



REVISITING FEMALE WORKERS' THINKING ON PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era characterized by an overwhelming and interconnected flow of information, individuals are increasingly required to possess critical skills in interpreting visual messages. However, the ongoing crisis in information literacy poses a significant challenge in understanding public messages conveyed through visual media. Public messages presented in the form of public service advertisements (PSAs) hold strategic potential when delivered with communicative and persuasive visual elements. This study revisits the perspectives of female workers toward PSAs to explore how they interpret such public messages. Employing a phenomenological-narrative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with female workers from diverse age groups and educational backgrounds. The data were analyzed using Atlas.ti software. The findings reveal that female workers actively engage in visual interpretation through three primary dimensions: active selection, visual symbolic structuring, and contextual emotional resonance. Informants tended to select familiar visual elements, interpret the design structure, and relate them to their lived experiences. This interpretive process reflects a form of critical visual literacy grounded in social and emotional realities. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in enriching the discourse on visual media literacy by foregrounding the often-marginalized voices of female workers in public communication design. Practically, the study highlights the necessity for inclusive and socially sensitive public communication strategies to more effectively engage audiences.

Keywords: public service advertisement, female workers, visual literacy, phenomenological-narrative, gender representation

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, the flow of information is rapidly evolving and becoming increasingly interconnected. Technology has transformed communication patterns, leading to a rise in globalization and interlinked information systems (Godhe et al., 2022). These developments not only expand access to information but also shift the dominant mode of public communication from text-based formats to increasingly visual representations (Dyussebayeva et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). In the current landscape of digital media, information dissemination is no longer linear or solely textual; instead, it manifests through symbols, colors, visual designs, and image-based narratives that are instant, emotional, and multisemiotic in nature (Kress, 2009). Visual-based platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become dominant channels of public communication, gradually replacing conventional media as the primary sources of information distribution (Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024). Within this context, the public is no longer expected to be passive consumers but must instead develop strong visual literacy competencies—namely, the ability to critically and contextually interpret, evaluate, and reflect on the meanings conveyed through various visual representations

(Weisberg et al., 2023). This skill is increasingly vital as visual content is no longer supplementary but functions as a principal medium in shaping public opinion and social awareness.

This communicative function is often fulfilled through advertising, particularly non-commercial advertisements such as public service announcements (PSAs). Public service announcements (hereafter PSAs) refer to advertisements intended to inform, persuade, or educate audiences, with the primary objective being social benefit rather than economic gain (A. Zaitseva et al., 2020; Pujiyanto, 2013; Shyamali Banerje et al., 2023). The intended social benefits include increased public knowledge, awareness, attitudinal shifts, and behavioral change in response to the promoted issue, alongside cultivating a positive public image. In essence, PSAs serve as strategic tools for conveying public messages to a wide audience.

To effectively communicate public messages, the visual elements in PSAs must be strategically designed to be both persuasive and communicative (Wiesenberg & Verčič, 2021). These visual elements do not merely complement verbal messages but play a pivotal role in evoking emotions, shaping perceptions, and guiding audience interpretations of the social issues being addressed (Breves, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2023). Visualization in PSAs becomes central to constructing compelling narratives, enhancing message appeal, and fostering affective responses from the public. Specifically, PSAs integrate various interconnected visual elements into a coherent whole, including form, structure, material, color, imagery, typography, and other design features (Pujiyanto, 2013). The integration of these elements serves not only to achieve visual aesthetics but also to ensure that the conveyed information is quickly understood, easily remembered, and capable of prompting the desired behavioral change. Hence, visual design in PSAs must be carefully crafted with consideration of cultural context, audience background, and targeted social objectives, so as to maximize message effectiveness.

