The visual identity of science communication journals: a comparative study of periodical covers in Ibero-American publications indexed in Scopus

A identidade visual de revistas científicas: um estudo comparativo de capas de publicações ibero-americanas indexadas na Scopus

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editorial design, scientific journals, visual identity, scientific communication, Scopus

This article aims to analyse the current trends of design regarding the covers of science communication journals in Ibero-America, focusing specifically on those indexed in Scopus. From a perspective that acknowledges the relevance of visual aspects in relation to editorial identity, the study examines the formal design decisions underlying the graphic presentation of these publications. To this end, a descriptive content analysis was conducted with a sample of 64 journals using a coding system comprised of variables related to identification, design, and content. The findings indicate a preference for functional and homogeneous visual models, characterised by symmetrical compositions, a predominance of sans serif typeface, and the moderate use of colour. Although images play a key role in more than half the covers, they tend to be institutional in nature, with a scarce amount of vivid experimentation. Similarly, there is limited typographic diversity and only slight variability from one issue to another, resulting in visual identities that are quite similar to each other. These trends highlight the need to strengthen editorial design as a strategic tool for improving the visibility, consistency, and graphic identity of science communication journals.

design editorial, revistas científicas, identidade visual, comunicação científica, Scopus

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar as tendências atuais de design nas capas de revistas científicas na Ibero-América, com foco específico naquelas indexadas na Scopus. A partir de uma perspectiva que reconhece a relevância dos aspectos visuais para a identidade editorial, o estudo examina as decisões formais de design subjacentes à apresentação gráfica dessas publicações. Para isso, realizou-se uma análise de conteúdo descritiva com uma amostra de 64 periódicos, utilizando um sistema de codificação composto por variáveis relacionadas à identificação, ao design e ao conteúdo. Os resultados indicam uma preferência por modelos visuais funcionais e homogêneos, caracterizados por composições simétricas, predominância de tipos sem serifa e uso moderado de cor. Embora as imagens desempenhem um papel central em mais da metade das capas, elas tendem a ter caráter institucional, com pouca experimentação visual mais expressiva. Da mesma forma, observa-se limitada diversidade tipográfica e baixa variabilidade entre edições, resultando em identidades visuais bastante semelhantes entre si. Essas tendências evidenciam a necessidade de fortalecer o design editorial como ferramenta estratégica para aprimorar a visibilidade, a consistência e a identidade gráfica das revistas científicas.

1 Introduction

In any publication, design is not merely an adornment, but rather a system of visual mediation that shapes the way knowledge is presented and perceived (Triggs & Atzmon, 2019; Kress & Van Leewen, 2020). As pointed out by Lupton (2010), editorial design organises information and shapes ideas, which means that each decision regarding visual details, ranging from typography to cover layout, plays a key role in constructing scientific discourse. In academic communication journals, the cover is a symbolic interface, which conveys identity, hierarchy, and readability, and communicates the publication's position within the scientific ecosystem (Frascara, 2004; Bonsiepe, 2011). Therefore, addressing this aspect provides insight into how cover design transforms editorial values into visual arrangements, and how they help science to achieve cultural legitimacy (Wang et al., 2017).

Far from being a mere visual complement, design is an essential factor in the communication process, as it directly influences the way content is presented, perceived, and interpreted by readers (González Díez & Pérez Cuadrado, 2001; White, 2017; Sánchez Sánchez, 2023). Regarding scientific journals, especially those in the field of communication, due to their hybrid nature between academic discourse and visual sensitivity in this field, it is worth paying attention to design as an expressive and practical tool (Barness & Papaelias, 2021). Well-devised editorial layouts help organise information in a way that is clear and hierarchical, thereby enabling easy navigation through the content, while at the same time improving the reader's experience through graphics that guide their attention toward key elements of the text (Caldwell & Zappaterra, 2014). Given the context, attention to this aspect is crucial, as covers are a vital part of any publication. In fact, as a cover is comparable to a letter of presentation, it is highly important with regard to key issues such as reinforcing a periodical's visual identity (Evans, 1985; Martín Aguado, 1992; Zappaterra, 2008; Tabuenca et al., 2022).

In a competitive environment largely defined by the position of journals in major databases like Scopus and Web of Science, a distinctive design can make a difference in terms of visibility and identity, thereby contributing to wider dissemination of the content (Siess, 2025). Moreover, in an academic setting increasingly oriented toward open, collaborative, and interdisciplinary dissemination of knowledge, design stands out for its innovation and experimentation, especially in fields such as communication, where the dialogue between visual appearance and content is inherent to research practices (Frascara, 2004).

