



Beyond Sight & Sound: A Brief Introduction to Sensory Communication – A Review of Professor May Lwin's Lecture at MHM 2025

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Abstract

With the rapid development of digital media, contemporary communication practices are undergoing a profound transformation of “disembodiment.” Vision and hearing have gradually become the dominant channels of information transmission, while embodied senses such as smell and touch have been systematically marginalized. This article is based on the inaugural lecture of the MHM2025 special series delivered by Professor May Lwin, titled "Beyond Sight & Sound: A Brief Introduction to Sensory Communication." In the lecture, Professor Lwin emphasized that marginalized senses such as olfaction and haptics play irreplaceable roles in brand recognition, health communication, and the construction of user trust, while also reflecting cultural embeddedness and cross-cultural variation. Particularly in Asian contexts, she highlighted the urgency of developing culturally localized olfactory tools and haptic frameworks to improve the effectiveness and equity of health communication. The lecture provides both theoretical insight and practical direction for advancing sensory communication studies globally and calls for a paradigm shift toward re-embodiment in communication research.

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Keywords

Sensory communication, Olfactory memory, Haptic perception, Health communication, Cultural localization

Introduction

In an era dominated by visual screens and audio interfaces, contemporary communication practices have increasingly sidelined the roles of other senses such as smell, taste, and touch. Traditional models of communication primarily emphasize sight and hearing, resulting in a narrowed sensory scope that overlooks the multisensory nature of human perception. However, recent advances in cognitive psychology and neuromarketing suggest that sensory engagement—especially through olfactory and haptic channels—can significantly enhance memory retention, emotional resonance, and behavioral response (Krishna, 2012). Scholars have called for a paradigmatic shift toward a more inclusive, sensory-rich understanding of communication, particularly in contexts such as branding, healthcare, and education. Despite this growing interest, research on sensory communication remains underdeveloped, particularly in Asian contexts where localized cultural practices may influence sensory interpretation. This underscores the importance of Professor May Lwin's lecture, which offers both theoretical insight and practical direction for advancing sensory communication studies in the digital age.

On July 7, 2025, the first lecture in the MHM2025 special series invited Professor May Lwin—Vice Provost of Nanyang Technological University and Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information (WKWSCI)—to deliver a presentation titled “Beyond Sight & Sound: A Brief Introduction to Sensory Communication,” in which she systematically introduced the core concepts of sensory communication and emphasized the key senses long neglected in communication practice.

The Disembodiment of Sensory Experience in Digital Communication

As media technologies continue to evolve, contemporary communication practices are undergoing a profound transformation marked by "disembodiment" (Hayles, 1999). Human interaction is increasingly shifting away from physical, embodied spaces toward two-dimensional interfaces—screens and headphones have become the primary channels for receiving information. This transition has elevated visual and auditory modalities to a dominant position, while corporeal sensory channels such as olfaction, gustation, and haptics have been systematically marginalized.

As Professor May Lwin highlighted in her 2025 lecture, the media environment over the past decade has progressively detached human interaction from direct sensory experience.

Communication has become increasingly reliant on visual and auditory channels, diminishing the role of other senses in the transmission of information. As McLuhan (1964) has long emphasized, media are not neutral conduits of information but rather extensions of the human senses—the sensory logic embedded within a medium shapes both human perception and the organization of social life. When communication technologies privilege visual and auditory forms of symbolic input, senses such as touch, smell, and taste—once integral to interpersonal interaction and memory formation—are gradually displaced. This sensory imbalance contributes to cognitive biases and a diminished richness of lived experience.

Lwin, Morrin, and Krishna (2010), in their research on sensory marketing, further noted that traditional advertising studies have predominantly focused on verbal and pictorial information, often overlooking the role of acoustic, haptic, gustatory, and olfactory sensory input. They introduced the concept of the “superadditive effect,” arguing that the simultaneous stimulation of visual, auditory, and olfactory channels produces significantly stronger outcomes than single-sense activation, particularly in enhancing memory retention. Building on this, Professor Lwin drew upon Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1991) to explain the phenomenon: when information is encoded through multiple sensory modalities such as sight and smell, it activates parallel but complementary cognitive systems in the brain, thereby reinforcing memory retention and facilitating deeper meaning construction. This suggests that the exclusion of embodied senses from communication processes may in fact undermine both the depth and efficacy of communication.