The public's ability to receive PSA messages depends on their capacity to read, understand, and interpret the visual elements employed. The ability to derive meaning from symbols, images, colors, typography, and overall visual layout is referred to as visual literacy (Chaban, 2022; Kennedy, 2020; Poon, 2021). Visual literacy encompasses the skills not only to see but also to critically and contextually interpret messages embedded in visual representations (Brown & Savić, 2023). In this regard, the public is expected to act as active readers who can recognize the connections between visual elements and the social meanings they convey. Without sufficient visual literacy, PSA messages risk being only partially understood or misinterpreted, thereby diminishing the overall effectiveness of the campaign (Khamadi & Setiawan, 2020). Furthermore, the complexity and ambiguity inherent in some visual messages can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations among audiences (Bünzli & Dillard, 2022). In such cases, not only is the message's impact weakened, but the miscommunication may also generate unintended negative perceptions of the social issues being promoted. Therefore, strengthening visual literacy is essential in fostering public awareness and understanding of social issues presented through visual media.

Amidst the rapid growth of social information, it is crucial to understand how various societal groups interpret messages communicated through PSAs. As previously mentioned, PSAs are designed to attract attention and influence audience behavior (Breves, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2023). However, not all audiences respond to visual messages in the same way, particularly those with diverse social experiences and perspectives (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2022). In this regard, one group that deserves



particular attention is female workers. Studies indicate that female workers are among the groups often marginalized in public communication design (Szabó, 2022). Despite their significant contributions across sectors, their representation in visual media remains limited and often lacks sensitivity to their lived realities.

This study adopts a narrative-phenomenological approach to understand how female workers interpret visual elements in PSAs. Narrative phenomenology combines phenomenology's emphasis on lived experience with narrative's focus on structuring individual understanding, enabling researchers to explore in depth the perspectives of female workers regarding the visual messages they encounter in PSAs (Creswell, J.W. and Poth, 2018). This approach facilitates the exploration of how meanings are constructed through lived experience and visual interpretation within specific social contexts. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, which provided participants with the opportunity to openly share their experiences and thoughts, thereby allowing the researcher to gain rich insights into their meaning-making processes. The interview data were then analyzed using Atlas.ti software, which supports the systematic coding and categorization of key themes, resulting in a comprehensive and structured interpretation (Friese, 2019). As such, this approach offers a robust foundation for understanding the deeper meanings embedded in how female workers read and interpret visual elements in PSAs.

This study is expected to make a significant theoretical contribution to the field of visual literacy by highlighting the perspectives of female workers—voices that are often underrepresented in public communication design. While many previous studies on visual literacy reflect dominant perspectives or those of socially privileged groups, the experiences of marginalized communities such as female workers have frequently been overlooked (Mackenzie, D., & Ladd, 2020). This research provides space for the perspectives of female workers, who actively interpret and make meaning of PSA visuals within their socio-cultural and emotional contexts. The findings offer important insights into how visual communication can be made more inclusive and responsive to diverse social contexts, thereby increasing its effectiveness in engaging wider audiences. By investigating how female workers read and respond to visual messages, this study suggests that public communication strategies should be designed with greater attention to equitable and diverse representation—strategies that resonate empathically and meaningfully with people's lived experiences (Graham, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Thinking is an essential mental process through which the brain filters and manages diverse streams of information to produce accurate and appropriate decisions (Sternberg, R. J., & Sternberg, 2016; Woolfolk, 2016). Furthermore, thinking can be defined as a mental process grounded in action and spatial perception, subsequently expressed through various systems of communication, both verbal and nonverbal (Beres, 2025). Based on these definitions, thinking may be understood as a crucial mental activity rooted in experiential action and spatial perception, whereby the brain processes and synthesizes information through verbal and nonverbal communication to arrive at sound decisions.

Thinking plays a fundamental role in both verbal (spoken and written language) and nonverbal communication (such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language). Verbal communication relies heavily on logical and structured thinking to convey meaning explicitly, whereas nonverbal communication reflects the affective and intuitive

dimensions of thinking, which are often not consciously recognized by communicators (Knapp, M. L., Hall, J. A., & Horgan, 2014). Thus, within diverse social contexts, thinking serves as the foundation for constructing effective and meaningful messages in social interaction. The integration of thinking processes with multimodal communication is vital for learning, collaboration, and decision-making (Wegerif, 2007). Accordingly, thinking constitutes a central mechanism that connects perception, meaning, and action in human communication.