For the foregoing reasons, the aim of this study is to contribute additional knowledge to the field of scientific publishing based on the view that the visual factor is a key component in developing academic discourse. Addressing design in this context allows for a reflection on the role of journal cover design in articulating editorial identity and visual coherence, as well as in shaping the visual presentation of scientific knowledge. Furthermore, delving deeper into this area will enhance the visibility of publishing practices that help journals position themselves in the academic ecosystem,

in addition to opening up new lines of research related to the role of graphic design in science communication.

2 Objectives and methodology

The overall objective of this study is to identify current trends in designing the covers of science communication journals in Ibero-America. For this purpose, the authors used content analysis of the journal covers under study, which implied a descriptive approach. In other words, science communication journals in Ibero-America were examined, which involved systematic observation to identify their distinctive features based on specific data related to their graphic design. As pointed out by Guevara et al. (2020), descriptive research provides scholars with a means of "describing a real situation in all its main aspects" (p. 165). Thus, the authors used both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, which is considered an effective technique. As asserted by López Noguero (2002), "This technique attempts to identify the essential components of a phenomenon through a process of rigorous measurement" (p. 174).

To this end, the methodological proposal of Tabuenca et al. (2022) was used to develop a data collection tool, which was tailored to academic publishing in the field of communication. As can be observed in Table 1, the instrument consists of 38 variables among the following categories: identification data, including name, country, ISSN, URL, open access route, SJR quartile, h-index, responsible institution, etc.; design-related data, such as typography, image, colour, design model, etc.; and content-related data, entailing whether or not the brand is present, textual information, consistency from one issue to another, etc.

Table 1 Categories and variables. Source: created by the authors.

Category	Variable
1. Journal identification	1.1. id
	1.2. journal title
	1.3. issn
	1.4. url
	1.5. country
	1.6. publisher
	1.7. publisher type
	1.8. language
	1.9. open access route
	1.10. periodicity
	1.11. sjr quartile
	1.12. h-index
	1.13. year, volume (number)

Table 1 Categories and variables. Source: created by the authors. (continued)

Category	Variable
1. Journal identification	1.14. print version (issn)
	1.15. full issue pdf
	1.16. cover
2. Design	2.1. type of design
	2.2. dominant element
	2.3. hierarchical levels
	2.4. initial visual focus
	2.5. presence of a graphic brand
	2.6. type of graphic brand
	2.7. masthead's across issues
	2.8. type of image
	2.9. typographic family – masthead
	2.10. typographic family – main title
	2.11. typographic style – masthead
	2.12. typographic style – main title
	2.13. changes across issues
	2.14. mode of appearance (position)
	2.15. motto, subtitle, or descriptor
	2.16. dominant color
3. Content	3.1. journal title
	3.2. volume and number
	3.3. date
	3.4. central topic title
	3.5. featured articles
	3.6. other texts

To define the sample, the Scopus database was used as a benchmark, given its exemplary status and acknowledged standing as an international symbol of quality (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Martín-Martín et al., 2018). In addition, Scopus includes a larger number of non-English-language periodicals than Web of Science (Culbert et al., 2025). The final sample consisted of 64 journals, corresponding to the complete set of titles indexed in the Communication category of Scopus in the May 2025 update. No additional inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied, as the study follows a census-based approach and takes the full population of journals within this category as its unit of analysis. To identify consistent patterns in cover design, the five volumes published prior to the main unit of analysis were also reviewed.

3 Results

3.1 General characteristics of the sample

Regarding the geographical distribution of the periodicals analysed, the data in Figure 1 reveal a strong presence of journals from Spain, which account for 31 of the 64 titles in the sample (48.44%). This datum confirms Spain's influence in Ibero-America regarding science publications related to communication. Portugal achieves the second highest number with 12 journals (18.75%), and Brazil stands in third place with 10 (15.63%), which highlights significant publishing activity in the Portuguese-speaking world as well. Chile and Colombia have a smaller share with three journals each (4.69%), while Argentina and Peru offer two titles, respectively (3.13%). Finally, Mexico has one periodical (1.56%) indexed in Scopus in the field of science communication.

