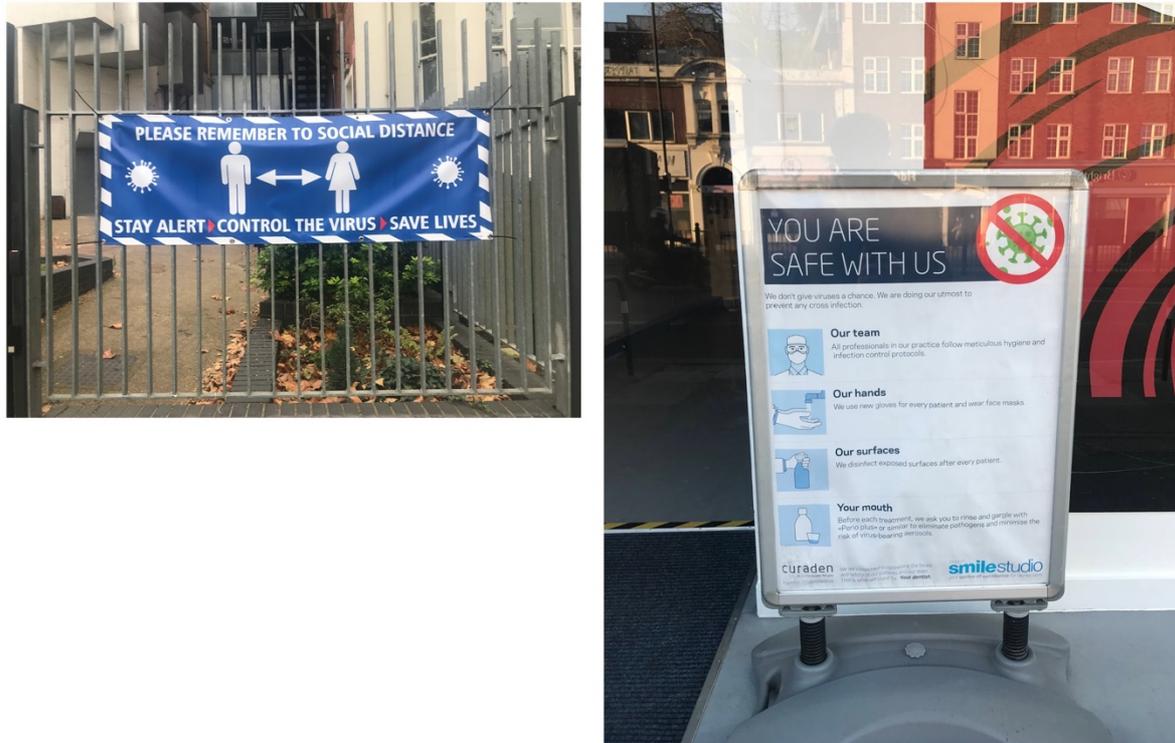
Figure 12 – Ultrastructural morphology exhibited by the virus. Photograph by author.
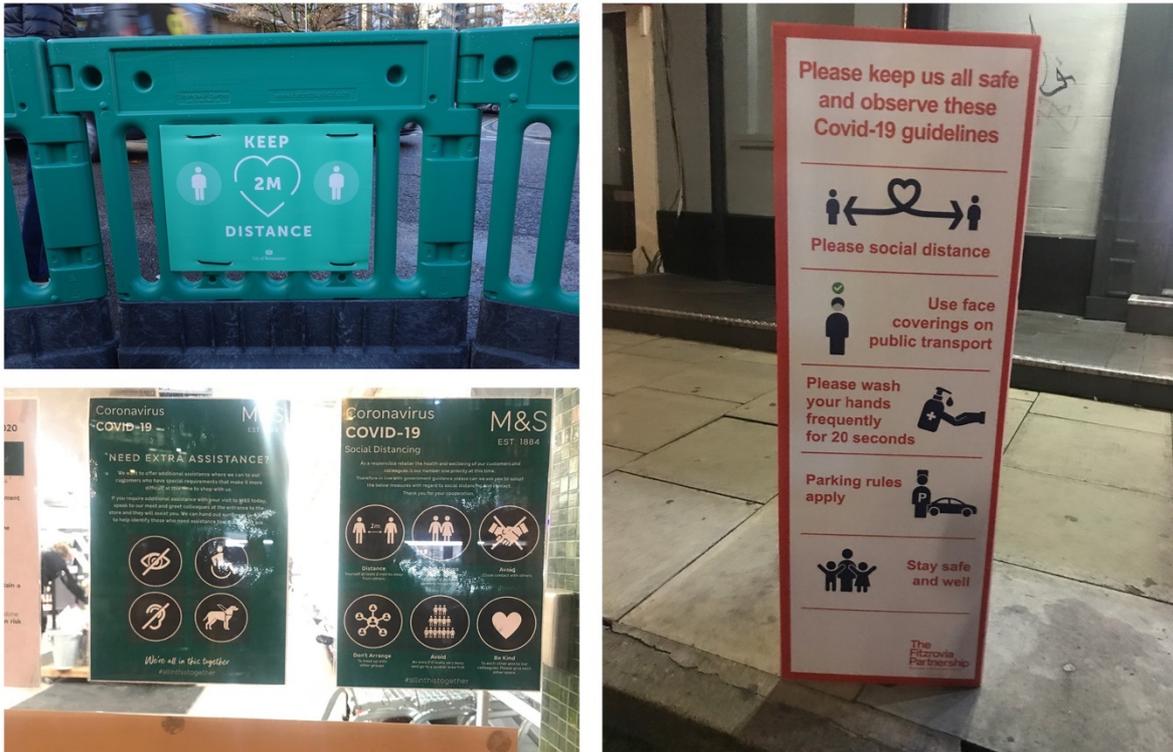
Figure 13 – Heart symbols, stay safe. Photograph by author.

