



YOU CAN LEARN TO COMMUNICATE



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SIGN LANGUAGE? HOISTING THE KOSOVO FLAG?
INTERPRETERS AMONGST THE YOUTH LEADERS?
IN YOUTH WORK THERE ARE MANY MISUNDERSTAND-
INGS ABOUT HOW TO REACH OUT EFFICIENTLY TO
DIFFERENT TARGET GROUPS. BEFORE YOU INVEST
MONEY IN A PHOTO SHOOT OF MOROCCAN KIDS IN
UNIFORM, OR CONTRACT A DUTCH-TURKISH TRANSLA-
TOR FOR YOUR NEW BROCHURE, YOU NEED TO HAVE A
LOOK AT YOURSELF FIRST. GOOD COMMUNICATION
WITH A CULTURALLY DIVERSE AUDIENCE STARTS WITH
YOURSELF. BUT IT DOESN'T STOP THERE...



1 WE DON'T REACH THEM!

Do you know HEMA? A thoroughly Dutch shop, which has become widely accepted in Flanders, just as the Jip and Janneke characters. Media-matic, a Dutch agency, developed an Arab version: El Hema. In this concept shop, you can find halal smoked sausage, rubber gloves with henna motifs, Arabic chocolate letters and more of the typical Hema-products in new fonts and with new accents. Base also developed an ethnic mobile phone brand: 'Ay Yildiz'. Many Belgians of Turkish origin now call fellow Turks at cheaper rates with Ay Yildiz. In the meantime, we can find halal meat, slaughtered according to Islamic rules, both in the supermarket chains as well as in the local shops. The not-for-profit sector is also trying to reach out to different ethnic-cultural groups. For example, the recruitment campaigns for Belgian Railways (NMBS), the Flemish Public Transport Company (De Lijn) or the Antwerp police. Pre-



Verbal Vision vzw and ethno-communication

Verbal Vision vzw (not-for-profit organisation) has organised a considerable amount of exploratory research into ethno-communication over the last few years.

A first exploration was commissioned by the Department of Equal Opportunities of the Flemish Government and the Province of Antwerp. Verbal Vision vzw organised a digital questionnaire sent to 400 not-for-profit services, (How do organisations communicate with immigrants?), analysed the content of Antwerp media in cooperation with the Science Shop of the Free University of Brussels and spoke to key national and international people about ethno-communication.

A second exploratory piece of research, 'Words in Image', was commissioned by the Minister of Housing, Integration, City Policies and Interior Administration within the framework of 'Managers in diversity', and with the support of the province of Antwerp. During this exploratory research, the emphasis was on how to improve the graphic and textual elements of communications aimed at a culturally diverse audience. The not-for-profit organisation analysed the communications materials of five organisations: the Flemish Job Service (VDAB), the Social Housing Department of the city of Ghent, the Diversity Department of the city of Mechelen, Antwerp University and the Flemish Institute of Health Promotion and Illness Prevention. What does a culturally diverse audience think of their communication? Verbal Vision carried out 33 in-depth interviews and organised 3 panel discussions. Over 1000 participants filled out the digital questionnaire, 'Voices in colour'. Fifty students of Digital, Graphic and Advertising Design of the Sint-Lucas college in Ghent developed campaigns for target groups with Turkish, Moroccan, African and Eastern-European roots. The results of this exploratory research (with graphics examples, research findings, publications and training sessions) can be found at www.verbalvision.be.

