

**VISUAL HEALTH COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:  
THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA**

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**Abstract**

The world has faced several pandemics in its existence, but the COVID-19 pandemic has opened up new aspects, making it a good introduction to what could be explored in the field of visual health communication in times of global crisis when it matters most for the message to reach as many people as possible in as short a period as possible, and for as many people as possible to understand it. The initial analysis conducted in ISPJR showed that the official source/medium of information related to the conditions and measures regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was the official Facebook page of Minister of Health of Republic of Macedonia, and the digital posters worked as a tool for persuading citizens to behave responsibly. The sample consisted of digital posters that were posted from March 2020, and by the end of the year, a total of 113. As this research showed, the digital poster campaign focused on promoting disease prevention among the general population, as much as 93% of digital poster messages refer to this goal – what citizens can do to protect themselves and others from the coronavirus.

Answering the main research question of how the relevant official (domestic) institutions shape the message that aims to motivate the population to comply with their recommendations, it can be summarized that in Republic of Macedonia, through Facebook, on the official page of the then Minister of Health an incompletely properly prepared communication campaign and an incompletely defined communication strategy were conducted.

**Keywords:** Digital posters, Facebook, Visual health communication, COVID-19, Republic of Macedonia

## **1. Introduction**

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) emphasized that the new disease caused by the coronavirus is a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). In March of the same year, the WHO came out with an assessment that the situation with COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic (WHO, 2020).

The global pandemic caused by the coronavirus requires vigilance and thoughtfulness in communicating public health messages to different segments of the population. With the intensity with which the disease spread, so did misinformation. They especially gained strength due to the very nature of the epidemiological situation, which was characterized by the speed of spread and gaps and deficiencies in scientific knowledge about the virus. Therefore, when communicating with the public during emergencies of this nature, care should be taken not to overload the public with information, to check the reliability of the sources and the accuracy of the information, as well as misinformation (Vraga & Jacobsen, 2020). Misinformation is easily spread through social networks (Vraga & Bode, 2020). On the one hand, social networks spread misinformation, but on the other, they offer a quick sharing of relevant information, unique opportunities for providing valid information. Uncertainties about the accuracy and veracity of available information about the virus (mode of spread, virulence, treatment of the disease) among the population can increase distrust in health experts (Brennen et al., 2020).

The introduction of preventive measures activates the need for fast and effective science-based health communication that involves the public in order to influence behavior on a mass level. Health communication, which includes interpersonal and mass communication in the direction of improving the health of individuals and populations (Ishikawa & Kiuchi, 2010), has become dominantly prevailing when it comes to the most important public health problem – the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health institutions, governments, and media around the world have often used comics as a medium to present scientific data through graphic narratives, using the power of visual imagery and storytelling in an engaging format (Kearns & Kearns, 2020).

## **2. Health communication**

### **2.1. Defining the concept of health communication**

There are several definitions of health communication and, for the most part, they all point to the similar role of this type of communication in the process of advocacy and improvement of individual and public health. The key purpose of health communication is to influence individuals, communities, health professionals and policy makers to make decisions that promote health. In general, health communication is defined as an area that focuses on the scope of use and implication of relevant expressions and messages applied in situations and circumstances that are related to health (health care, prevention and treatment). Key attributes commonly used to characterize health communication and its role are: sharing meanings, influencing individuals or communities, informing, motivating the target audience and changing their behavior (Schiavo, 2014).

The Society for Health Communication defines health communication as “(...) the science and art of using and applying communication to promote the health and well-being of people and the population. It is a multidisciplinary field of study and practice that incorporates evidence, strategy, theory, and creativity to promote behaviors, policies, and practices that advance the health and well-being of people and populations” (SHC, 2017).

Other definitions highlight the aspect of influence, thus defining health communication as “the use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions in order to improve health” (National Cancer Institute, 2004: 2). In addition to the aspects of information and influence, some of the definitions also include the decision-making process, noting that health

communication implies a scientific understanding and practical application of communication strategies for providing information that is needed for decision-making in function of individual and general health (U.S. Department of health & human services, n.d.).

When defining, it is noted that health communication is simultaneously defined as both a theoretical and a practical approach to health. The first involves theoretical insights and analysis and is based on theoretical concepts in communication science. The second trend is primarily oriented towards considering communication as a practical activity aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle and medical education of the population (Grishina, 2018).

## **2.2. Theories of health communication**

Health communication is influenced by various disciplines and theoretical approaches. Theories that are important and offer an explanation in health communication are several and their main assumptions are described in the text that follows.

Originally developed by Everett Rogers (1995), Diffusion of Innovation Theory refers to the way in which new ideas, concepts or practices can spread within a community or society or from one society to another (National Cancer Institute, 2005). This theory can be applied to explain the process of how new contents/behaviors should be presented, communicated to individuals or certain groups of citizens who are at risk of a certain disease, in order to cause a change in behavior, which would reduce the risk of disease.

The theory recognizes several types of actors: innovators (people who want to be the first to try the innovation, interested in new ideas and ready to take risks), early adopters (people who represent “opinion leaders”, that is, influential intermediaries in the process of transferring information and embrace opportunities for change), early majority (these people are rarely leaders, but adopt new ideas before the average person), late majority (these people are skeptical of change and will adopt an innovation only after it has been accepted by the majority) and others (these people are traditional, conservative and skeptical of change) (La Morte, n.d.). Those who would be called innovators are present in the smallest percentage in the community, and the early and late majority would be represented in an equal percentage.

According to this theory, changes occur over time and take place in the following five stages: 1. awareness, knowledge and interest (knowledge); 2. persuasion; 3. making a decision (decision), in this phase a decision is made to accept or reject the change; 4. attempt or implementation of the adopted decision; and 5. acceptance of the behavior change (or rejected behavior change) (Rogers, 2003, according to Walitzer et al., 2015).

