

EPIDAY 2011

Communicating Visually in Europe and Asia

Sabrina Bresciani

Institute of Marketing and Communication Management (IMCA)

Post-doc

Presentation

In recent years we are witnessing a growing interest and use of conceptual representations for communicating ideas and insights. In the context of organizational communication, companies are deploying diagrams and knowledge maps to convey crucial business concepts; scholars are reporting successful company cases, theorizing on the topic and compiling classifications and best practices. Yet few studies have attempted to prove the effectiveness of visualization, with hypotheses based on theories with predictive power.

This interdisciplinary study evaluates the effects of visual mapping on human communication in different cultures. It focuses on assessing conceptual visual communication - in particular in the context of organizational communication - and to investigate if there are cross-cultural differences in the reception of visual representations in Europe and Asia. Scholars have provided evidence of differences in the perception of visualization, caused by differences in thought patterns between East Asia and the Western world (Nisbett, 2003).

A model is proposed, in which it is predicted that a conceptual visualization, compared to text, has a positive effect on behavioral intention, mediated by attitude (toward the content). Further, we combine theories on attitude-intention (Ajzen, 1991) and the concept of the Geography of Thought (Nisbett, 2003), proposing a research model of mediated moderation, predicting an interaction of culture and visual representation on attitude, and consequently on behavioral intention.

To test the model we set up a controlled experiment specifically for the context of strategy communication, one of the most crucial and challenging task for successful strategy implementation (Alexander, 1985). We compare the attitude and behavioral intention of subjects exposed to a corporate strategy expressed in a textual format (control group) or in two types of visual format, one more suitable for Westerners and one more suitable for Asians. The results of 360 experienced professionals in Europe, Singapore and India, provide full validation of the proposed model: we find a significant positive effect of visual representations on attitude and a significant full mediation of attitude on behavioral intention. Thus, a visual representation of strategy, compared to text, increases the positive attitude toward the strategy, which in turn increases the intention to implement the strategy. Considering culture, we find support for the predicted hypothesis of mediated moderation: visualization is more beneficial than text in all cultures, and when a culturally appropriate visualization is used, its effects are enhanced.

The results of the study indicate that conceptual visualization has the power to increase the effectiveness of the message compared to text, and that these benefits replicate across different cultures. It shows that human communication can be shaped and enhanced by using visual mapping tools, which empower users to swiftly craft clear and convincing messages. These results are relevant as a growing number of organizations are operating internationally and have to communicate their knowledge and strategy across different cultures.

Open questions remain regarding the role of ICT in conveying knowledge with interactive visualization. Further research could explore the generalizability of these findings on a number of diverse communication outcomes.