Different social groups interpret messages in varying ways (Lagos, 2022; Ares et al., 2021; Ortega & Scartascini, 2020). This variation arises from cultural backgrounds, social experiences, collective values, and historical contexts that shape patterns of thinking and representational systems. In line with this perspective, meaning is not inherently embedded in the message itself but is constructed through a decoding process by receivers, each of whom brings their own interpretive framework (Gudykunst, 2021). Female workers are among the social groups frequently overlooked in the design of public communication (Szabó, 2022), despite their significant contributions across sectors. Their representation in visual media is often limited and fails to reflect the complexity and realities of their lives, thereby creating inequities in the delivery of inclusive and just messaging.

The visual media of focus in this study is public service advertisements (PSAs). PSAs are a form of strategic communication designed to convey information, raise awareness, and promote changes in public attitudes or behavior for social benefit rather than economic gain (A. Zaitseva et al., 2020; Pujiyanto, 2013; Shyamali Banerje et al., 2023). Because of their orientation toward public interest, PSAs differ from commercial advertising. They are guided by educational and persuasive missions rooted in collective interest and public welfare. Typically developed by government agencies, non-profit organizations, or civil society initiatives, PSAs address social issues such as health, the environment, gender equality, or public safety. Within the framework of public communication theory, PSAs are seen as symbolic media that play a vital role in the construction of social meaning and the reproduction of cultural values (Jaramillo-Dent & Romero-Rodriguez, 2022). The effectiveness of PSAs largely depends on the visual and narrative elements' ability to generate emotional and cognitive engagement across diverse social and cultural contexts (Fransen, M. L., Smit, E. G., & Verlegh, 2021). Therefore, a deep understanding of audience characteristics and the inclusive representation of social groups is key to designing impactful and socially equitable PSAs.

In conclusion, thinking is not only central to decision-making processes but also constitutes the foundation for constructing and conveying both verbal and nonverbal messages. When integrated with multimodal communication systems, thinking enables the transfer of complex and contextual meaning, especially in socially diverse interaction spaces. However, the interpretation of messages is inherently relative and influenced by cultural, social, and collective experiences, necessitating sensitivity in the design of public messages. In this context, PSAs serve a strategic function as symbolic media aimed at fostering social awareness and behavioral change. For PSAs to be effective and equitable, their visual representations must account for audience diversity, including marginalized groups such as female workers. By understanding the interplay of thinking, socio-cultural contexts, and inclusive public communication principles, the design of PSAs can become more empathetic, relevant, and impactful in driving social transformation.



METHOD

To achieve the research objectives, a qualitative approach with a phenomenological-narrative design was employed. The phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the subjective experiences of female workers in interpreting public service advertisements (PSAs), particularly focusing on how visual elements triggered personal perceptions and reflections toward public messages. Meanwhile, the narrative approach enabled the researcher to trace and reconstruct the informants' personal stories and experiences related to their interactions with the PSAs. The combination of these two approaches allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the cognitive and affective dimensions of the participants' experiences, as well as how they constructed meaning based on their social, cultural, and gender contexts.

A total of seven female informants were purposively selected, taking into account variations in age, educational background, and occupational fields. The participants represented a broad demographic range—from youth to elderly—and educational levels from secondary school to higher education. They were engaged in both formal and informal sectors, including office workers, teachers, sanitation workers, and street vendors, each with different levels of exposure to visual media. This diversity was intended to yield a comprehensive perspective in understanding and interpreting visual messages in PSAs.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions that focused on participants' perceptions, emotional responses, and reflections regarding several PSA samples that had been pre-selected by the researcher. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software. The analytical process began with open coding to identify meaningful units within the interview transcripts. This was followed by axial coding to group related codes into broader categories such as gender representation, emotional resonance, and media critique. The final stage, selective coding, involved formulating key themes that reflected consistent and significant patterns of visual meaning-making in the participants' narratives. The validity of the findings was ensured through data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing to minimize interpretative bias and enhance the credibility of the data.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. These included ensuring the confidentiality of participant identities, obtaining written informed consent, and allowing participants the freedom to withdraw at any time. All research procedures adhered to established ethical standards in social research. The researcher also served as the primary instrument in the study, actively engaging with the data and conducting self-reflection on personal position, values, and potential biases to avoid influencing data interpretation. This reflective approach was essential for maintaining the authenticity of the narratives and preventing meaning distortion during the analysis and reporting stages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Informant Profile