The Health Belief Model (HBM) was developed in the 1950s by social psychologists at the U.S. Public Health Service. The model was initially set up with the intention of providing an explanation for human behavior (Rosenstock, 1974; Janz & Becker, 1984). Namely, it has been found that people refuse to participate in programs that could help them diagnose and prevent their disease (National Cancer Institute, 2005).

The main premise of this model, which could provide an answer to such behavior of people, is that the target population should achieve a level of awareness of the risk of contracting life-threatening diseases and perceive the benefits of their own behavior change. The main contribution of the Model in the field of health communication is the emphasis on the importance of knowledge, which is still a necessary but insufficient step for change. To adopt behaviors that lead to health care and avoid disease risks, people must: believe that they are susceptible to the disease; to believe that the disease will affect their life negatively, at least moderately; to believe that the adoption of certain behaviors is really useful and it is important to mention the psychological barriers, key to successful prevention or successful treatment, i.e. that the person believes that he has the opportunity to change his own behavior. The likelihood of change will depend on whether the perceived benefit of the changed behavior outweighs the perceived barriers. This model takes into account “factors of change” (factors that act on behavior change), and include demographic variables, psychological variables, and structural variables (economic, political, and social conditions) (Corcoran, 2013).

Also known as Social Learning Theory, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains human behavior as the result of three reciprocal factors: behavior, personal factors, and external events.

Behavior is considered to be influenced by personal and external factors and events. This relationship is called “reciprocal determinism,” meaning that changes in one factor will affect the other two (McLeod, 2016).

People act as a result of their own motivation, their own behavior and level of development within a network of mutual influences (Bandura, 1989). A person’s ability to change behavior is based on self-efficacy, goals, and expected outcome. Those who consider themselves self-efficacious (confidence in their own abilities to perform a certain behavior) can change their behavior and overcome obstacles. According to this theory, new forms of behavior can be learned by watching someone behave in a certain way (observational conditioning). Learning will largely depend on the model (the one performing the behavior).

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) was developed by Ajzen (2019a) as a general model for predicting and explaining the practice of different ways of behaving. TPB considers and elaborates an individual’s intention to behave in a certain way as a major factor in predicting whether that individual will or will not behave in the desired manner. In addition to intention, this theory predicts that people will act on their intentions when they have the necessary skills for the desired behavior (Thompson, 2014).

### **3. Visual communication in the health system**

Visual communication has several advantages over verbal communication, and some of the benefits are that complex information can be simplified (for example, large numbers of statistics and figures displayed as graphs). In the literature, we encounter the term *visual aids*, which represent simple, transparent visual representations or graphic stylizations. Examples are in graphs, arrows, pictograms, etc. The advantages of visual aids are that, properly designed, they can enhance understanding of the risk associated with various medical treatments, examinations and lifestyles (Waters et al., 2007; Zikmund-Fisher et al., 2006). Also, visual aids increase appropriate risk-avoidance behavior, promote healthy behavior, and reduce errors caused by “anecdotal narratives” (Cox et al., 2010; Fagerlin et al., 2010). They can reduce errors and biases that affect the accuracy of perceptions of the effectiveness of medical treatments (Garcia-Retamero & Cokely, 2013).

Images have the ability to present a visual sequence that may be unclear on a linguistic level (Hajdu Barat, 2007). In this way, it is easier and more efficient to reach a wider audience and it is possible to communicate with the following patients/users of the health system:

- a) those with limited language skills,
- b) illiterate,
- c) children,
- d) those with disorders and/or deficits in information processing, attention or memory.

Older people, for example, benefit from visual aids in communication (as long as they have a medium or high degree of ability to recognize graphic elements), because some of the cognitive abilities necessary to decipher, store and reinterpret complex data deteriorate with age (Finucane et al., 2005). Therefore, visual communication, in all categories where there is a cognitive problem, can contribute to more accurate, informative and, ultimately, better judgment about the course of treatment or prevention.

Visual communication is also suitable for communication with children, where the information can be presented in such a way that it will be adapted to the age of the child, that is, in a fun way and in a way that the medical communication will not seem scary, but will be part of the game and everyday conversation. It is also suitable for immigrants and people whose mother tongue is not the language of the majority community (a very important factor in multilingual countries, such as Macedonia).

Information presented visually can be permanent – constant reminders, daily educators, etc. (as well as written information, but here we mean posters, billboards, sculptures, 3D-models that are fixed for some spaces for a long period of time). The speed with which information is read, interpreted and remembered depends on the target group and is adapted to it. In addition, it has been proven many times that visual material is remembered faster and longer.

## **4. Research methodology**

### **4.1. Subject of research and research questions**

The subject of this research is the way the relevant domestic institutions shape the messages in the educational visual material prepared to show the recommendations and instructions on how each individual should behave in order to comply with the adopted measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and which refer to the aspect of maintaining physical and mental health. Considering that the largest number of visual materials for educational purposes were posted on the official Facebook page of the former Minister of Health, Venko Filipche, the subject of the research was specified on the visual material posted on the official Facebook page of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The posted material includes posters made within the Ministry of Health, but also by individuals or groups that are part of the general public, because they were all part of the campaign with digital posters, during which the citizens were invited to give their contribution.

The problem that is in focus and to which this research tries to give an answer is: Considering the serious implications that the COVID-19 pandemic had in the context of global culture and communication, to analyze the quality of the visual communication of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Macedonia (as a representative of the Ministry of Health) during the COVID-19 pandemic, which would mean analyzing the comprehensibility and inclusiveness of visual communication, as well as predicting the effectiveness of that communication.

