Visual Communication Bridging Intercultural Barriers: Visual Methods Supporting the Social Inclusion of Young Refugees

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Abstract *This paper explores the possibilities of graphic languages in an intercultural context while analyzing the potential of creative methods when working with refugee youth. The practice-based aspect of this research is undertaken with Open Doors Hungary, a community-based design project that creates a programme for unaccompanied minor refugees. The aim of Open Doors is to help refugee youth integrate into Hungarian society, and develop their means of communication and quality relations with the host society.*

Refugee youth arriving in Hungary face serious problems: the loss of home and community, the traumas suffered during the journey, the cultural differences, and the lack of a common language all make their social integration extremely challenging. These challenges are further exacerbated by xenophobia and stereotypes against foreigners present in some parts of Hungarian culture. Social inclusion requires frequent contact with the local society, and unaccompanied refugee youth need new tools (cultural knowledge, language skills, intercultural skills) to overcome their disadvantages.

Since 2013 the author has been working with refugee youth using the methods of participatory design tools such as regular creative sessions, intensive workshops, and 8 intensive (media) camps based on the integrating role of creativity and art. During these sessions young refugees and their Hungarian and European peers got to know different visual communication tools and created common messages in the form of videos, animations, photos, posters, booklets, murals. Through these activities, refugee youth become part of the design process, and their choices are the basis for the final result.

Based on theoretical research and field experiences, this paper argues that design thinking and the creative process allow interactive cultural exchange, sharing of values, safe and open discussions, and community building. As a global language, visual communication can be a tool for intercultural communication, storytelling, and self-expression. The opportunity for refugee youth and their Hungarian peers to work in intercultural teams develops new competencies, and creates shared ownership and community.

1.   Introduction

The global increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees over the last decade has been one of the challenges for our society. Hungary—due to its geographic location—has been one of the main transit countries towards other member states of the European Union (IOM Hungary, 2023). Barriers to integration are exacerbated by xenophobia and stereotypes against foreigners present in some parts of Hungarian society, thus creating conflicts between members of the host society and newcomers (Gyulai, 2014, Sik, 2022).

This study focuses mainly on unaccompanied minor refugees and young migrants arriving to Hungary between 2013–2023. Minor refugees arriving in Hungary are a special group, as their situation is not only determined by the inherent characteristics of being a refugee, but also by the fact that they are protected by the childcare system. Their long and dangerous journey and the uncertainty of the asylum application process only exacerbate the so-called "post-traumatic stress disorder", which may have been caused by the trauma of losing their roots or their human connections at home. The cultural differences, and the lack of a common language all make their social integration into the host country extremely challenging. Social inclusion requires frequent contact with the local society, and they need new tools (cultural knowledge, language skills, intercultural skills) to overcome their disadvantages (Magyar Helsinki Bizottság, 2023).

The author—coming from a graphic designer background—together with her architect partner Erzsébet Hosszu is the co-founder of Open Doors Hungary, a community-based social design project working for intercultural dialogue with the tools of visual communication, placemaking and design.

This study—as part of an ongoing PhD-in-practice research—connects theory and practice and uses a mixed-methodology approach: on the one hand, relying on literature review on the topic of intercultural visual communication and existing practical methods, on the other hand, examining the experiences of young refugees with visual communication, exploring its potential as a tool for facilitating intercultural understanding and integration through a practical social design project, Open Doors Hungary.

The review of the relevant literature will establish the context, including the role of visual communication in bridging cultural barriers, and also the factors that can influence the intercultural understanding of images.

In addition to the literature review, the author is including her 10 years of field experiences, using the methods of participatory and community based design.

The purpose of this study is to understand how visual communication and community-based design can contribute to the process of social inclusion of young refugees, and how design can create a platform for intercultural dialogue.