This study involved seven female informants employed across various sectors, including domestic work, corporate environments, offices, and educational institutions. The informants' ages ranged from 20 to 38 years, with educational backgrounds spanning

from elementary school to postgraduate level. Their professions varied widely, encompassing domestic workers (housemaids), housewives, project consultants, architects, programmers, university lecturers, and micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) entrepreneurs. Such diversity was intentionally selected to capture a wide range of perspectives on public service advertisements (PSAs), particularly in relation to their lived and social experiences. The following is a brief profile of the participating female workers.

Table 1. Informant Profile of Female Workers

Informant	Age	Profession	Educational Background
P1	27 years	Architect	Bachelor's Degree
P2	38 years	Lecturer	Posgraduate Degree
P3	23 years	Programmers	Diploma
P4	34 years	Housewives	Posgraduate Degree
P5	35 years	Project Consultant	Posgraduate Degree
P6	20 years	Housemaids	Elementary School
P7	25 years	MSME Entrepreneurs	Senior High School

Active Selection of Public Service Advertisements

"Active selection" refers to the deliberate process through which individuals select visual or symbolic information they encounter (Arnheim, 1997). Most informants indicated a tendency to pay attention to public service advertisements (PSAs) that are familiar, socially relevant, and closely connected to their lived experiences. This suggests that individuals consciously choose categories of information based on their relevance to personal needs, contextual factors, or specific interests. Elements such as occupational health and safety (OHS) symbols, no-smoking signs, academic information, and various forms of warnings, recommendations, or social prohibitions represent visual cues that consistently draw the informants' attention.



Figure 1. Coding of Active Selection Findings

Visual Symbolic Structure

In relation to the dimension of visual elements in public service advertisements (PSAs), the term "element" refers to various visual and textual components embedded



within informational media (Arnheim, 1997), particularly those used in educational or public communication contexts. The findings indicate the presence of diverse visual media formats (e.g., banners, boards, papers), shapes (e.g., starburst, exclamation marks, pyramidal forms), colour and lighting schemes (e.g., blue, red, bright tones, white backgrounds), imagery and symbols (e.g., safety belts, figures wearing personal protective equipment, tax logos), textual features (e.g., slogans, capitalized text), and size specifications (e.g., large, small, 2m x 1m). Collectively, these visual elements consistently emerged in participants' narratives as the most attention-grabbing and memorable features.



Figure 2. Coding of Visual Element Findings

Contextual Emotional Resonance

The dimension of *proximity* in this study refers to the emotional and cognitive closeness experienced by the community (Arnheim, 1997), particularly in relation to schools. This core concept is supported by several key elements, including "school excellence," "competitions," "moments of achievement," and "school promotions." School excellence serves as the foundational indicator of educational quality, typically demonstrated through participation in and achievements from various competitions. Such participation or victories foster "moments of achievement," which become sources of pride and emotional connection for both students and parents.

Furthermore, "school promotions" function as a complementary strategy to reinforce emotional proximity through rational appeals, such as "tuition discount promotions" and "special price offers." These elements are directly linked to parental decision-making in school selection. Collectively, these components contribute to shaping a positive public perception of the school, thereby facilitating a comprehensive approach to building institutional loyalty and attractiveness in the educational sector.



Figure 3. Coding of Proximity Findings

Discussion

Active Participation in Visual Meaning-Making

The findings of this study indicate that female workers possess an active and context-sensitive capacity for visual literacy when engaging with public service advertisements (PSAs). Rather than processing information passively, they actively select, interpret, and respond to visual elements based on their lived experiences and socio-cultural realities. This aligns with the principles of critical visual literacy theory, which posits that audiences are not passive recipients but active meaning-makers who negotiate visual messages within their sociocultural contexts (Brown & Savić, 2023). For female workers in particular, their lived experiences—shaped by issues such as double burdens, gender inequality, and social expectations—profoundly influence how they interpret the messages embedded in PSAs (Sharma, 2020; Sharun, 2023).