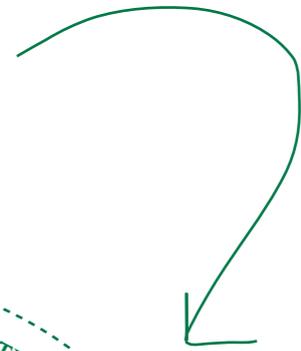
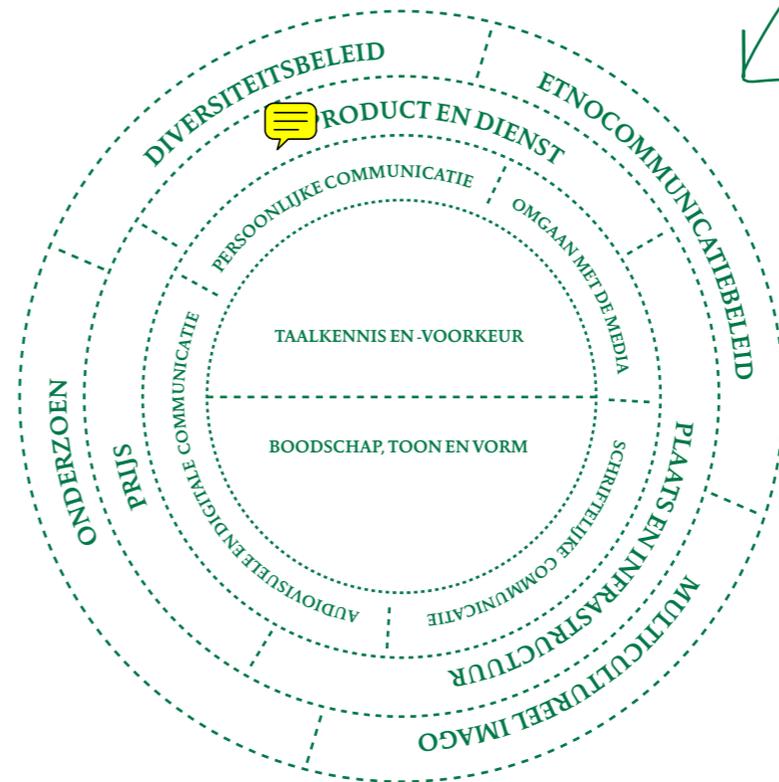
vention leaflets for breast cancer or Aids are translated into different languages, such as Arabic and Turkish.

But still, our foreign fellow citizens seem to be less informed about the ins and outs of our society and its institutions. They participate less. 'We organise multicultural activities, but they don't come,' exclaims a frustrated Chiro leader. 'We portray people of different countries in our posters and leaflets, but still they don't know us,' agrees the staff member of the local community centre. It is a widespread lament in different sectors: 'We can't reach them.'

Is there a way we can make our organisation's message more appealing to a culturally diverse audience? Can communication play a role in bridging this social and cultural gap? Verbal Vision organised some exploratory research into ethno-communication over the last few years. **Huh?** Ethno-communication is about communication between communities with different cultures. In this article we dive into the world of marketing and research, but at the same time, we also discuss the practical applications of text and image.

2. ETHNO-COMMUNICATION: MORE THAN THE GUY IN THE PICTURE

Some Arabic in a leaflet, a special couscous evening, a solid vision of 'everybody-is-welcome'... Often these are just drops in the ocean. Communication needs fertile soil. The wheel of ethno-communication shows what is needed to better reach a multicultural audience. Let's get the wheel rolling...



If we are planning to communicate with a culturally diverse audience, we should first have a look at **ourselves**. How are we doing with our **diversity policy**? Have we translated values such as equality, solidarity, justice or respect into our human resources and recruitment policy? Staff members from a different ethnic-cultural origin bring knowledge, skills and networks of their own. If you are aiming for clients of colour, it is not very credible to do so with an exclusively white team. Diversity policy will inevitably influence the organisational identity and express itself in the corporate identity, the networks, the activities, the offer and the service. Within ethnic groups, word-of-mouth communication travels very fast. People who have had positive or personal experiences with an organisation, talk about it to their friends and family. People who had negative experiences, talk about it even more. Trust comes slowly, but goes rapidly. The aim is to build up **a good reputation**. But that will cost money. The bigger your **communications budget**, the more efficiently you can work. Communication is not a quick-fix task. You need to set up a structure, develop a plan. You need to invest in a communications policy now, to reap the benefits later. There is no way around exploratory research. Build up a feeling of your target group and you will notice that there are big differences within one ethnic group.