2. Intercultural Communication

Cross-border migration processes always involve an encounter with a new culture. In addition, the issue of interculturality may arise within national borders, in the case of small geographical movements or movements between different social groups, which also entail interaction between two different cultures. Thus, the issue of social integration and its relationship with culture concerns a much wider audience than refugees and asylum seekers.

Cultural differences can manifest themselves in different forms: in the use of space, time management, the most basic customs, manners, human relations, communication or metacommunication, conflict management, intimacy and publicity, taboos, religion, attitude to power, worldview or the most fundamental values. Cultural differences become most evident in different visible, tangible signs (Kapitány, 1993).

Culture can be seen as one of the major integrating and socializing forces, defined by Haviland (1987) as the set of rules and norms of a society that are considered to be correct and accepted by the members of that society. The more integrated the culture itself, the greater its integrating power, since *"the very essence of culture is to ensure the integration of society"* (Hidasi, 2004). The concept of culture is closely related to communication.

Intercultural communication is nothing other than the interaction of people from different cultural groups. This does not necessarily mean different national groups, but in the era of globalisation and in the midst of migration processes, there is a growing need for intercultural competences. We no longer need to cross a national border to encounter another culture, and learning culture is as essential to successful interaction as learning a language, and cannot be avoided in our everyday conversations and work.

> "To have an effective and smooth conversation with a foreign partner, or to read a foreign novel, or even to understand an advertisement, or to be successful in marketing, these are all essential skills." (Hidasi, 2004, p. 25)

Culture is therefore not an innate quality, but an acquired and learned set of knowledge and norms. This fact makes it possible to learn culture and acquire intercultural competences.

3. Social Inclusion and Visual Communication

In 2014 the European Commission published the European Modules on Migrant Integration, with the aim to "provide a common language and a reference framework regarding integration" in the three given areas (European Commission, DG Home, 2014):

1. Introductory and language courses;
2. A strong commitment by the host society; and
3. The active participation of immigrants in all aspects of collective life.

These areas are all relevant for the topic of this study. The closest link and one of the most important overlap between visual communication and the social integration of refugees and migrants can be seen in the potential of language learning.

People living away from their home country inevitably become part of the new host society—forming human connections, friendships and experiencing the culture of that country through their social contacts. To understand the new environment more deeply, they also encounter the need to know the language of that country. Even if English or another language is sufficient for their work, studies and daily life, they are still confronted with the need to learn Hungarian language and culture.

Language has many functions that play a very important role in the social integration of an individual or a group. It is an important tool not only for everyday communication and administration, but also as a prerequisite for participation in education or the labour market. It is also a symbol: knowing the language of a society is for many people a symbol of belonging to that group. The lack of language skills not only hinders the understanding of verbal communication, but also makes it difficult for both parties—the person seeking to integrate and the host society—to develop deeper social relationships, to develop new behaviors and to break down prejudices and stereotypes.

As a result of empirical research conducted in 2006 by the Working Group on Intercultural Conflict and Social Integration, four levels of social context for migrants' foreign language learning were identified: (1) the migrant's family background or personal history of emigration, (2) country of origin, (3) host country, (4) ethnic context (Várhalmi, 2006).

Among other things, it has been found that unfavorable social circumstances in the absence of language skills mutually reinforce each other, and that there are significant differences between generations in the knowledge of the language of the majority society, regardless of origin. The same research also finds that those with less secure language skills have significantly lower earnings and much higher unemployment rates (Esser, 2004).

Thus, knowledge of the language of a country can be seen as a key to social integration.

Because of the semiotic aspects of visual communication, images can be used to facilitate language learning at different levels of the language, such as letters, words, and sentences.

4. Visual Communication

"Words divide, pictures unite." (Neurath, 1936)

Visual communication, the language of images, has the potential to bridge language barriers and promote intercultural understanding—which is extremely important when the participants of the communication process do not share the same language or culture. But is this not too ambitious a statement? Do people from different cultures and social groups really understand the same things in the same way? This research intends to find and define a visual language that can bridge cultural and linguistic barriers. But to define this, we need to understand the barriers of visual language, the barriers to universal understanding, the possible aspects that may make it difficult to read images from a cross-cultural perspective.