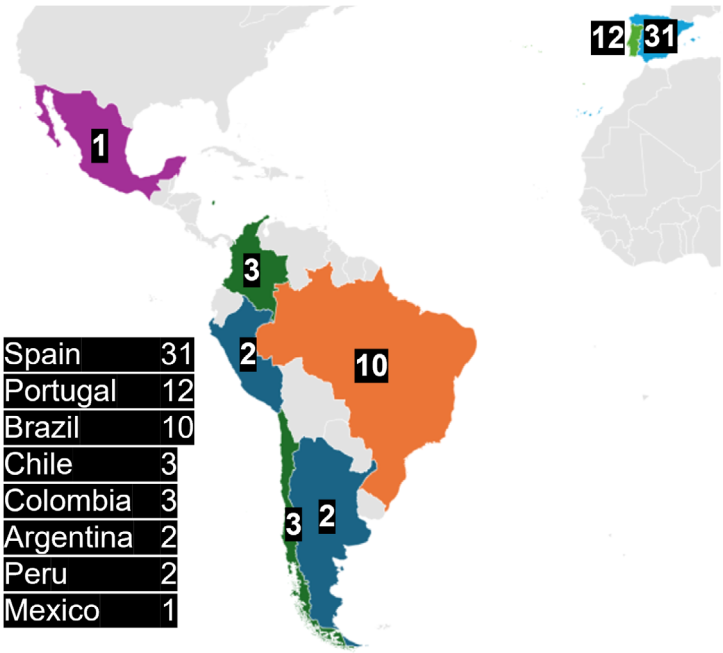

Figure 1 Distribution of journals by country.
Source: created by the authors.

The sample analysed, which can be observed in Figure 2 through the set of covers, presents a series of publication-related characteristics that are summarised in Table 2.

Regarding the type of institution engaged in the publishing studied, the data reveal that university journals dominate. In fact, 47 of the 64 journals in the sample (73.44%) are published by universities, confirming their key role in the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge. Other publishers are considerably less prominent, which include the following: professional and academic associations have six journals (9.38%);

publishing companies have five (7.81%); and research centres have four (6.25%). Among all of the foundations, only one publishes a journal (1.56%). Finally, there is one case of co-publishing (1.56%), which involves a university and an association, yet it is rare in the sample analysed.

All the journals under study are published using the open access model. In Ibero-American science communication, this indicates a strong trend toward the free distribution of knowledge. Regarding specific models, 56 journals follow the diamond system, which offers free access without Article Processing Charges (APCs), both for readers and authors, accounting for 87.5% of the total. By contrast, eight journals adhere to the gold model, comprising 12.5% of the sample. Although this system guarantees open access, it requires payment of publication costs.

In terms of publication frequency, the biannual model is the most common, accounting for 27 journals (42.19%). This is followed by continuous publication, used by 14 periodicals (21.88%), indicating a gradual trend to more frequent publishing. Another 10 journals (15.63%) are published annually. Quarterly and triannual publications are used by six journals (9.38%), while monthly publications are rare, with only one case reported (1.56%).

Table 2 Research data from the journals that comprised the sample. Source: created by the authors.

Quartile	Country	Organisation	Access	Publishing frequency	Pdf	Cover
Q1	Spain (4), Portugal (1)	Publishing company (4), Association (1)	Gold (5)	Continuous (2), Annual (1), Monthly (1), Other (1)	No (5), Yes (0)	Yes (4), No (1)
Q2	Spain (10), Brazil (2), Chile (1), Other (1)	University (11), University and Association (1), Association (1)	Diamond (12), Gold (2)	Biannual (8), Continuous (3), Quarterly (2), Other (1)	Yes (3), No (11)	Yes (12), No (2)
Q3	Spain (14), Brazil (4), Portugal (4), Other (4)	University (21), Research centre (2), Association (1), Other (2)	Diamond (25), Gold (1)	Biannual (12), Continuous (7), Quarterly (3), Other (4)	Yes (7), No (19)	Yes (20), No (6)
Q4	Brazil (5), Portugal (5), Spain (4), Other (5)	University (15), Association (2), Research centre (2)	Diamond (19)	Annual (7), Biannual (7), Triannual (3), Others (2)	Yes (5), No (14)	Yes (17), No (2)
Total	Spain (32), Brazil (11), Portugal (10), Chile (3), Colombia (3), Argentina (2), Peru (2), Mexico (1)	University (47), Association (6), Publishing company (5), Research centre (4), Foundation (1), University and Association (1)	Diamond (56), Gold (8)	Biannual (27), Continuous (14), Annual (10), Other (13)	Yes (15), No (49)	Yes (53), No (11)