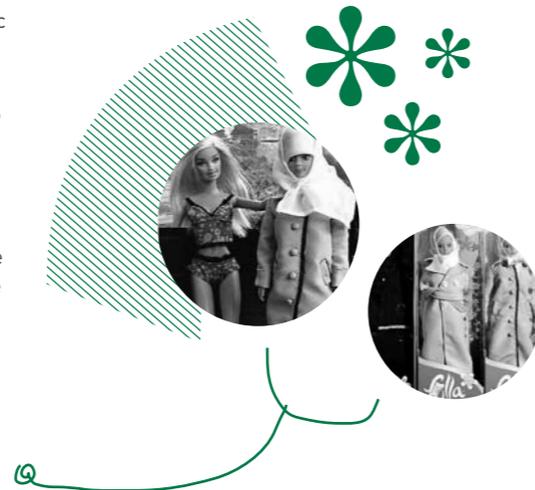
That is when the second component comes in: **marketing**. Why doesn't your target group like your offer, its presentation or the communication about it? Within your marketing mix you can adapt your offer and presentation to the wishes and preferences of your target groups. An Egyptian toy company, for instance, developed the Fulla dolls for children in the Middle East, as a reaction to the very Western Barbie dolls. Mecca-Cola is an alternative for Coca-Cola. Local organisations should analyse their offer, but also their product placement, their infrastructure, the service, the price, the accessibility, etcetera. A Flemish organisation in a green residential neigh-

bourhood will not attract many immigrant children from the suburbs.

The third component has a look at the variety of **communication methods**. Each method has its own strengths. A poster can highlight a certain issue, a leaflet gives information and a discussion can make people act. Each of them have their own characteristics. First generation newcomers prefer to watch foreign TV stations via satellite dishes, rather than Flemish channels. Young people are active on the internet, but read very few newspapers and magazines.

'I never watch the local Antwerp TV, but I watch the Turkish channels. I only read Hürriyet, a Turkish newspaper', says a man of Turkish origin. The choice of a specific media mix is often based on the analysis made during the exploratory research. A golden rule: vary your communication and walk the communication paths of your target group.

And that is how we end up at the axis of the wheel: how to develop such a leaflet, flyer, poster or web page **in practice**. Can graphic and textual elements improve the communication of not-for-profit organisations with different ethnic groups? Let's zoom in on the use of words and images.



3 WEIGHING WORDS

Language and images give meaning to the world around us. Both representational systems are bound by their own rules and conventions. They are mostly not interchangeable. Language is an excellent vehicle for spreading information. Written media, printed or digital, reaches a much wider audience than you would ever reach with face-to-face discussions.

THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

People from a different origin do not necessarily have linguistic problems, but communicating in a language different from your mother tongue is simply more difficult. How well they have mastered Dutch is often related to the level of education, the degree of integration and people's age. Even second generation immigrants do not master Dutch fully. For example, more than half of the second generation young people from Turkish or Moroccan origin, never speak Dutch with their parents. Some newcomers do not have a reading culture. Many Berber immigrants cannot read or write or have difficulties understanding written texts. More than half of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants (almost) never read a Dutch language newspaper, except for the young people. Oral understanding is the easiest, followed by speaking, reading and finally, writing. Non-native speakers read words, but do not understand them sufficiently. That is why translating for the first generation immigrants is a logical option. This is particularly true for complex or unknown topics. They are best communicated in their mother tongue.

I look at the images and try to understand what they mean. There are many letters, but there are only a few words that I can read or understand. If I can't understand it, I just put it away. (Older woman of Moroccan origin)

In some of the research carried out by Verbal Vision, a federal civil servant said that, 'Communicating in the language of the target group undermines their motivation to learn Dutch'. These arguments are not valid for the communications officers. The aim and the result of the campaign is more important. Everybody is entitled to education, leisure time, health care or social housing, even if they do not understand the language. Teaching a language is the task of the educational sector in the first place. Few first generation naturalised Belgians will ever master Dutch completely. Flemish Belgians also have French classes, starting in primary school, but only few speak it fluently. From the second generation immigrants onwards, texts in both languages can be combined. But there are limits to the number of languages in one leaflet. It is better to limit leaflets to a maximum of four languages. The general principle is: always use Dutch and if need be, make a translation available in another language, or at least a summary or a headline.

