



Birth room images: What they tell us about childbirth. A discourse analysis of birth rooms in developed countries



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ABSTRACT

Objective: this study examined images of birth rooms in developed countries to analyse the messages and visual discourse being communicated through images.

Design: a small qualitative study using [Kress and van Leeuwen's \(2006\)](#) social semiotic theoretical framework for image analysis, a form of discourse analysis.

Setting/participants: forty images of birth rooms were collected in 2013 from Google Images, Flickr, Wikimedia Commons and midwifery colleagues. The images were from obstetric units, alongside and freestanding midwifery units located in developed countries (Australia, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States of America).

Main findings: findings demonstrated three kinds of birth room images; the technological, the 'homelike', and the hybrid domesticated birth room. The most dominant was the technological birth room, with a focus on the labour bed and medical equipment. The visual messages from images of the technological birth room reinforce the notion that the bed is the most appropriate place to give birth and the use of medical equipment is intrinsically involved in the birth process. Childbirth is thus construed as risky/dangerous.

Key conclusions and implications for practice: as images on the Internet inform and persuade society about stereotypical behaviours, the trends of our time and sociocultural norms, it is important to recognise images of the technological birth room on the Internet may be influential in dictating women's attitudes, choices and behaviour, before they enter the birth room.

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Introduction

As we move into the digital age, society is undergoing a major shift in the landscape of communication ([Kress, 2000](#)). The Internet and in particular the visual messages projected by images on the Internet have become powerful tools of persuasion, particularly in the field of public health reform ([Houts et al., 2006](#); [Bennett and Glasgow, 2009](#); [Mangold and Faulds, 2009](#)). Studies show visual images are an extremely effective way to convey highly complex and ideological concepts ([Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006](#); [Lester, 2014](#)). Educational research too, has shown visual communication is a highly effective mode of communication. This is because people learn and retain up to

30% more information from visual stimuli such as photographs, television and film. This is in contrast with only 10% of what people read ([Dale, 1969](#); [Stokes, 2002](#)). This occurs because words are processed by the short-term memory, whereas 'images go directly into the long-term memory where they are indelibly etched' ([Burmark, 2008](#), p. 5).

Recent research shows childbearing women are increasingly turning to the Internet to learn about childbirth ([Lagan et al., 2010, 2011](#)). As a consequence it can be argued that the visual messages or discourse projected from images of the birth environment in print (magazines) and screen media (television, movies and the emergent landscape of the Internet) might be influencing birthing women, in that women will bring this implicit knowledge with them to their childbirth experience. With the rapid change in how society is educating and informing itself about lifestyle, health and leisure behaviours, by tapping into the Internet, it is important to understand the communicative messages being projected through images about

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childbirth and the birth environment. The purpose of this study therefore, was to analyse the messages and visual discourse being communicated through images of birth rooms in developed countries.

Methods

Data were collected in 2013 from a variety of sources including Google Images (Google Inc., 2013), Flickr (Yahoo Inc., 2013), Wikimedia Commons (Wikimedia Foundation, 2013) and midwifery colleagues. A diverse range of images was found by using the search terms hospital birth* room*, delivery room*, birth unit design, maternity unit design, hospital labour ward birth* space* and childbirth. The search process resulted in 802,250,000 images from Google Images, 32,936 from Flickr and 588 from Wikimedia Commons, which were combined with 108 images obtained from midwifery colleagues in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Germany.

Due to the enormous size of available data (8+ million) initial efforts focused on reducing this number to a manageable size for analysis. Careful examination of the first 300 images from each of the three Internet search sites and the 108 images from colleagues (total 1008 images) was undertaken, with the aim of noting patterns and to list key ideas and recurrent themes. It was identified that the images were very similar in what they presented regardless of their source. The use of 1008 images was deemed far too many for this study, so a process of sample selection was decided upon which is described below. Purposive sampling and content analysis were used to select a subset of data that was seen to be a representative sample (Patton, 2002).

As the aim of this study was to examine images of birth rooms from the developed world, purposive sampling was used to select images of birth rooms located in developed countries (Australia, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States of America) from:

- Obstetric units (26 images),
- Alongside midwifery units (6 images) and
- Freestanding midwifery units (8 images).

These descriptors were drawn from the 'Birthplace in England study' (Rowe, 2011) and are considered to cover the different kinds of maternity units available to childbearing women in the developed world.

Content analysis of the objects within the images and the configurations of the rooms was conducted until data saturation occurred at 40 images. Fig. 1 shows the sample collection process.

This study used elements of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic theoretical framework for analysing visual images. Kress and van Leeuwen's framework organises visual language

into three primary functions; *representational*, *interactive* and *compositional*. Key elements from each of these primary functions as well as *meaning potential* (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 285) were chosen to analyse the dataset.

The analytic framework

Represented participants are the people, places and things that constitute the subject matter within the image (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). *Representational meaning* identifies the relationship between the represented participants portrayed in the images. *Narrative and conceptual processes* are the two techniques used to identify what kinds of people, places, objects, events or activities are depicted. Narrative processes present unfolding actions and are usually identified by the presence of human or quasi-human figures. Conceptual processes, on the other hand, represent the participants in terms of their class, structure, or meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Due to the lack of human or quasi-human figures this study focused on conceptual processes.

Interactive meaning is used to understand the way viewers engage and interact with images. In every reading of an image, the position or attitude of the viewer towards an image influences the way the message is 'read'. In this study, two aspects of interactional meaning were used and these were *contact* and *social distance*.

Contact is identified by the presence or absence of gaze/direct eye contact. Images where direct eye contact between the participant and viewer occurs is a 'demand' image, because the participant symbolically 'demands' the viewer enters into some kind of relationship. Alternatively, images that do not contain 'human or quasi-human participants' are called 'offer' images (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Images that make an 'offer', simply offer information or objects for contemplation (which can be accepted, or rejected).

In everyday interactions societal norms determine the distance we keep with people. Similarly, in images, social distance also influences how the viewer interacts with the image. For example, in a close up shot, where the object can almost be touched, read, used or eaten; the viewer is perceived to be intimately acquainted with the object, whereas a middle distance shot implies a social or familiar relationship. In contrast to these, a long shot where the object is positioned far away indicates a public, largely impersonal relationship (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006).

Compositional meaning is used to analyse the way the images are composed or constructed. Compositional meaning relates to the way visual cues of the elements draw the attention of the viewer, and most importantly, the way 'representational and interactive elements relate to each other and are integrated into a meaningful whole' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 176). In this study,



Fig. 1. Selection process to arrive at a heterogeneous sample.

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