Heroes and Protection

The **heroes and protection** theme overlaps with the Thank you, Togetherness, Care theme.
The concept of the *hero* – a word that has been used by the government and the media to
describe frontline workers and scientists protecting citizens against Covid – aligns with the
Safety and Security theme. Like in war, where there are obligations to the nation, these terms
imply the militarisation of society, where society must be constantly prepared for war,
cultural values are reshaped, and society's collective worldview must be reoriented[43].

The official government campaign during the strictest phases of the lockdown urged
us to "Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives", and the NHS became a source of national
pride. This is demonstrated in the use of the *official NHS colours*, blue (Pantone 300) and
white in signage thanking NHS workers for their sacrifices (figure 14). The use of the hero
and pride in the NHS aligns with WHO guidelines on risk communication: build national

capacity, support national ownership. This is particularly evident in the vaccination drive underway across the United Kingdom.

Figure 14 – Thank you to the NHS signage. Photograph by author.

The signs target emotions – anyone including your loved ones can contract Covid – and we must protect them. *Typography* dominates in the NHS app adverts, with the only instance of *photography* showing a young boy and his grandfather (figure 15), connoting the protection of the vulnerable (using narrative and targeting emotion), and the heart symbol represents both care and 'loving' a photo via social media platforms.
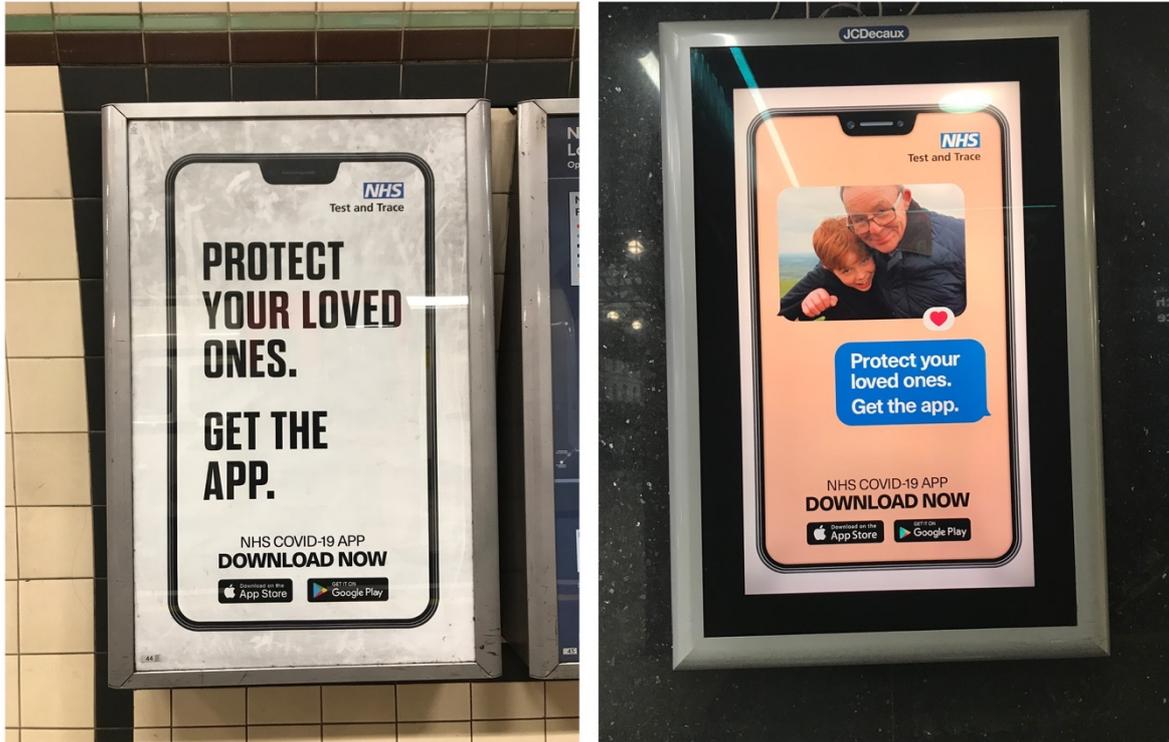
Figure 15 – Protect your loved ones. Photograph by author.

Through our sacrifice by staying home and protecting our loved ones and the NHS, we become heroes, as demonstrated in Co-op's campaign (figure 16). Protection is implied through the **_image of the mask_**. Variations of the mask on signage include the shape of the blue surgical mask, pictograms (male, female, gender neutral), line art style illustration, more illustrative imagery of people wearing masks, and use of humour to enforce mask wearing (figure 17).

Figure 16 – Be a hero, stay at home. Photograph by author.

Figure 17 – Different variations of face mask signage. Photograph by author.

The colour scheme of face mask signage is predominantly ***blue and white***, with some variations using ***yellow and black*** (symbolising the ***hazard*** label). TfL's use of light blue communicates hygiene, and the corporate blue (Pantone 072) for key messages such as practicing social distancing and bright ***red*** for mask wearing (figure 18).
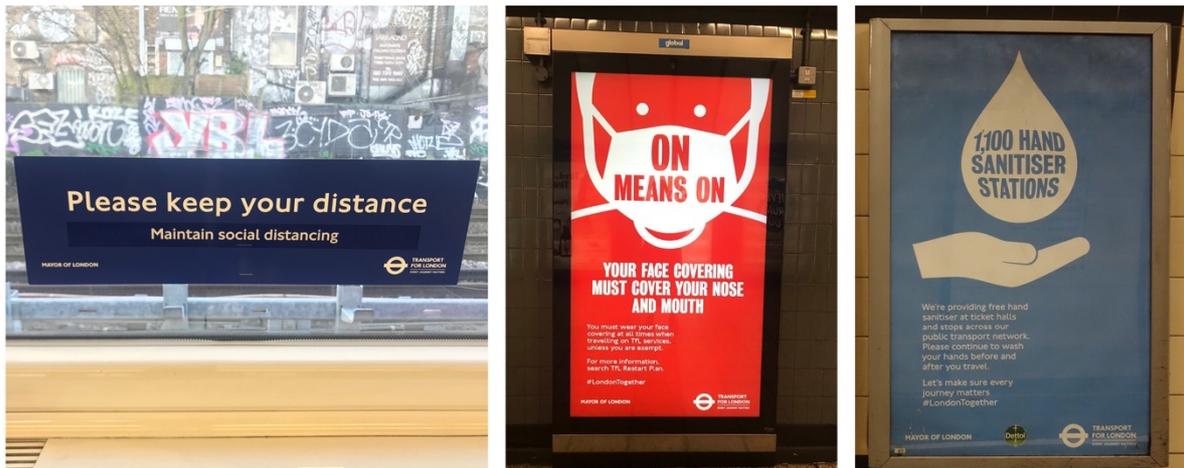
Figure 18 – TfL colour scheme. Photograph by author.