The diversity of participants in this study reinforces this argument. The seven informants represented various employment sectors (ranging from domestic workers to professionals and educators), with age spans between 20 and 38 years and educational backgrounds from elementary school to graduate-level degrees. Informants such as P6 (a domestic worker with elementary school education) and P4 (a housewife with a bachelor's degree) demonstrated that, despite their non-professional backgrounds, they were able to relate the content of PSAs to personal experiences, particularly in messages concerning safety, family health, or children's education. Conversely, participants like P2 (a university lecturer) and P5 (a project consultant) engaged with the PSAs more critically, questioning how the messages were constructed or how women were visually represented.

Their meaning-making process was not an automatic reaction but involved active and narrative engagement. The women interpreted the messages based on the values, roles, and social conditions embedded in their daily lives. This resonates with the theoretical perspective that meaning is not solely dictated by the message sender but is co-constructed through the interaction with readers who bring their own backgrounds and experiences (Bojanić, 2023). Therefore, female workers should not be viewed merely as passive targets of public messages but as active agents in shaping meaning (Sharma, 2020; Sharun, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of designing PSAs that are inclusive and attuned to the audience's backgrounds. When their lived experiences,



social roles, and visual literacy competencies are taken into account, PSAs can serve not only as channels of information but also as dialogic spaces that foster critical awareness and public participation.

The Dimension of Active Selection toward Visual Elements

Findings from the active selection process in this study reveal that female workers consciously choose visual information they consider important, relevant, and aligned with their lived experiences. The concept of *active selection* posits that visual perception is not a passive process, but rather a cognitive act whereby individuals select specific visual elements based on their personal meanings and significance. In the context of Public Service Advertisements (PSAs), participants demonstrated greater interest in familiar messages or those directly related to their daily lives, such as Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) symbols, no-smoking signs, or information about education and safety.

This suggests that the interpretation of PSAs is influenced not only by visual design but also by individuals' social contexts and lived experiences. Participants expressed a sense of connection to certain messages because they resonated with their daily responsibilities, such as maintaining health, caring for children, or managing household duties. In other words, their engagement with PSAs went beyond reading the content—they interpreted the messages through the lens of personal values and real-life impact (Brown & Savić, 2023).

In addition to message content, visual forms significantly shaped their attention. Bright colors, easily recognizable symbols such as exclamation marks or traffic signs, and familiar layouts enabled participants to more easily identify and understand the intended meanings of the PSAs. This indicates that their visual literacy encompassed not only image recognition but also the ability to associate visual cues with particular social actions—for example, complying with no-smoking regulations or adhering to workplace safety rules (Farmer, 2022; Häggström, 2024; Unal, 2024). Therefore, effective PSAs are those that not only convey information but also establish personal and social resonance with the audience. Visually relevant, context-sensitive, and easily identifiable messages are more likely to attract attention and encourage active responses from the public. Understanding the dynamics of active selection is thus crucial in designing public visual communication, as it highlights how audiences actively filter and construct meaning from the visual messages they encounter in everyday life.

Interpreting the Symbolic Structure of PSAs

The study's analysis of symbolic structures within PSAs indicates that visual elements play a central role in capturing attention and shaping audience understanding, particularly among female workers. Based on data coding, common communication media included banners, boards, posters, and LED displays, while frequently identified visual forms encompassed exclamation marks, starburst symbols, and pyramid shapes. These elements function as visual markers that reinforce the core message of the PSA and enhance its recognizability in daily life (Arnheim, 1997).

Color and lighting also emerged as prominent factors referenced by informants. Bright colors such as blue, red, and yellow, as well as high-contrast combinations like black-and-white or white backgrounds, were effective in attracting attention. This supports the view of Paksi (2021) that color not only serves an aesthetic purpose but also carries cultural and social meanings. In PSAs, vivid colors are often associated with warnings or urgency, while neutral tones aid message legibility.