The research is of an exploratory type and is based on research questions. The main research question is: “How do the relevant official (domestic) institutions shape the message that aims to motivate the population to comply with their recommendations?”

The concretization of the research question went in the following direction: “What kind of digital posters did the then Minister of Health, Venko Filipche, use on the social network Facebook in communication with the citizens of Macedonia during the pandemic?”

The questions that served to break down the research problem into individual relationships were:

- What was the basic function of the digital posters used?
- What, how and why was used in the digital posters and what was actually emphasized in the digital posters?
- Which audience did these digital posters address?

### **4.2. Research sample and timeline**

The preparatory phase of the research was aimed at analyzing the materials posted on the official websites of the indicated institutions. The analysis showed that the official Facebook page of Filipche is the dominant source of information about everything related to COVID-19 and the pandemic that is distributed to the public. There, the largest amount of information was posted in a timely, detailed and continuous manner, which, given the specificities of social networks, was also the most accessible to citizens (in the virtual space). Also, the figure of Filipche was imposed as authoritative during that entire period, so a large part of the citizens were informed about everything related to COVID-19 through his official Facebook page. This knowledge determined the direction of conducting the main research and allowed us to define the sample. In this research, the sample consisted of digital posters that were posted on the official Facebook page of Venko Filipche in the period from March 2020, until the end of the year, a total of 113.

The overall research ran from March 2020 to March 2021.

## 5. Results

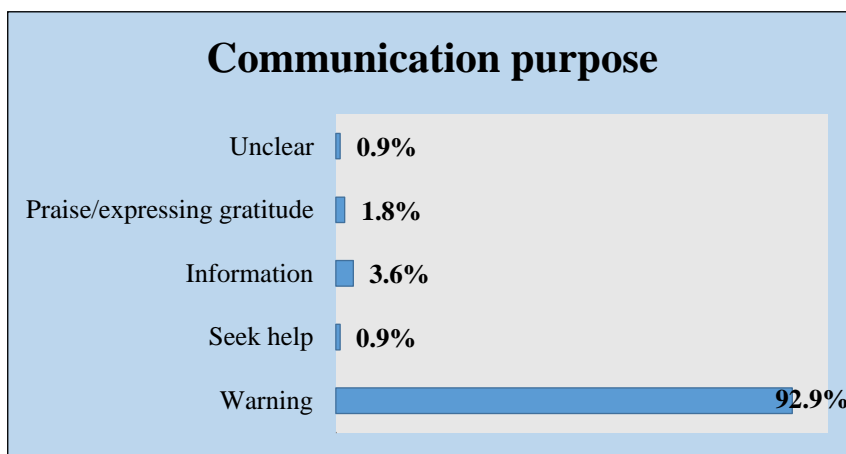
Most of the posts with digital posters on the official Facebook page of Venko Filipche were posted in March 2020 (44.2%), i.e. a total of 50 digital posters were posted. Then comes April, with 25.7% and 29 posted digital posters. The fewest posts with digital posters are in June and August 2020, and the percentage is insignificant – 0.9%, i.e. in these months only one digital poster was posted per month. Not a single digital poster was posted in July.

Regarding the production and authorship of the digital posters, for 75 digital posters (66.4%) this is not indicated, 27 digital posters (23.9%) are from individuals, 7 digital posters (6.2%) are in production of a state institution/organization, while 4 digital posters (3.5%) do not fall into any of the listed categories and are in the “other” category. As for the orderer of the digital posters, for all 113 digital posters it is not specified who is the orderer.

In the largest percentage (82.3%), the initial purpose of the digital posters is for the general population, that is, out of a total of 113 digital posters, 93 refer to the general population. Only one digital poster is intended for children and young people. 15 digital posters or 13.3% are intended for a specific group of citizens (for example, infected with coronavirus), and 4 digital posters or 3.5% are intended for health workers.

Regarding the purpose of communication, the largest number of digital posters – 104 (92.9%) contain warnings or orders/imperatives, 4 (3.6%) inform, 2 (1.8%) praise or express gratitude, and the remaining, with an insignificant percentage, either seek help or are unclear.

Graph 1. Communication purpose of digital posters

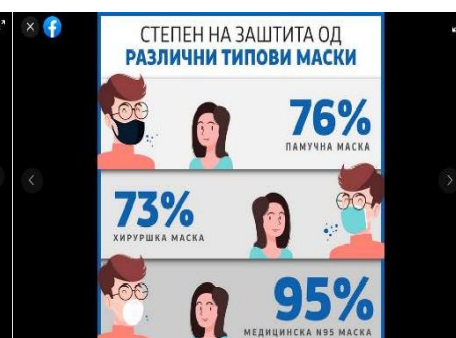


The images below show examples of command and informing.