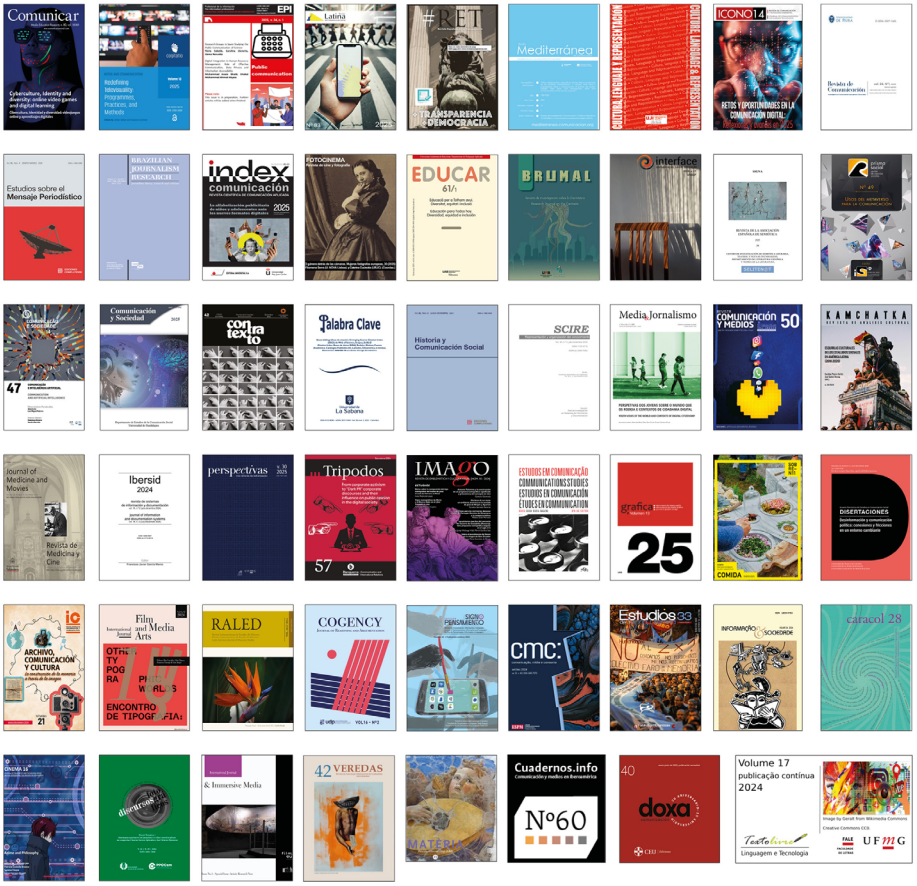

Figure 2 Visual overview of the analysed journal covers.
Source: created by the authors based on the analysed journal covers.

In terms of visibility and impact based on Scopus quartile measurements, there is a notable concentration at the lower end of the spectrum: only 19 journals (29.69%) are in the first two quartiles; 5 are in Q1 (7.81%); and 14 are in Q2 (21.88%). However, 45 of the journals (70.31%) are in Q3 and Q4, with 26 (40.63%) in the third quartile, and 19 (29.69%) in the fourth.

Despite the fact that all the journals are published in digital format, a considerable number also have an ISSN for the print edition. According to the ISSN Portal,[1] 42 of the 64 journals (65.63%) have an ISSN for their print version, and another number for the digital version as well, so they have at least two identifiers.[2]

In terms of the format used to present content, which has direct implications for the editorial layout, 15 journals (23.44%) publish each issue in a single PDF file. This approach gathers all the articles in one place, thereby creating a continuous and cohesive display. Nevertheless, in all the cases analysed, this approach goes hand in hand with individual publications of each article as well.

1 Published by the ISSN International Centre, available at the following website: https://portal.issn.org/

2 There is also an ISSN-L, used for publication on various media, which is an identifier that aggregates the various formats in which a journal is published.

3.2 Visual analysis of the sample

After reviewing the 64 journals, it was found that not all of them have a cover page. In fact, 11 journals do not have a cover, which reduced the valid sample for visual analysis to 53 titles. Table 1 below summarizes the identifying variables related to the research data collected from the journals analysed.

As can be observed in Figure 3, regarding the most prevalent design model used for the covers analysed, the results indicate a preference for symmetrical layouts, used in 27 journals (50.94%), which reflects a trend toward balance in arranging visual features. The second most frequently used design was asymmetrical, seen in 22 journals (41.51%), which indicates more openness to compositions that are more dynamic and less conventional. Two other approaches appear less frequently, which include a modular design (based on defined grids), and free design (a more spontaneous layout), both of which are present, respectively, in just two of the journals (3.77%).