To analyse the 'reading' of images, we need to examine their relation to written language by examining semiotic aspects.

The dominance of verbality and the written medium over visuality in our modern society is evident. Literacy and language represent a specific historical stage in the formation and development of different civilizations, the ability to read and write has separated and distinguished social classes, and the social significance of literacy is still decisive today. But how do we relate to visual literacy?

While the perception and recognition of images is indeed a universal ability, reading them and decoding their meaning is far from being so. Understanding the pictorial signs that make up visual language is a social process, one that presupposes a social, historical and geographical context, and one that requires prior experience and knowledge.

"Like verbal communication, pictures represent an understanding of the world acquired by members of a certain group, and thus the meaning readers construct from a given image may depend largely on knowledge they share with group members." (Kostelnick, 1993)

According to Charles Kostelnick (1993), there are three levels of social context that influence the perception of images:

1. cultural context – i.e. the shared worldview and values of the group members
2. conventional context – i.e. members of the group share a particular discipline or the visual language of a particular discipline or special topic
3. immediate context – i.e. the situation in which the participants use the particular image

Several studies (Kostelnick, 1993; Gibson, 1954; Goodman, 1976; Jones & Hagan, 1980) introduce the concept of the "naïve eye", i.e. the reader who is not yet familiar with the world of images, the "visual illiterate", so to speak. These studies disagree as to whether the perception of images is analogous to the perception of real objects (Gibson, 1954) or whether it is necessarily a learned skill (Goodman, 1976). Gibson, later joined by Jones and Hagan (1980), argue that the 'naïve reader' of images, such as members of intact cultures isolated from the modern world, or young children, needs very little experience to perceive and recognize images, and thus considers this first stage of image reading to be a plausibly universal ability. In contrast, Goodman rejects the notion of the 'naïve eye', arguing instead that visual communication also embodies a convention-based language that changes from time to time and from culture to culture.

Writing with images

Although most of the existing writing systems of our world are not primarily pictographic in nature, our everyday lives are filled with images, including functional images, which are often as challenging to read as verbal writing systems are to decipher. The reading of images can be challenging both at the level of 'letters', i.e. individual pictorial signs and at the level of 'sentences' and 'texts', i.e. pictorial compositions or collections of narrative images. The factors discussed below, the cultural context, including in particular spoken and written language, the context of the conventions recognized by the group, and the immediate context of the situation, all influence the cross-cultural interoperability of visual communication at all levels.

The perception of images and the identification of their elements are, for the most part, truly culture-independent, but their reading is already highly dependent on the cultural and linguistic context and the writing system used by the language in question. The reading of images in different cultural contexts is therefore influenced by a number of factors, such as the writing system of the culture, the direction of reading, the degree of abstraction, and the symbolic meaning of the basic forms, signs, and colors (Radtke 2021; Pater 2020).

Figure 1: Open Doors workshop, 2014 (photo by the author).

5. Practice-based Methods

In the past 10 years, the author has organized 10 creative camps and weekly creative sessions, with the participation of young refugees and migrants and their Hungarian and European peers. During these sessions, participants learned about different visual communication tools and created common messages. Design thinking and the creative process provided a platform for interactive cultural exchange, sharing of values, safe and open discussions, and community building. The graphic media used during the workshops included:

1. Signs, pictograms, abstract elements
As we can establish from the relevant literature, images can help us communicate, express thoughts and emotions, and also they can help to represent ourselves. During the work with refugee and migrant youth, drawing simple images, pictograms and abstract elements (forms, colors) was crucial help in communicating with each other. As part of a getting-to-know each other process, youth created signs that represent themselves, their community or their culture.

Signs and pictograms served as visual aids in more formal language classes expressing both concrete symbols and abstract thoughts, therefore images were also the tools of language learning which is a key element in the social inclusion of migrant and refugee youth.