Picture 1a. Giving an order<sup>106</sup>



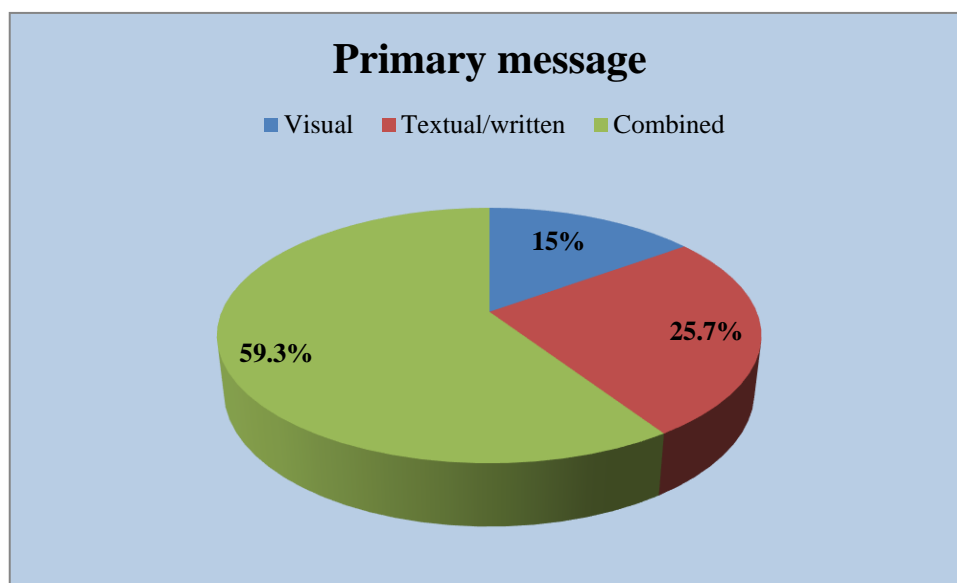
Picture 1b. Informing<sup>107</sup>



Source: Official Facebook page of Venko Filipche (posted on April 2 and November 6, 2020) – printscreen.

As for the primary message displayed on the digital posters, in the largest percentage (59.3%), that is, on 67 digital posters, it is combined, i.e. both textual/written and visual - with an illustration. The primary message is illustrative on 17 digital posters (15%), and textual/written on 29 digital posters (25.7%)

Graph 2. Primary message of digital posters



None of the digital posters contain information about the source, that is, none refers to a source for additional information (for example, an official and credible/relevant source regarding recommendations, measures, protection, etc.).

### Text/written messages

<sup>106</sup> Main text in the picture: Wear mask and gloves.

<sup>107</sup> Main text in the picture: Degree of protection from different types of masks.

Out of a total of 113 digital posters, the presence of a text/written message is present on 109 digital posters, i.e. 96.5%.

The use of professional terms (for example, from the field of medicine) is found in only 8.3% of the digital posters that contain a text/written message, i.e. 9 digital posters, while in 91.7%, i.e. 100 digital posters, there isn't any presence of professional terms.

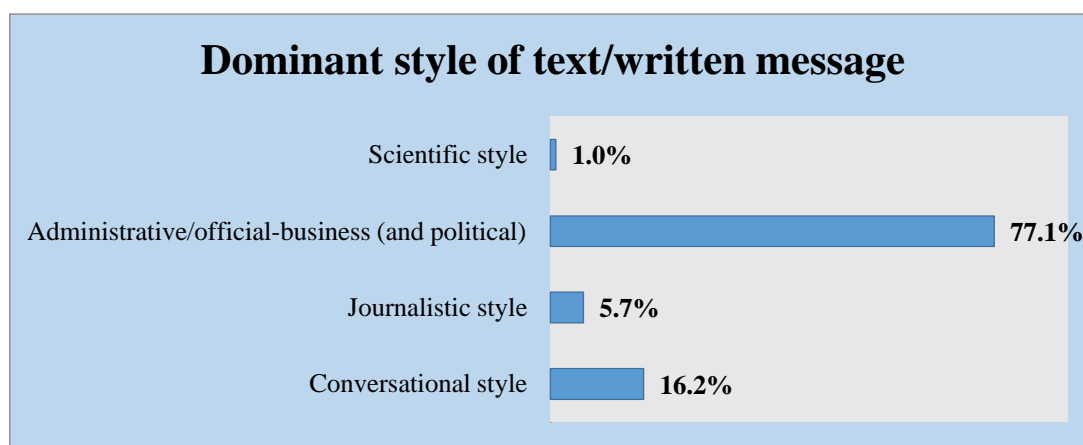
Regarding the presence of a significant number of internationalisms and words of foreign origin, in 96 digital posters (88.1%) there is no significant presence, while in the remaining 13 digital posters (11.9%) of the 109 with a text/written message there is the presence of a significant number of internationalisms and words of foreign origin.

Regarding the language of the text/written message displayed on the digital posters, in the largest percentage (89.9%) it is the Macedonian language – 98 digital posters, 7 digital posters (6.4%) have a text/written message in Macedonian as well and in English, combined, while in English is the text/written message of 4 digital posters or 3.7%. In the largest number of digital posters with a text/written message in the Macedonian language – 102 (97.1%) the language is literary, while in 3 digital posters, or 2.9%, it is conversational.

The orthographic rules of the Macedonian language are respected in 21 digital posters (20%), partially respected in 77 digital posters (73.3%), and this could not be determined, that is, it was not applicable in 7 digital posters (6.7 %).

As for the dominant style of the text/written message, it is in the largest percentage (77.1%) administrative/official-business (and political), i.e. 81 digital posters out of a total of 105 with a text/written message containing the Macedonian language have this dominant style. 17 digital posters, or 16.2%, have a conversational style, 6 digital posters, or 5.7%, have journalistic style, and only one digital poster, with an insignificant 1%, has a scientific style.

Graph 3. Dominant style of text/written message on digital posters



The images below show examples of some of the styles.

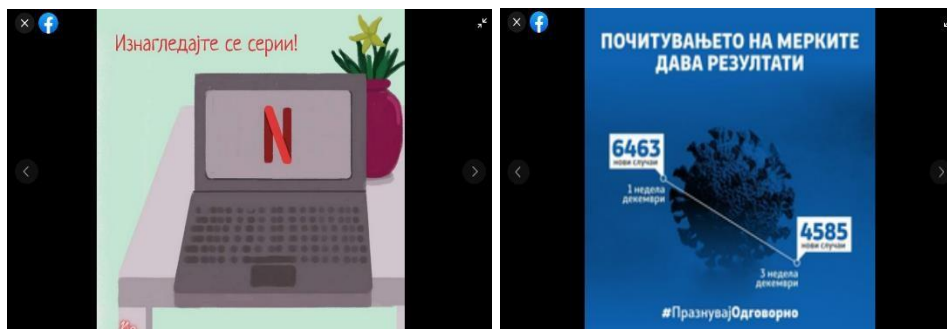
Picture 2a. Conversational style<sup>108</sup>

Picture2b. Administrative/official-business style<sup>109</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Main text in the picture: Watch TV series!