Regarding the presence of images, the use of illustrations stands out, appearing on 25 covers (47.17%). This is followed by photography, used in 13 cases (24.53%), while collage is used sporadically on two covers (3.77%). It is noteworthy that 13 journals (24.53%) do not use any images whatsoever,

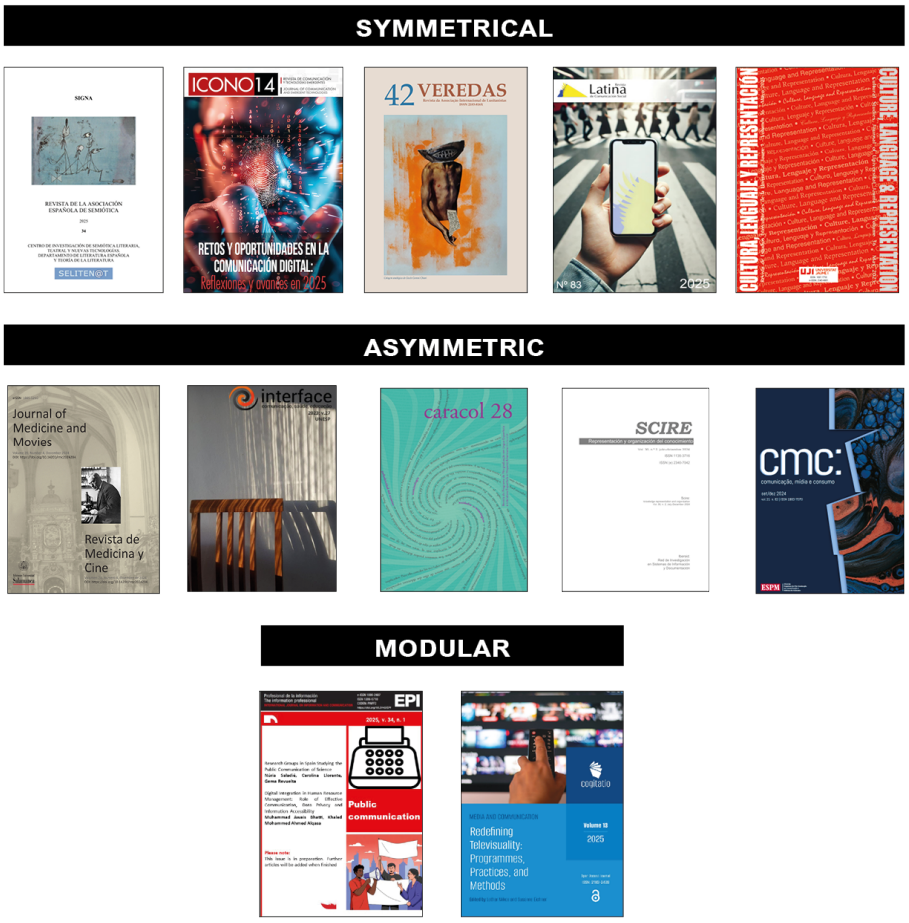

Figure 3 Examples of prevalent design models used on the covers.
Source: created by the authors based on the analysed journal covers.

which might simply be an editorial preference to focus on a text-only strategy, or to take a minimalist approach. These results are graphically synthesised in Figure 4 and further illustrated through representative cover examples in Figure 5.

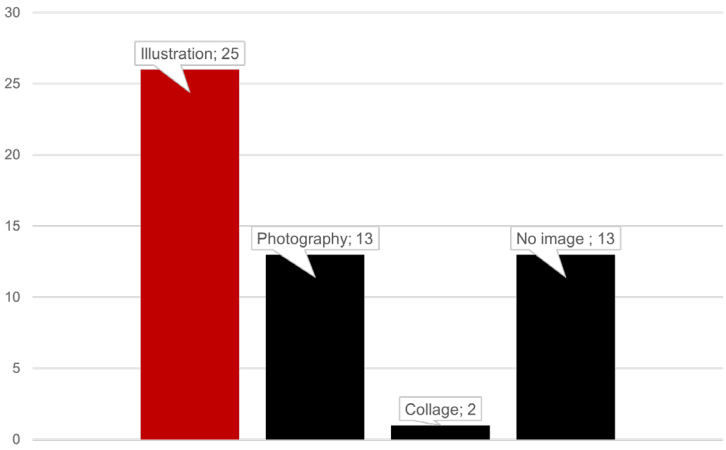

Figure 4 The frequency of image types that appear on the covers.
Source: created by the authors.