(UN)WRITTEN RULES

Verbal Vision found out from their research based on 33 in-depth interviews, that people from different origins do not like to read written media, because of the language differences and the differences in reading culture. Those who do not master a language, do not like to read as much. Still, the interviewees indicated that written and printed media are an important source of information. Some illiterate and/or older first generation immigrants, who barely understood any Dutch, preferred a talk to a (Dutch language) leaflet. Digital media as a source of information is very unpopular, except for young people who want to study. So printed written media continues to

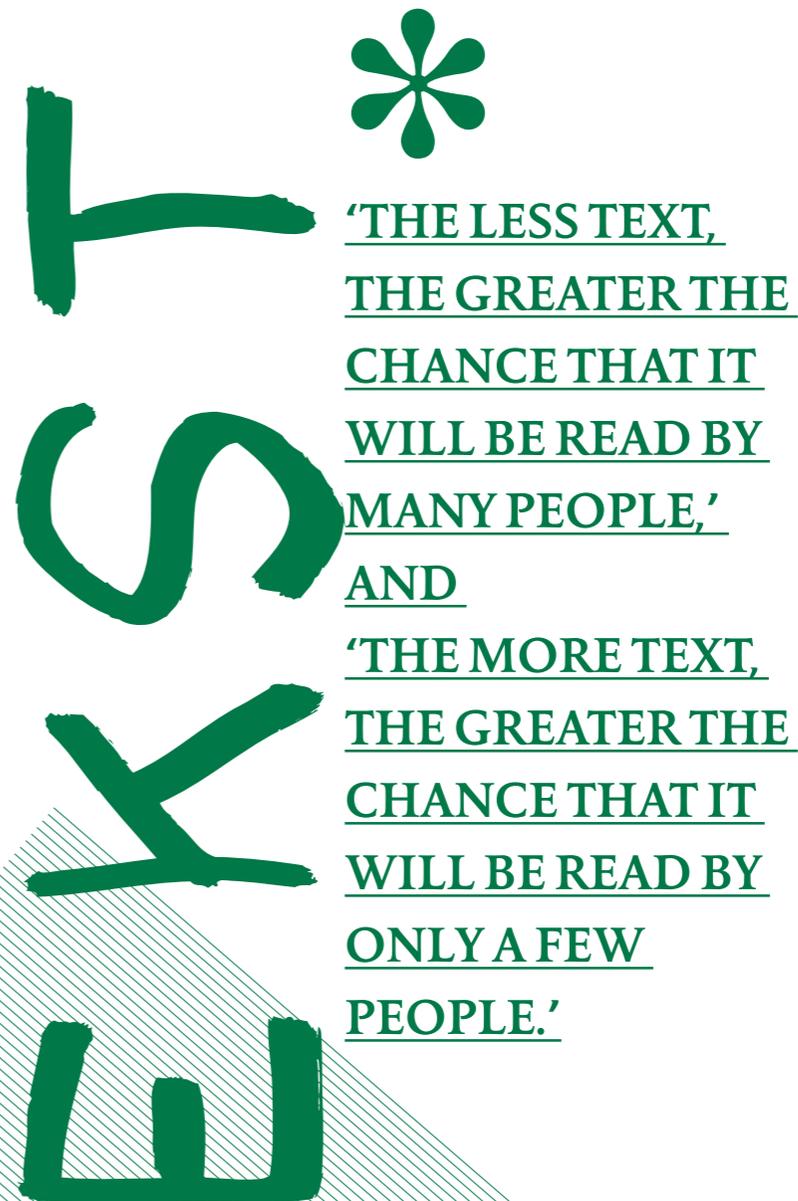
play its informative role, especially in combination with a talk or explanation, whether that is individually or in a group. If you are targeting ethnic groups through written media, you need to make extra efforts to increase the efficiency of your images and texts to the maximum.

They did their best to use simple language in their leaflet, but they are stuck in their way of talking and writing. They use their own specific jargon and have not made enough effort to speak the language of the people. It is written language, you wouldn't use it at the market.
(Woman with Moroccan roots)

SIMPLE, SIMPLE, SIMPLE

Simple language, a simple structure and a simple message. Long and difficult texts do not encourage people to read them, especially less linguistically-skilled people. Two golden rules: 'The less text, the greater the chance that it will be read by many people,' and 'The more text, the greater the chance that it will be read by only a few people.' If your text needs explaining, it is too difficult. Writing simple texts is not the same as using childish or patronising language. Keep it simple: write short sentences, with a clear subject and an active verb. Avoid nuances, jargon, civil servants' language, difficult terms or hollow words. The text of the written medium should approach the linguistic skills, the wishes and the needs of the reader as far as possible. Written material, especially leaflets and flyers, should draw people towards them, rather than being as complete as possible. The key message should be formulated loud and clear. Just say what it is about. Only launch messages that are directly useful, wrapped in a clear structure and with clear instructions. What should the reader do, when, where, how and with whom? The most important thing is to connect the reader to a contact person.