<sup>109</sup> Main text in the picture: Adherence to the measures gives results.





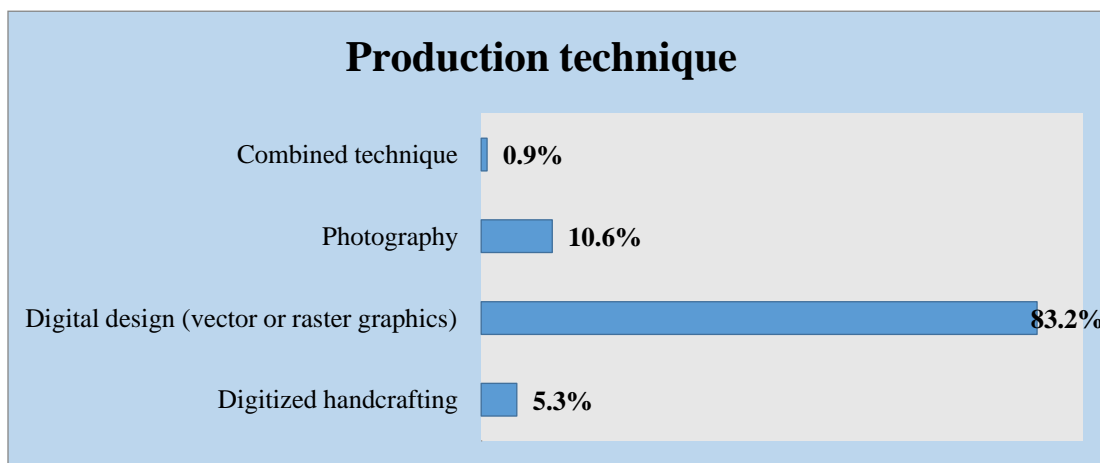
Source: Official Facebook page of Venko Filipche (posted on March 15 and December 22, 2020) – printscreen.

The presence of phrases on the digital posters with a text/written message in the Macedonian language is present in 13 digital posters (12.4%), and in 92 digital posters (87.6%) there is no presence of phrases.

### Visuals

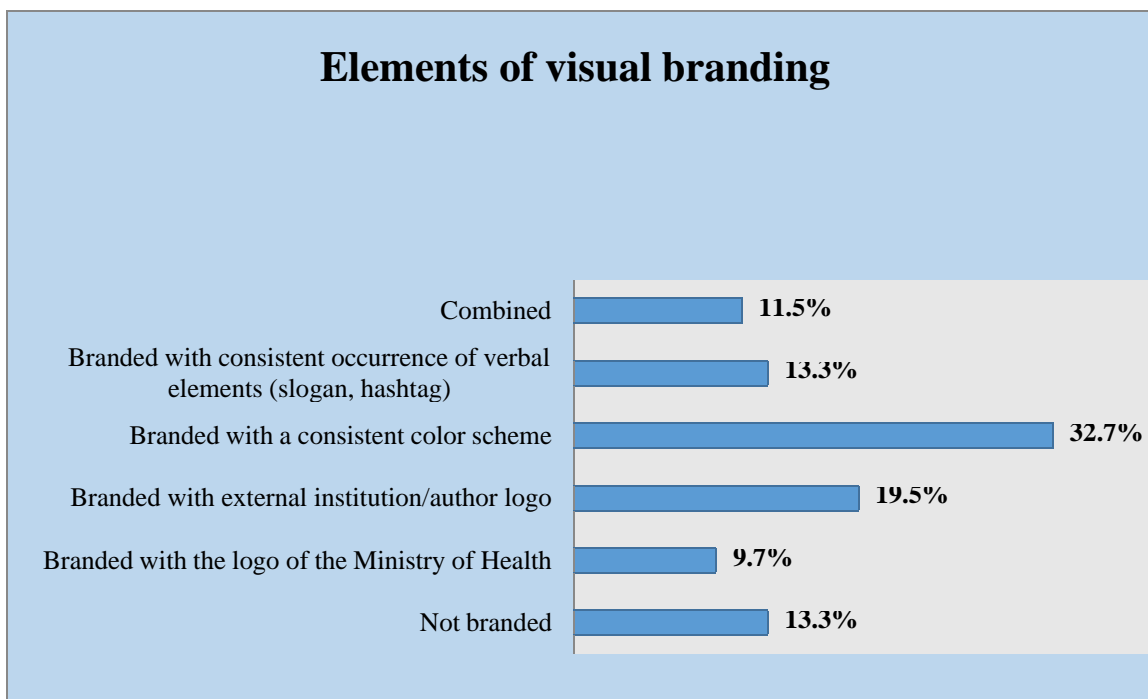
Regarding the technique used, 83%, that is, 94 visuals were made with digital techniques, and in 12 (or 11% of the total analyzed visuals) photography was used as the main means of visual communication. Six visuals (5%) were made by hand, and one (1%) was made with a combined technique.

Graph 4. Visual production technique



Regarding branding elements, only 13 visuals (12%) used more than one branding element. The largest number of visuals, 37, i.e. 33%, are branded with a consistent color scheme. In these visuals, the combination of blue and white is the most common. Fifteen visuals (15%) are either not branded at all or not branded with visuals. Of all the visuals, only 11, i.e. 10%, are branded with the logo of the parent institution.