Fear, Danger, Caution

The **fear, danger, caution** theme is more prevalent in recent official UK government campaigns discussed earlier. It plays out within mass media but is displayed subtly in the text and visual language of Covid signage. The strategy falls under Covello's Be Truthful, Honest, Frank, and Open: risk information is disclosed (everyone is affected), do not minimise or exaggerate the level of risk, and do not over-reassure[44].

Both *colour and typography* play a key role in communicating this theme and displaying the level of risk. A recurring motif is the *hazard label stripes*. Local councils have adapted the striped hazard sign on their communications. However, rather than using the standard yellow and black, the border stripes are coloured like a *rainbow* – a nod to care, kindness and thank you messages (figure 19). McCormick argues that children painting rainbows began in Italy as an act of solidarity, and in the UK symbolised support for the NHS[45].

The typography connotes a danger element, using *all caps* typeset against a *black background*. Other council messages use yellow text on a black background (hazard sign) to communicate information such as a number, an email or website, or red text for the key message (figure 20). Government guidance on travel makes subtle use of the striped hazard

sign, strong use of typographic hierarchy using all caps and large type, bolding and

underlining key words (figure 21).

Figure 19 – Council use of rainbow hazard symbol. Photograph by author.

Figure 20 – Community important information. Photograph by author.
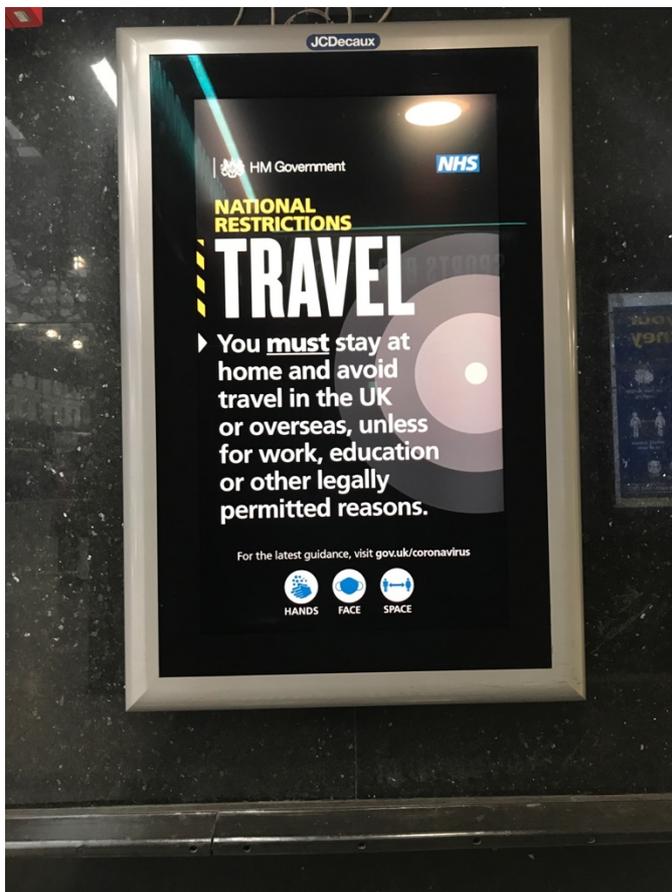
Figure 21 – Government guidance on travel. Photograph by author.

The use of *hands* is another recurring visual in this theme. In most Covid related signage, hands symbolise washing hands or sanitising. In fear and danger, they are a warning to stop and avoid touching. Similarly, the *stop sign, or the word stop* communicates a warning. Most often, the use of the *colour red* signals what one cannot do or rules one must follow (figure 22).

Fear and Caution theme

Figure 22 – Stop! Caution! Do not enter here! Photograph by author.