Figure 2: Open Doors workshop, 2014 (photo by the author).
Videos and short animations

Open Doors Hungary has organized 3 local and 3 international media trainings and several local workshops in the past 10 years. During the local events, Hungarian highschool students and refugee youth were introduced to different techniques (graphic design, photography, animation, video) and then worked together in groups to create visual messages with the help of art student mentors.

The methodology of the locally developed media workshops was also applied in an international context: the Change for Media—Media for Change international youth exchange was organized under Erasmus+ programme and brought together 25 refugee and European youth from 5 countries.

Figure 3: Change for Media – Presenting the future, 2018 (photo by the author).

2. Photography

Creating photos is a well-known technique in visual anthropology. They can help the creators to share fragments of their lives with a larger audience, to observe, map and get familiar with their new environment, and to communicate emotions and abstract feelings. During the workshops of Open Doors, participants usually work in pairs or small mixed groups, therefore they can share different perspectives and ideas also during the creative process.

3. Posters

Creating posters is one of the most traditional platforms of graphic design. In 2021, Open Doors organized a Women's Day poster workshop, where participants were invited to create a poster about an inspiring woman from their culture. During the workshops, participants used collage and paper cut-out techniques to create visually attractive posters with strong messages. Placing the posters on the street provided a platform for participants to connect to the place, share a part of their culture and identity, and gain confidence.

4. Zines, comics, booklets, books

Zines are traditionally self-published magazines containing images or texts, that are usually photocopied into physical prints for small-scale distribution. Folded into multi-page booklets, zines are an excellent tool for storytelling. The story can be told in the form of collage, comics or typography. In the past years Open Doors organized

monthly zine-circles, where participants create individually minizines following a common keyword, and they share the results with the others in the circle, discussing topics important to them.

In 2020, during COVID regulations, Open Doors organized a series of online cooking events, which resulted in a tangible product—a cookbook collecting recipes of refugees and migrants living in Budapest.

5. Game design

Playing traditional games can provide a good platform for intercultural dialogue, they can be a way of sharing culture in an informal and playful way. Teaching games means to share the rules and attitudes of a certain system. Designing games together can lead to setting a new system of rules. Redesigning the visual elements of a simple game means to collectively accept a set of rules, but personalizing it according to common needs and shared preferences.

6. Screen printing

Screen printing is a traditional printing technique that provides opportunity for participants to mix and personalize already prepared patterns resulting in a visually coherent outcome. The content of the patterns were developed during community brainstorming events, and some of them include visuals drawn by multiple members of the community. The technique was used on bags, t-shirts, and pullovers that participants could personalize using the already existing frames. The results became their own property created in a community.

7. Murals

Murals are grand-scale site specific paintings that are not only platforms for intercultural collaboration, but also serve as a communication surface that can preserve a common message for the future and can make connections easily with the outside viewer. Between 2013 and 2023 more than 10 community-designed murals were created by the participants of the workshops. The murals were designed with a democratic decision making process, synthesizing the ideas of the whole community.

Figure 4: *Open Doors screen printing workshop, 2019 (photo by the author).*

Figure 5: *Open Doors – Art for Development camp, 2013 (photo by the author).*

The methods of Open Doors Hungary consist of diverse tools; besides the creative workshops, various community events are also organized by the members of the community. Photo and video documentation were used to record the workshops and events, and tangible results were created such as books, posters, videos, games and murals, that were analyzed during the research.

6. Results

The findings of this study suggest that visual communication can be an effective tool for bridging intercultural differences among young refugees and the members of the host society. Visual aids served as a tool for mutual understanding and self-expression, and also tools for learning new languages and new skills.

Recurring motifs

During the workshops participants created videos, photos, and games using visual symbols. In the past 10 years some motifs and symbols have been repeated. These motifs unfold larger topics that serve as common interests of the refugee and the European youth such as—*the journey, family, home, equality, tolerance, being human, nature, food, music, hopes and dreams*. These findings can serve as topics to be channeled towards further workshops, and as a base of further research.