Graph 5. Elements of visual branding



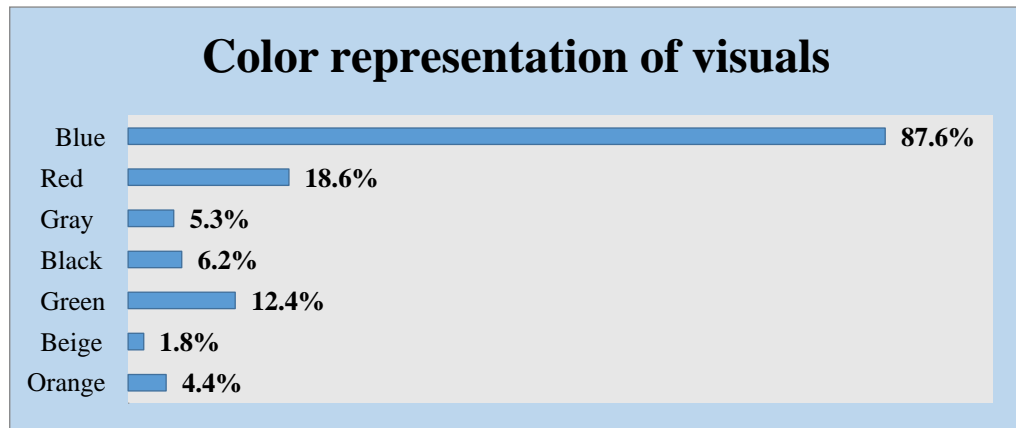
The following are examples of branded visuals with the Ministry of Health logo.

Picture 3a and Picture 3b. Branding with the logo of the Ministry of Health



Source: Official Facebook page of Venko Filipche (posted on April 2, 2020) – printscreen.

Graph 6. Color representation of visuals



When it comes to the representation of colors, blue is the most represented, but there is inconsistency in its use, that is, it is used in different shades, which can be seen from the example below.

Picture 4a and Picture 4b. Different shades of blue on the visuals



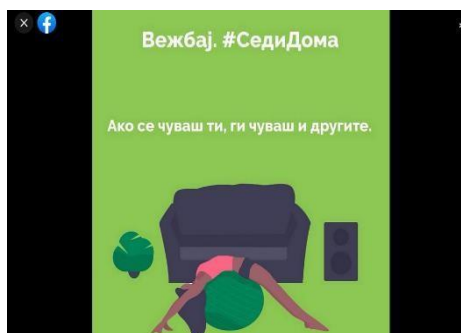
Source: Official Facebook page of Venko Filipche (posted on December 19 and 21, 2020) – printscreen.

Regarding the outcome, the choice of material in 92% of the visuals has a positive outcome, while the remaining visuals contain messages with a negative, neutral or unclear outcome.

An example of a positive outcome is shown in the image below.

Picture 5. Positive outcome<sup>110</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Main text in the picture: Exercise. Stay home. If you take care of yourself, you take care of others.

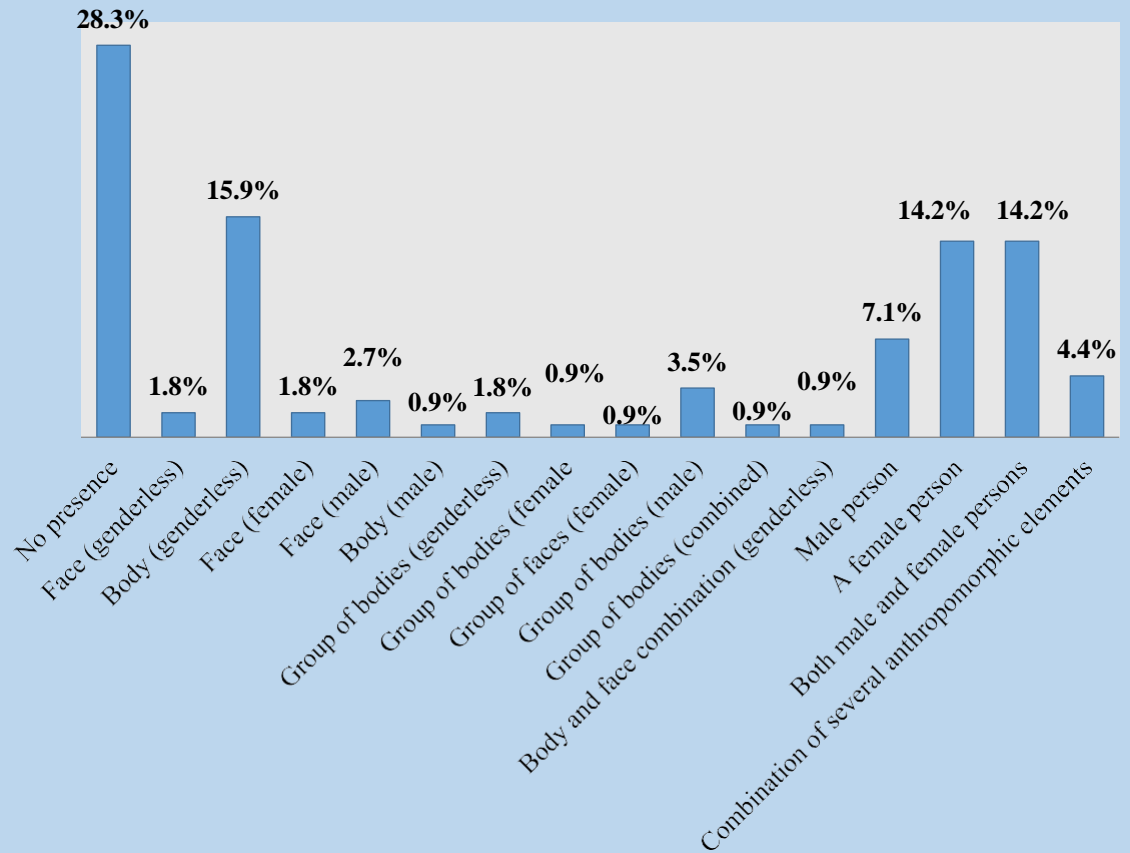


Source: Official Facebook page of Venko Filipche (posted on March 15, 2020) – printscreen.