On the leaflet is written 'personal invitation', but it doesn't mention a name. If there were a name, it would attract people, it would help me. I would have responded to the information.
(Man of Moroccan origin)



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'THE LESS TEXT,
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CHANCE THAT IT
WILL BE READ BY
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PEOPLE.'**

4 THE RIGHT IMAGES

Is leopard print associated with hookers or is it a symbol of power? Does a flag refer to the country of origin or does it indicate oppression. Do Arab mosaics attract attention or is it a cliché that has the opposite effect? What makes an image pleasant or unpleasant, shocking or banal, interesting or boring? Images seldom appeal to people in the same way. Nevertheless, images are never void of meaning. No two people will see exactly the same. Images are construed within a certain socio-cultural context with a certain purpose. The viewer judges the image and attributes meaning to it through his filter. The context in which we see images, plus the technology used to show them, guide our judgment. When we lift images out of their context, for instance, they can provoke quite contradictory interpretations. Just think back to the protests against the Danish Mohammed cartoons. Images mean different things to different people within a certain socio-cultural context. An image has multiple meanings. Images are never neutral interpretations without context.

There are many textile shops in the Antwerp-Noord area. People from the west coast of Africa produce wax-textiles with different meanings. Each waxed pattern has its own message and you can communicate to others with it. Some messages are: 'Chéri, ne me tourne pas le dos,' (Don't turn your back on me, darling). Or 'Mon marié capable,' (my husband is very capable). 'Six bougies' (six candles) stands for women that can afford a Mercedes Benz.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

All too often we look at images with our auto-pilot switched on. We hardly pay them any attention. However, those in-depth interviews show us that images do catch our attention and are seen through our personal and cultural glasses, both by the person producing the images, as well as the viewer. We can only use images consciously if we train ourselves to understand them as sources of information. Who has produced this image? What was the intention of the producer? What technology was used to make this image? Which colours were used? What is the perspective? What do you see and do you recognise yourself? What do you understand from the image? What is the link with the text? What is the cultural or historical context? What meaning does the image have for you? In what context does someone read this image? The next step is to find out what interpretation your target group attributes to those images. Pictures of a square in Marrakech will make young men of Moroccan origin think of holidays. When we carry out a 'pre-test', we can find out how target groups interpret and use those images, and we can anticipate the meaning they will be given. Moreover, we can limit the number of possible interpretations through the words we use with the image, and by selecting the images in the light of what we are aiming for.



Pre-testing written material

Brochures that are adapted after a 'pre-test' are more appreciated and more effective. An individual interview is an excellent way to test materials and get to know your target groups better. You can divide such an interview into two parts: In a first stage, you can ask the reader what he thinks the strengths and weaknesses of a leaflet are, via the free association method and the plus-minus method. The respondent is instructed to read the leaflet or (part of a) brochure and put pluses and minuses in the margins. A plus represents a positive point, a minus indicates a negative reading experience. The reader can decide independently where to put the pluses and minuses, and how many: next to a title, a word, a picture, etcetera. Afterwards, the pluses and minuses are commented on in a discussion between the interviewee and the researcher.

In a second phase, the questions can go more into depth regarding the different elements of the leaflet. Some possible topics for discussion: **attractiveness** (draw attention, titles, fonts, colours, pictures, format, cultural elements, etcetera), **understanding** (about the structure, the content, the key message, the purpose, the target group, the sender, the text, the readability, the completeness, the language, the contact information, etcetera), **acceptability** (about the usefulness of the information, the call to action or contact, spreading the message, the attitude towards the sender and the topic, etcetera) and the **visual material** (the degree of diversity, cultural and social elements, active and passive characters, functions of the images, etcetera). You can go more into depth about certain elements of your communication material. After a few interviews, you will start noticing similarities and differences. From six in-depth interviews or more, you will get useful information to move your work forwards.

The viewer judges the image and attributes meaning to it through his filter.