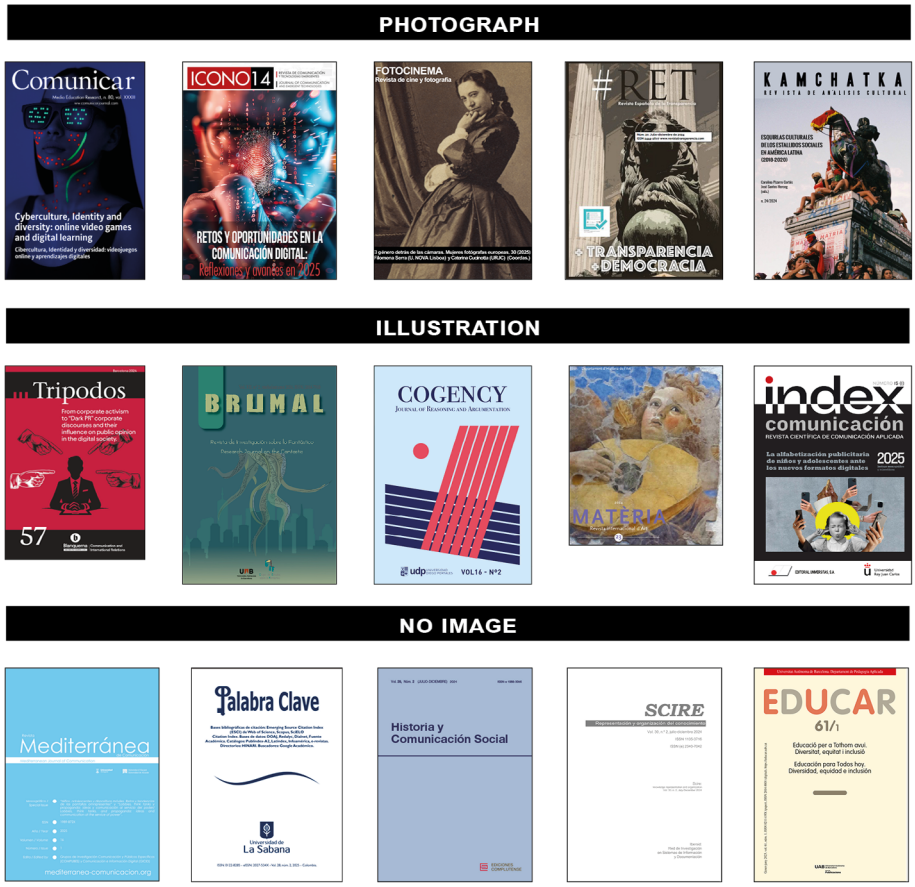

Figure 5 Examples of the presence of images on the covers.
Source: created by the authors based on the analysed journal covers.

By delving into the analysis of the set of journals that have a cover, the authors examined the most dominant visual features in each case. The data indicates that in 31 journals (58.49%), whether the image is an illustration, photograph, or the main graphic resource, it takes centre stage, becoming the overriding feature of the design. In 10 publications (18.87%), typography plays a key role, providing structure to the composition. In six cases (11.32%) the dominant feature is the brand, displayed in graphic format, while another six covers focus on this same component, but using colour (11.32%). These patterns are visually exemplified through a selection of representative covers in Figure 6.

Figure 6 Examples of dominant visual features on the covers.
Source: created by the authors based on the analysed journal covers.

Regarding hierarchy, there is a trend toward two-level structures on the covers, which is seen in 33 journals (62.26%). This arrangement usually involves a combination of two key features, typically an image and a title, or a logo and typography, which share the visual spotlight. A second group, comprising 12 journals (22.64%), uses a three-level hierarchy, which indicates more compositional complexity. Finally, eight covers (15.09%) only have one hierarchical level, with a simple visual arrangement that focuses on a single, dominant feature.

In analysing the visual focal point,[3] which is the component that naturally captures the reader's attention at first glance, a direct observation of the covers was carried out based on a visual scanning pattern. The results show that in 29 of the covers (54.72%), the first attention is focused on the image, which highlights the importance of placing illustrations and photographs in key positions. In 14 cases (26.42%), the first attention is directed toward the graphic mark, either a logo, isotype, imagotype or isologo. And on 10 covers (18.87%), the focus is on other prominent aspects such as colour spots, volume numbering, or auxiliary icons.