In the largest number of visuals, 32 or 28.3%, there is no presence of anthropomorphic figures. In 18 visuals, or 15.9%, there is the presence of a genderless human body. There is a presence of a female person and a male and a female person in 16 visuals each (or 14.2% each), and the presence of a male person is present in 8 visuals or 7.1%. A group of male bodies is present in 4 visuals (3.5%), and a group of genderless bodies in 2 (1.8%). A male face is present in 3 visuals (2.7%), and a female and genderless in 2 (or 1.8% each). A combination of several anthropomorphic elements is present in 4.4% (5 visuals).

Graph 7. Kind of an anthropomorphic figure on the visuals

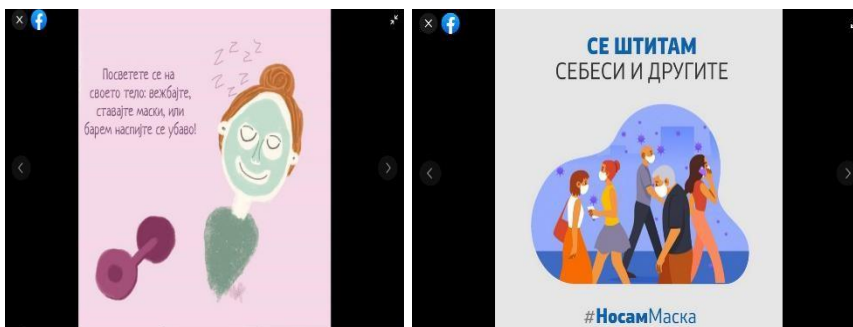
## Type of an anthropomorphic figure



The following is an example of two of the types of anthropomorphic figures represented in the visuals – a female face and a combination of male and female figures.

Picture 6a. A woman's face

Picture 6b. Male and female persons



Source: Official Facebook page of Venko Filipche (posted on March 15 and November 5, 2020) – printscreen.

As many as 106 visuals, or a high 93.8%, refer to the general public and do not have any representation of subcultures, and the rest are visuals depicting children and youth (made in collaboration with UNICEF).

In 84.1% (95 visuals) there are no stylistic figures represented through the visual elements. In 8% (9 visuals) there is the presence of metaphor, comparison in 2.7% (3 visuals), hyperbole in 1.8% (2 visuals), and personification in 0.9% (1 visual). A combination of stylistic figures is present in 2.7% (3 visuals).

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of a number of aspects and elements of visual communication on the official Facebook page of the former Minister of Health, Filipche, initially showed that most of the digital posters were posted in March and April 2020. It is understandable that the most posts were in March, because that was the period of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and then the information related to prevention, recommendations, etc. were the most numerous, considering that it was about something that was unknown and unpredictable until then, and the responsible institutions tried their best to get all the information and recommendations to the greatest number of people. But considering that the different months of the year brought different events and activities, and the citizens of the country, and of the whole world, lived the period of the pandemic for a very long time, especially since certain information and developments changed over time, the practice of posting digital posters should have continued with the same or similar intensity.

The results showed that one of the weak elements in the campaign with digital posters is the purpose of the digital posters, i.e. the target group addressed by the posters. Namely, the communication through the digital posters mostly took place with the general population. In that regard, specific groups of citizens (for example, people with special needs, children and youth, elderly, marginalized groups, etc.) have been neglected, thus the campaign is limited and does not offer the possibility of more direct communication with specific target groups.

Related to the above, a significant number of members of certain subcultures were not represented in the visual materials with which Minister Filipche communicated with the public. Considering the multiculturalism of Macedonia, and thus the existence of different visual codes, the inclusion of subcultures in visual communication, and in communication in general, especially in a crisis, is a very important element.

Another piece of information that indicates a deficiency is that none of the posted digital posters have more detailed information about the client, nor information about the sources in terms of where certain recommendations are taken from, who provides the recommendations and additional information that, in fact, are very important for further consultation in order to obtain more detailed and relevant information from credible sources.

Also, on a smaller number of the posted digital posters, the production/authorship is indicated, and even in the cases where this is the case, the data is not detailed. In this sense, the target audience does not receive key information about who is the orderer, who produced the digital poster, who is the author, i.e. the designer. Considering the specificity of the situation for which the digital posters are intended, the most important thing is which competent institution is behind them and in what way they communicate with the public in order for it to be accurately and in detail informed. Thus, in this case, it is crucial to provide information about the competent institutions that are responsible for sending the messages. In order to believe something that is sent to them as media content, people need to know who is sending that media content, so that they can judge from the credibility of the source whether they can trust the message itself.

In terms of the purpose of communication, most of the digital posters contain warnings or orders/imperatives, i.e. directives (according to Speech Act Theory). This is understandable given that it is a global health crisis and it is necessary to communicate with the public in this way for their safety.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that the largest number of posted digital posters on the official Facebook page of Filipche are combined, i.e. composed of an illustrative and a text/written part. That

ratio is complementary and it is appropriate for this type of mass communication materials within health communication because they include both an informative text and an illustrative part that complement each other and thus the message is conveyed most appropriately to the target audience.