Beyond color and form, images and symbols such as tax logos, individuals wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), or seat belts consistently drew attention. These visuals were not only informative but also carried emotional value, depicting scenarios that closely reflect the participants' everyday experiences (Fajar Paksi, 2021). Such visual symbols serve as "meaning shortcuts" (Jewitt, C., Bezemer, J., & O'Halloran, 2017), allowing audiences to grasp messages quickly without extensive reading.

Textual elements such as short phrases, slogans, or capitalized statements were also deemed significant. This style of writing was perceived as clear and direct, making it easier to comprehend and remember. In many cases, the textual component served as the initial point of engagement before other visual elements were noticed. Media size further influenced visual appeal; larger displays (e.g., 2 meters by 1 meter) or medium-sized formats visible in public spaces were more effective in drawing attention.

Overall, the visual structure of PSAs comprises a synergistic combination of form, color, imagery, text, and size, all of which collectively contribute to message appeal and meaning-making (Fariq Hasril Adiwardana & David Rizar Nugroho, 2025). These findings suggest that effective PSA design must go beyond textual content to include strategically arranged visual elements. Female workers in this study demonstrated the ability to actively interpret and respond to these visual cues by connecting them to their own experiences and needs (Bodén et al., 2023).

Emotional Resonance and Contextual Proximity

This study employs the dimension of *proximity* to examine how emotional and cognitive attachments are formed among community members—particularly working women—towards educational institutions such as schools. *Proximity* here extends beyond mere physical closeness; it encompasses a sense of belonging, trust, and pride that emerges from lived experiences and perceived institutional values (Arnheim, 1997). Understanding how working women's perceptions are constructed requires attention to elements such as school excellence, participation in competitions, moments of pride, and financial incentives, which all contribute to the development of this proximity.

Working women, both as parents and members of the community, often play a critical role in choosing educational institutions for their children. During interviews, many participants highlighted school excellence as reflected in student achievements in various competitions. Student participation and victories not only signify institutional quality but also evoke collective pride, particularly when the accomplishments involve their own children or those within their immediate environment. These events foster emotional resonance—an attachment rooted in meaningful experiences. This aligns with Shen et al. (2023), who assert that narratives closely tied to real-life experiences are more effective in fostering strong social connections.

Beyond emotional dimensions, the informants also emphasized the significance of school promotions, such as discounts on registration or tuition fees. In economically demanding contexts, such incentives are perceived as helpful and as indicators of the school's empathy toward community financial limitations. In this regard, *proximity* also stems from rational experiences—namely, improved access to education facilitated by supportive policies (Nurse, 2025).

The findings suggest that working women's perceptions of schools are shaped by a combination of emotional experiences and rational considerations. When student achievements affirm institutional quality and promotional policies ease financial burdens, emotional and cognitive proximity to schools is strengthened. Consequently, educational communication strategies should integrate both emotional appeal and practical solutions.



Such an approach not only enhances a school's public image but also fosters long-term community loyalty, as people feel acknowledged and involved.

Social Context as a Determinant of Visual Literacy

The findings of this study demonstrate that social context plays a pivotal role in shaping visual literacy, particularly among working women from lower-middle socioeconomic backgrounds. Visual literacy is not merely the ability to recognize images or symbols; it is an active process of interpretation informed by life experiences, social values, and everyday realities (Brown & Savić, 2023; Häggström, 2024). In this regard, working women exhibit the capacity to critically interpret visual elements in public service announcements (PSAs), not passively receiving information but actively selecting, interpreting, and connecting visual messages to their social roles as mothers, wives, workers, and community members.

Visual symbols such as safety signs, protective gear, or school fee information are interpreted differently based on the individual's proximity to the content. For instance, informants working in domestic sectors more readily grasp messages related to hygiene, health, or smoking prohibitions, as these align with their daily activities. Meanwhile, professional workers critically assess how women are represented in PSAs, including the symbolic inequalities embedded within the visuals (Sharma, 2024; Sharun, 2023). These insights support the view that visual meaning is not fixed but emerges from the interaction between message content and the audience's social experience (Colley, 2023).