3 Observations were carried out by the researchers.

As for the typeface used in the headers, there is a clear dominance of sans serif, which is present in 32 of the covers (60.13%). This is followed by old-style Roman in nine cases (16.98 per cent), modern Roman in four (7.55 per cent), and slab serif in three (5.66 per cent). The authors also found decorative typeface, yet with a very limited presence among the journals (1.89%), with only a single appearance in each one. This type of ornamental typeface included combinations of old Roman/sans serif, modern Roman/sans serif, and handwriting-style fonts. The titles mostly feature the sans serif font, which is used on 21 covers (39.62%), while slab serif and Roman fonts, whether old or new, appear in only two cases each (3.77%). It should also be noted that 28 covers (52.83%) do not have a title as such, which limits the typographical analysis of this aspect. Figure 7 provides representative examples of the different typefaces identified in the headers.

Figure 7 Examples of typeface used in the headers. Source: created by the authors based on the analysed journal covers.

As for the typographical style of the header, two combinations dominate: bold lowercase (21 covers; 39.62%), and bold uppercase (20; 37.74%). With much lower numbers, condensed bold uppercase and shaded bold lowercase have also been found, both of which appeared on three covers (5.66%).

In addition, there are isolated cases of lowercase Roman type (2; 3.77%), and we also found condensed capital, isolated bold, bold italic uppercase, and lowercase Roman italic, but at a very low rate (1.89%), with only one appearance for each. Finally, none of the journals in the sample showed any variation in the font family or style used from one issue to another, which confirms that the use of graphics by this group (n = 53) is stable.

In a deeper analysis of the typographical style of the headers, the prevalence of bold type is seen once again, at the following rates: bold lowercase (9 covers; 16.98%), bold uppercase (5; 9.43%), condensed bold uppercase (1; 1.89%), shaded bold uppercase (1; 1.89%), and bold italic lowercase (1; 1.89%). There was also limited use of rounded lowercase (4; 7.55%) and, in a few isolated cases (1.89% each), condensed lowercase, italic lowercase, and hollow uppercase. However, the absence of a header on 28 covers (52.83%) also limits the scope of this analysis.

Regarding colour, most journals (49.06%) do not have one single shade. This is due to the use of images, which makes it impossible to use only a single, dominant tone. Among the periodicals that display a recurring colour pattern, the shades that stand out include blue tones (4; 7.55%), white (4; 7.55%), and cream colour (2; 3.77%). Likewise, among 9.43% of the journals, a distinct colour is used for each issue. These colour distributions are summarised in Figure 8, which provides a visual overview of the chromatic strategies identified across the analysed journal covers.

Figure 8 Examples of colour distributions. Source: created by the authors based on the analysed journal covers.

As for the presence of the brand in graphic format, the findings indicate that most journals include a specific element on the cover to identify the periodical, and 71.7% (n = 38) continue to use this same component permanently in all subsequent issues. By contrast, 15 covers (28.3%) do not display any visual component to identify the journal. In terms of the type of graphics used, the logo is dominant, appearing on 30 covers (56.6%). To a lesser extent, the isotype is used (3; 5.66%), followed by the imagotype (3; 5.66%) and, rarely, the isologo (1; 1.89%).

In terms of the textual information that appears on the covers, a series of recurring features are used by most of the journals (Figure 9).

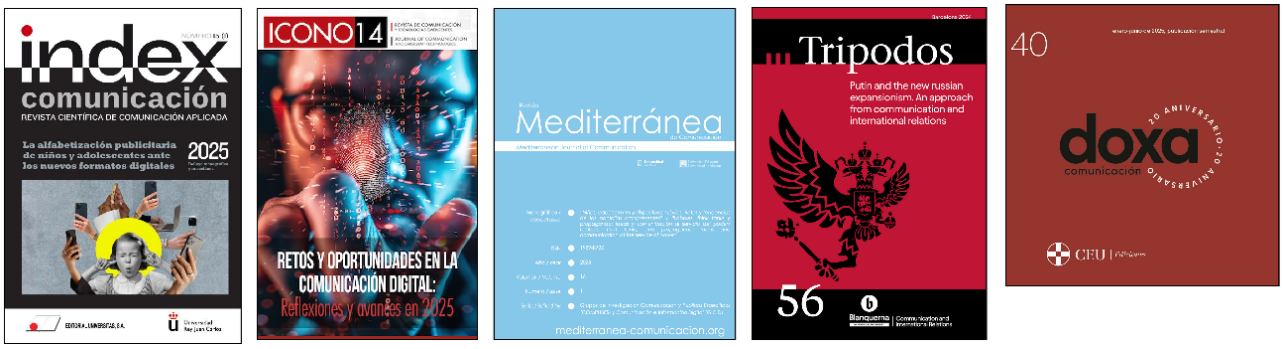

Figure 9 Textual information on the cover of various journals in the sample.
Source: created by the authors based on the analysed journal covers.