The analysis of the textual/written part of the digital posters showed that in a very small percentage, that is, in a small number of digital posters, there is the use of professional terms (medical, scientific, etc.). Given that the purpose of the digital posters is in the largest percentage for the wider population, that is, it is the main target group, and is composed of citizens with different levels of literacy, as well as media and health literacy, the lack of professional terminology is somewhat justified.

The Macedonian language is used in the largest number of digital posters, and in a smaller number there is a combination of Macedonian and English or only the English language is present. Also, there is no significant presence of internationalisms and words of foreign origin. It is especially important both in terms of the target audience and in terms of specific health communication in the context of a global health crisis. Namely, the use of the Macedonian language (the official language of the entire territory of the country) makes the message understandable to the largest number of citizens. In that way, communication is easier and the essence of the sent message is better understood, and it is communicated in the mother tongue (for the majority of citizens), which is certainly the most appropriate in conditions of a global crisis, when people are in fear and in uncertainty and (want to) rely on familiar and close things (for example, language). Fast and efficient communication is a condition for appropriate action.

The dominant style of the text message in the largest percentage is administrative/official-business (and political), and the text messages also occur in a conversational and journalistic style. Considering the message to be conveyed, all the information, recommendations and advice, as well as the specific conditions in which the message is conveyed, the dominant style is somewhat adequate.

In the context of the above, it would be good to have a greater presence of phrases that are characteristic of Macedonia and the Macedonian people (they are present in only 12.4% of digital posters with a text/written message). Phrases that people use almost every day would make the message more accessible and “closer” and would facilitate communication. Of course, they would facilitate it only if they are well used and combined with the key, important information, recommendations and advice, and not just used as such without any specific purpose and goal.

Given that we are talking about digital posters, the complete dominance of digital content is noticeable. It is understandable both in relation to the pandemic and in relation to modern flows, because digital works are easier to produce and reproduce, if there is a need for certain changes to the information, it is done much easier and faster, and distribution is less of a problem, because digital materials can be uploaded both online and as printed material.

As for branding elements, they are very important in terms of successful communication with the wider audience/public. Through it, a continuous relationship is created and maintained with the target groups who, recognizing the brand, identify it with a certain set of values associated with it and thus trust can be built, which is especially important in this type of campaign related to public health. From there, competent and responsible institutions, such as the Ministry of Health, should send their messages marked with their brand. It would contribute to easy recognition of the source of the message and would bring a certain level of trust in it, of course on the condition that the institution is trusted.

Most of the digital posters posted on the official Facebook page of Filipche, used blue and white colors. Blue and white are also associated with global trends for the visual presentation of health information. But it is important to point out that the blue color of the posted visuals on the official Facebook page of Filipche is in different shades and, if the goal is to achieve the above through branding, the colors that are part of the brand are also very significant to be fully and always consistently used.

From the analysis and from the results, it can be observed that digital posters mostly promote a positive outcome, that is, in terms of communication, there is a positive framing of the outcome. It provides the necessary momentum for change towards the desired outcome and very often represents both a clear step and a concrete benefit that the proposed behavior change could bring (for example, if I wear a protective mask, I will reduce my chances of contracting the coronavirus/I will not get infected with coronavirus). There is a possible benefit from the application of both positive and negative

outcomes, but the audience itself should always be taken into account, which in this case is massive and diverse, and precisely because it is a mass campaign, it is more appropriate to promote positive outcomes.

Regarding the value of using specific tools in communication, such as the anthropomorphic figure, for example, it largely depends on the nature of the content and the target group within that communication. The anthropomorphic figure is not often present on the analyzed digital posters. The focus of the digital posters is on recommendations and the appropriate steps to take, so perhaps anthropomorphic figures in this case would not be essential to functionality. However, it should be taken into account the research results that point out that it is extremely important in visual health communication to use the human figure (Fontaine et al., 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Health authorities and, in general, competent and responsible institutions often design health campaigns for different purposes. Those campaigns greatly contribute to the improvement of public health at the global level, and therefore it is important how those campaigns are considered, how they are conceived and designed, and how they are implemented. In those campaigns, the visual part of health communication plays a particularly significant role, as a tool for easier understanding of the sent message and as a tool that conveys important information in a more direct, more creative, simpler and more picturesque way, which is of key importance for the general public with a lower level of literacy.

In times of a global health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when the world is facing something unknown, unpredictable and dangerous, it is crucial to get the message out to the largest number of people who can understand and act on it accordingly (because during such global crises there is a huge amount of information on a daily basis, and hence a huge amount of misinformation). It is also crucial that the health campaign is properly prepared, implemented quickly and efficiently and has the desired effect.

Are the competent and responsible institutions ready and up to such a task?

From the obtained results of the empirical research, we can conclude that digital posters functioned (to a greater or lesser degree) as a tool for mass communication with Macedonian citizens in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, a tool for persuading citizens to behave responsibly. As this research showed, the digital poster campaign focused on promoting disease prevention among the general population: as many as 93% of digital poster messages refer to this goal – what citizens can do personally to protect themselves from the coronavirus and protect others.

Answering the main research question: “How do the relevant official (domestic) institutions shape the message that aims to motivate the population to comply with their recommendations?” we would summarize that the analysis of the large number of communication aspects and elements showed that in Macedonia, an incompletely properly prepared communication campaign with an incompletely defined communication strategy was conducted through the official Facebook page of the then Minister of Health, Filipche. Of course there were positive aspects, well thought out communication elements and creative content, but still a fully structured campaign was lacking as an indicator of a well-defined and thought out strategy.

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