SOME IMAGES ATTRACT, OTHERS DON'T

Our culture is becoming increasingly visual. We are confronted with an average of 2000 visual messages daily. Images reach us even before anyone says a word or reads a thing. They can also be understood by illiterate people or those who do not speak the language. So how do you use the power of images? Attracting attention is the first inevitable step in the communication process. Whoever wants to draw the attention of an ethnic-cultural audience, should use images that make people 'stop'. The stronger the link to their own ethnic group, the greater the identification with recognisable cultural images, motifs and models from that target group. First generation newcomers are emotionally attracted to images that refer to tradition and nostalgia: the pilgrimage to Mecca, countryside images of people ploughing and working the land, milking sheep, a picnic at the river... Images of specific products from the country of origin also do the job (expensive Argan oil, the Ras El Hanout herb, locum...).

Be careful with religious symbols. Faith is too sensitive an issue to use. You can show though, in the background of your communication, that you have taken it into account, for example, by using an image showing halal food. Do you portray women with a headscarf, or without? The last few years, the scarf has become commonplace and is again considered as a symbol of identity. People want to be shown as they are, including with a headscarf. Some feel attracted to more than one culture at the same time. That would be the starting point to explore the social reality of the target group and to look for recognisable images.

Always show in your communication that you are interested in the target group and offer them a positive mirror: people that look good, who have interesting jobs, who have made it in life. Do not use them as 'wallpaper' or in a secondary role playing the lower social class. Appeal to the 'we' culture ('we Berbers', 'we Congolese') and the family feeling. Do not tell them 'I'm studying at university,' but 'Our children study at university'. Support the images with the text. Use a word or a title in their own language, use Turkish, Moroccan, Congolese names: Fatima and Rachid, Aynur and Erdal, Germaine and Firmin... Use warm and fresh colours.



UNDERSTANDING LEADS TO ACCEPTANCE

Does everybody understand your message? Or does your target group interpret it differently? Understanding depends a lot on language, but not completely. You can use images to make your message more easily understood. Not only pictures, but icons, pictograms, symbols or schemes can also be used. If you want to give extra information through images, make sure you use realistic images that are not easily misinterpreted.

I see three women. The woman to the left doesn't feel well. Does she have cancer? I think the middle one is from TV. I think the one to the right also has cancer.

(Reaction of a woman of Moroccan origin to the campaign 'Show your breasts' with Flemish celebrities Chris Lomme, Martine Tanghe and An Nelissen)

Use easily recognisable images in a context which is easy to recognise for the target audience: a picture of humidity problems in a house in a housing brochure, a living room with a Turkish interior. Images expressing certain values seem to be less vulnerable to different cultural interpretations. Group discussions have taught us that a black family in front of a hut symbolises family joy, a white woman in front of a bookshelf refers to learning and a dynamic woman with grey hair radiates health and happiness... Understanding is also determined by the font, the format or the shape.

Convince people of the quality of your offer. People from a non-Flemish background are particularly sensitive to racism and discrimination. 'Why would I report racism, it won't change a thing', 'In the job centre, they won't help me anyway or they will only give me bad work', 'I won't register for social housing because Belgians will get priority anyway'. If a message does not correspond to one's personal experiences, it will not be accepted, unless you convince

them with examples to the contrary. Do what you tell them you do. Give positive examples told by 'their own people'. Address their needs and offer concrete, useful and directly useable information. Readers like to know who is sending the message. A credible sender (for example the city council) increases the acceptability of the message.

The black lady next to me was a trained cobbler. They promised her that she would get a job easily, but when different people applied for a job, the employer chose the Europeans. Africans don't find jobs easily, even if they have a decent qualification.
(Man with Angolan roots).

Only when readers notice your message, understand and accept it, only then will they be prepared to take action. If your message does not complete these phases, it will suffer from 'noise' in the communication and this reduces the chances that people will act on your message. Adding specific cultural elements into your communication, will connect your message more to those ethnic-cultural groups and reach them better.

I would advise you not to focus exclusively on differences between the groups, but also on similarities. Develop a communication plan based on these principles and you will be able to count on the attention and approval of a wide audience. Moreover, the target groups should always be involved in the development of your communication materials. Conclusion: ethno-communication is the art of recognising diversity and avoiding the pitfalls of discrimination, exclusion and stigmatisation.

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