The interplay between social context and visual elements is also evident in how working women respond to messages through collective experiences. For example, posters showcasing student achievements evoke pride, reflecting their aspirations for their children's education. Likewise, school promotions, such as fee reductions, are perceived not only as economic benefits but also as indicators of institutional care for societal conditions (Nurse, 2025). These responses reveal that social context shapes how visual messages are received—whether they elicit emotional connection or are ignored. Thus, visual literacy in PSAs should not be viewed as a purely technical skill but as a socially situated process shaped by the audience's lived experiences (Statton Thompson et al., 2022). In this context, the social backgrounds of working women are crucial in actively interpreting and responding to visual messages. Designers of PSAs must recognize that effective messaging aligns with the social realities of the target audience. This alignment enhances message reception and positions PSAs as participatory spaces that foster collective awareness (Adiwardana, S., & Nugroho, 2025; Bodén et al., 2023).

Contribution to Visual Literacy and Gender Representation Discourses

This research makes a significant contribution to expanding the discourse on visual literacy and gender representation, particularly in the context of working women. The findings indicate that working women are no longer passive recipients of public service announcements (PSAs), but active interpreters who filter and connect visual messages with their own social positions and lived experiences (Brown & Savić, 2023; Colley, 2023). Visual literacy thus involves not only recognizing symbols and images but also the ability to decode the social realities embedded in these messages. For working women, this interpretative process is profoundly shaped by life experiences involving gender inequality, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to information.

Moreover, the study highlights persistent gender biases in PSA representation. Several professional informants critically observed that women are often portrayed merely as housewives or caregivers, with little emphasis on leadership, intelligence, or

independence. This suggests that media still tends to reproduce outdated stereotypes, failing to reflect the diversity of women's roles and identities today (Sharma, 2024; Sharun, 2023). However, women's ability to critique and reject such portrayals reflects their strong visual literacy and awareness of gender issues.

Critical interpretations of visual symbols—such as images of women in protective gear, motherly roles, or family emblems—demonstrate that meanings are not passively accepted but negotiated by audiences based on their perspectives and lived realities (Bodén et al., 2023; Jewitt, C., Bezemer, J., & O'Halloran, 2017). This implies that gender representations in PSAs may be interpreted differently across individuals, depending on their social values and positionalities. Hence, it is imperative for PSA designers to incorporate gender sensitivity and to involve audiences, especially women, in the development of public visual messages. Overall, this study reaffirms that working women possess reflective and critical visual literacy. They do not merely comprehend messages but are capable of generating new meanings from their experiences. In doing so, they actively contribute to shaping a more inclusive and equitable discourse on gender representation. This contribution enriches the field of visual literacy and public communication and underscores the importance of positioning audiences as active subjects in meaning-making (Häggström, 2024; Unal, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that female workers possess an active and contextual form of visual literacy in responding to public service advertisements (PSAs). In other words, their visual literacy is characterized by active and reflective engagement, grounded in their social experiences. These women do not merely function as passive recipients of messages but actively interpret and respond to visual elements based on their personal experiences, social values, and everyday positionalities. Through processes of active participation, selective visual engagement, and symbolic interpretation, they demonstrate critical readings of PSAs, particularly those addressing issues such as education, health, occupational safety, and gender roles. The emotional and cognitive connections they form are not solely tied to message content but also to the visual strategies used in message delivery. For instance, emotional proximity to schools emerges from shared experiences, pride in children's achievements, and positive responses to educational fee promotions perceived as socially and economically supportive. While PSAs continue to portray women through stereotypical representations, the informants exhibited the ability to critique and reframe these visual meanings in alignment with their lived experiences.

To ensure that PSA messages are more inclusive and do not reinforce gender stereotypes, it is essential for designers to incorporate women's perspectives throughout the visual communication design process. Such involvement enables visual messages to more equitably reflect the diversity of women's experiences and roles. Furthermore, it is crucial to promote experience-based visual literacy, particularly among lower-middle-class working women who are often positioned as passive audiences. Public communication policies should ideally move beyond one-way dissemination of information and instead foster dialogic spaces that allow for active public participation. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how different social groups interpret visual messages. By recognizing women's active roles in reading and meaning-making, visual communication can function as a more participatory, gender-equitable medium that contributes to sustainable social transformation.

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