As for recurring features, the name of the journal appears on 100% of the covers (n = 53), thereby making it the essential textual feature of the front design. The volume and issue number are included on 96.23% of the covers (n = 51), while the publication date is present on 81.13% (n = 43). Less standard textual components appear with considerably less frequency as follows: 42.28% of the journals (n = 24) include a motto, subtitle, or description, and in 39.62% (n = 21), the cover includes a topic title linked to the main content of the issue, suggesting an editorial strategy aimed at giving each publication a specific identity. The inclusion of a summary or list of selected articles is rare, only occurring in one of the periodicals.

Various approaches can be observed regarding the use of language on the covers. The most common method is to use only one language, which is the case in 35 of the journals (66.04%). This is followed by bilingual covers, used by 13 periodicals (24.53%), while three publications (5.66%) employ three languages, and one journal (1.89%) uses four different languages. There is even one case (1.89%) in which no words appear, where communication is carried out exclusively through numerical components. In terms of frequency, Spanish is the most widely used language, appearing on 23 covers (43.4%). The second most prevalent language is English, which appears in 22 journals (41.51%), followed by Portuguese on 15 covers (28.3%). Catalan is much less frequent, used in only in three magazines (5.66%), while French is the least common, appearing on a single cover (1.89%).

4 Discussion and conclusions

By conducting a visual analysis of journal covers, the findings of this study can be interpreted from a viewpoint that goes beyond the mere description of visual patterns, thereby making cover design a foundational component of scientific dissemination in the field of communication. Several features confirm the presence of a widespread visual model that prioritises clarity and functionality over more expressive or identity-based approaches, including the dominance of symmetrical designs, the repeated use of sans serif typeface, and the prevalence of placing images in the centre of the cover.

This pre-eminence of neutral and repetitive designs indicate the intention of journals to ensure legibility, standardization, and consistency from one issue to another. However, this also reveals the limited use of available graphic resources to reinforce the unique editorial image of each journal. Contributing to this visual uniformity is the fact that half the journals do not use a dominant colour for the front cover, and a significant percentage use either no images whatsoever, or they resort to minimalist designs. Thus, although this strategy promotes consistency, it hinders the periodicals' ability to differentiate themselves from others. The lack of alternative typographies, and the nearly complete absence of variation from one issue to the next, reinforces this same trend toward conservative and non-experimental designs.

In light of these findings, several areas of improvement have been pinpointed, the aim of which is to strengthen the visual identity of science journals. Firstly, a more deliberate use of colour would overcome the reliance on neutral palettes and enhance the immediate recognition of each periodical. The introduction of a specific, consistent colour scheme associated with the publishing brand might help to differentiate between the various journals, and to establish a sustained, visual identity. Secondly, the use of images with a stronger thematic message, whether illustrations, photographs, or graphic compositions, would enable a more direct link between the cover design and the topic content of each issue. This would involve gradually using more evocative visual models geared toward communication, rather than focusing exclusively on identification. Regarding typography, the data suggests the need to explore more options, which includes maintaining consistency between issues while incorporating resources that give headlines and titles more individuality. In addition, it would be advisable to reconsider the design structure, which is currently dominated by one and two-level schemes. This approach could lead to more dynamic covers capable of attracting attention without compromising informational clarity.

Furthermore, creating editorial style guides seems to be necessary for ensuring graphic consistency over time. The diversity of strategies found in some journals, along with the lack of continuity in others, highlight the need to establish formal guidelines to coordinate the use of colour, typography, composition, and textual features. Such standards would reinforce the internal consistency of each publication, while simplifying the decision-making process for editorial teams.

The findings of the present study support the initial hypothesis, which is the following: The journals analysed do not take full advantage of the potential of graphic design for creating an identity that is distinct and visual. While the field of communication acknowledges the strategic role of visual language, this potential is only partially evident in the covers examined. The prevalence of merely practical strategies with minimal variation from one issue to another reveals a gap between academic content and its visual depiction. Regarding the results presented, it should be noted that the identification of the visual focal point did not constitute a primary objective of the study and was based on expert visual observation of the covers. This represents a limitation of the analysis, which future research could

address by employing methodologies aimed at more precisely identifying visual scanning patterns and mechanisms of reader attention.

In short, the foregoing analysis highlights the need for editorial teams to incorporate design as a key component of science communication, due to its potential to reinforce editorial identity, enhance the reader's experience, and foster increased public visibility of research that appears in academic publications.

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