Visualizing future hopes and dreams

Through different storytelling exercises participants opened up not only about their past, their culture, their journey and many times painful memories, but also started talking about their future hopes and dreams. Putting it in visual forms such as

videos, photos or zines can be a powerful tool to set new motivations and goals. For refugee youth this can be a crucial step toward healing.

Visibility

Minor refugees make an almost invisible group. Fleeing from dangerous situations or escaping persecution often prevents them from sharing photos online, to show up publicly in the media, and to present themselves as equal contributors to our society. Different visual techniques may provide different levels of abstraction that can offer a way for refugees and vulnerable groups to express themselves in a safe and protected way. Short animations created by participants of the media workshops shared their stories of fleeing and their thoughts on their new lives. Videos and animations created during the workshops were shown in public on the closing events of the workshops, and some were broadcasted by the Hungarian National Television reaching a wide audience, giving visibility to underrepresented groups and issues. These videos are credible and important documents made visible for a larger audience without endangering the life of their creators.

Figure 6: Open Doors Youth Voices, 2015 (Photo by the author)

Improved language skills

Participants had the chance to learn and practice their communication skills in formal language classes as well as non-formal educational workshops and community events through the platform of visual communication and design. Improved language skills means better connection to the host society and better understanding of local values, which can result in better opportunities for social inclusion, better chance to participate in the education system or the labor market. Communicating through images improved not only their verbal, but also the non-verbal communication skills of participants.

Learning about local values

Designing together means making decisions together, and following up on these decisions in the realization process. Decision making in an intercultural team is a difficult process, especially if it involves participants with very different cultural backgrounds. Different opinions are influenced by different experiences, perspectives, and languages. Working in small teams of 3–4 people through small design tasks, participants had the chance to speak up, share their opinion and make decisions in a democratic way. For many participants arriving from different cultures and non-democratic systems this was an important exercise about European societies and democratic decision making.

Stronger interpersonal relations – stronger communities

As all the workshops and programs of Open Doors are realized in a two-way process, members of the host society—Hungarian and European youth from diverse backgrounds—were involved. Through creating together they learned about each other's backgrounds and motivation, they gained personal experiences that broke stereotypes. During the workshops, especially in longer (7–14 days) events, participants formed quality relations with each other, strengthening locally the social network of migrant youth. Together they became part of a stronger community, where they are multipliers of the newly learnt skills.

A more inclusive host society

As Hungarian and European youth were also involved directly in all the workshops, they had the chance to gain first hand experiences with migrant and refugee youth. They learnt about their cultures, life stories and struggles, discovered common interests and formed friendships.

Tangible results of the workshops, such as cookbooks, posters, videos and animations, reached a wide audience within the host society. These visual contents raised empathy, shared cultural values and knowledge.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of the research was to explore and understand how visual communication and community-based design can contribute to the process of social inclusion of young refugees, and how design can create a platform for intercultural dialogue.

The already existing literature proves that although the reading of images might differ in different cultures, they can still serve as a universal language and bridge communication barriers. Visual communication can serve in different areas of the integration process of young migrants and refugees, such as language learning and their inclusion to a community, and it can also influence the attitude of the host society.

According to the findings of the participatory research, visual communication and graphic design could benefit the inclusion of migrant youth by providing a common language, giving visibility to an invisible group, helping them in visualizing future hopes and dreams, learning Hungarian, learning about European values and customs, and provided a platform for intercultural communication between migrant youth and their Hungarian and European peers creating stronger interpersonal connections and stronger communities.

As it is an on-going PhD-in-practice research, the author will further analyze the role of visual languages from a semantic and semiotic point of view, and will categorize the factors that influence intercultural understanding. The author will summarize the methods and the findings of the research in a methodological handbook that can be shared with other stakeholders— -designers, social workers, institutions.

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