The fear and danger theme also translates in signage that attempts to address issues of hoarding after panic erupted at the start of the pandemic. Media scaremongering at the start of

the pandemic translated into selfish behaviour. Fuelled by fear and anxiety, people were put

into survival mode, fear of shortages and suffering led to highly individualistic and irrational

"every man for himself" behaviour[46]. Supermarket signage attempts to address hoarding

through the use of words like please and be considerate, appealing to people to show care and

kindness (figure 23).

Figure 23 – Combatting every 'man' for himself. Photograph by author.

This theme addresses two aspects of WHO guidance: acknowledge and communicate

even in uncertainty and be transparent. Elements such as hands, stop signs, the colour red,

and hazard symbols all signal danger and uncertainty – touching surfaces may spread

Coronavirus, and everyone must be vigilant. These symbols and colours aim to build trust in

communication, these are easy-to-understand signs. Moreover, council signs use prominent

typography to develop trust in their services: call this number to get tested and help prevent the spread of Covid.

Conclusion and Future Research

In this paper, I have reflected on the visual language of Covid print-based signage, categorising them under four broad themes. There are recurring elements within these visual communication materials, most prominently the use of pictograms, figures wearing masks, images of key workers, illustrations of the virus, hearts, hands, and arrows. The signage uses many pictograms, and while aiming to be accessible, these can often seem irrelevant or superfluous, and appear as a stylistic choice rather than a functional one. Much of the signage documented here has been produced in haste, reflecting the quick move into lockdown and to cope with a situation most businesses were not prepared for. Almost overnight, customers entering businesses were engaging with new rules via posters and floor signage asking them to adopt new behaviours such as maintaining distance and wearing a mask. In contrast to Covid television adverts, print-based signage is generally more informational than transformational, using rational need to educate.

While this paper focused on the visual language of Covid, there were several limitations in its scope. These limitations however provide several opportunities for future research. An element that was not discussed was the wordiness of Covid print-based signage. Signage, in its attempt to request compliance, attempts to over explain certain aspects. Do the designers (or makers of these signs) believe these will be read? Or is this a tactic to establish trust by claiming transparency? Wordiness may lead to key elements such as communicating exemptions to become lost in the messaging. Future research could consider the ways in which Covid print-based signage made use of best practice guidelines to communicate messages for people living with disabilities.

In this study there were choices made on what to discuss, with emphasis on certain materials over others. It is of course, open to interpretation. This study was concerned with the images themselves rather than include, in tighter focus, the social institutions that produced them and the effects of these. A study examining the social institutions would be concerned more strictly with official government signage, however. Within risk communication reports and literature, government communications are the focus, and future studies on the visual language of public health emergency materials would benefit from a narrower sample of works.

Whereas much of the literature and WHO reports emphasises government-led communication, we overlook other forms of communication – the more vernacular and ad-hoc forms – that people continue to engage with during the Covid-19 pandemic. While this study did not assess the effectiveness of print-based signage, instead exploring the visual language of Covid within these, future studies could examine the effectiveness of print narratives on audiences more generally. Moreover, future studies could look at a comparison of the visual language styles communicated in other major epidemics in the last 20 years such as Ebola, SARS, and Zika for example.

Finally, the guidance and recommendations on communication is largely dedicated to management strategies of communication – aimed at policy and decision makers responsible for managing emergencies as opposed to designers – overlooking the effect of design decisions that could aid in the production of messaging. The analysis of the visual language of Covid presented in this paper provides another opportunity for future research into the effectiveness of these elements, developing a toolkit or set of guidelines to designers working in health communication to communicate with audiences, and using design for behaviour change frameworks – coupled with strategies from WHO reports – in assessing the effectiveness of the print-based signage on audiences.

The Covid signage poses important questions regarding the role of communication design in effectively communicating with the public. Of course, these print-based signs are only one aspect of a larger system. As a somewhat passive medium, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness the exposure to these signs have on public behaviours and compliance, particularly where Coronavirus requires us to alter multiple behaviours simultaneously. Finally, this paper invited readers to ask who these designs are for and reflect on the effectiveness of the communication. Have these been effectively communicated to the public, or should communication design aimed at changing behaviours attempt more interactive and educational ways of communicating changes, restrictions and requesting compliance?

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Notes

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