The Power of Olfaction in Sensory Communication

Among the marginalized senses, olfaction stands out for its distinct neural processing pathways and cognitive functions. Unlike vision and hearing—which are primarily routed through the thalamus before reaching the neocortex—olfactory stimuli bypass this relay and project directly to the limbic system, including the amygdala and hippocampus, regions intimately involved in emotion and memory (Herz & Engen, 1996). As a result, olfaction elicits more affectively charged responses and possesses a superior capacity for long-term memory retention.

In the lecture, Professor Lwin cited the example of memory formation in infancy, emphasizing that neonates are capable of recognizing and remembering their mother’s scent not through conscious cognitive processing, but via early affective memory that is directly encoded in limbic brain regions responsible for emotion and memory (Gellrich et al., 2021). This nonverbal and nonrational sensory encoding mechanism helps explain why, even in adulthood, specific odors can vividly evoke childhood emotions or intimate autobiographical memories (Herz & Engen, 1996). Supporting this view, studies by Schaal et al. (2000) and Marlier et al. (1998) found that fetuses are capable of learning the odors of foods ingested by the mother in utero and display olfactory preferences for amniotic fluid or milk postnatally. These findings underscore the critical role of olfaction in shaping early attachment and the sense of security.

Herz (2004) further demonstrated through experimental research that, compared to visual or auditory cues, olfactory stimuli are more effective in eliciting vivid and specific autobiographical

memories, often accompanied by stronger emotional responses. This highlights the unique psychological advantage of smell in communication contexts that seek to evoke emotional resonance and enhance memory recall. Despite its significance, olfaction has been largely overlooked in contemporary digital communication practices and must be reintegrated into the core agenda of communication research.

Commercial practices have increasingly affirmed the value of multisensory communication. While brand communication has traditionally emphasized visual and auditory elements, Lwin and Wijaya (2010) argue that olfaction—due to its direct activation of emotional centers in the brain—is uniquely capable of evoking feelings of happiness, intimacy, and nostalgia, making it the most emotionally penetrative sense. In her case studies, Professor Lwin analyzed how companies such as Disneyland, the fragrance industry, and luxury automobile manufacturers like Cadillac and Rolls-Royce employ scent to craft distinctive brand experiences. For instance, Rolls-Royce recreated the leather and wood aroma of its 1965 model to evoke a sense of “heritage,” while Disneyland strategically releases the scents of popcorn and cotton candy to trigger childhood joy. Lwin also examined legal disputes in British courts surrounding olfactory trademarks, highlighting both the challenges and potential of scent as a registrable asset in marketing law. In addition, she referenced recent neuromarketing studies showing that scent, even when processed unconsciously, can alter consumer judgments, influence purchase preferences, and shape brand associations (Bone & Ellen, 1999; Herz, 2011; Krishna, Lwin, & Morrin, 2010).

Professor Lwin further situated the sense of touch within the context of health communication, highlighting that olfactory screening methods widely adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic often lacked cultural localization. Many standardized smell tests—typically based on scents such as mint or coffee derived from Western norms—may not be equally recognizable to populations in Asia. This oversight introduced a form of cultural bias in the early detection of COVID-19 symptoms in non-Western contexts, thereby exacerbating asymmetries in health information dissemination. Professor Lwin called for the development of more localized and culturally sensitive multisensory diagnostic tools to enhance both the accuracy and equity of cross-cultural health communication.

The Power of Touch in Sensory Communication

In the field of sensory communication, touch—arguably the most embodied of all perceptual channels—has long been marginalized. Nevertheless, it plays an indispensable role in brand perception, user experience, and health communication. The softness, weight, and surface texture of materials are not merely physical attributes; they serve as key cues through which consumers evaluate product quality and credibility (Peck & Wiggins, 2006). Krishna (2012) similarly observed that consumers tend to subconsciously associate tactile experiences—such as the heft of a business card, the smoothness of wrapping paper, or the density of packaging materials—with a brand’s professionalism, reliability, or premium positioning.

This mechanism has been further substantiated in research on non-diagnostic touch. Krishna and Morrin (2008) found that even when tactile attributes are unrelated to a product's core function, consumers still project these sensory experiences onto their expectations of the product's concentration, quality, or price. For example, juice stored in a rigid container is perceived as more concentrated and of higher value than the same juice in a soft package. This "associative transfer mechanism" underscores the subtle yet powerful influence of touch in shaping brand image, silently informing consumer perceptions and attitudes.

From an institutional perspective, Professor Lwin also pointed out the legal challenges surrounding tactile and olfactory trademarks within the global intellectual property system. While visual and auditory marks are widely recognized and protected under existing trademark regimes, tactile experiences—such as sensations of softness or smoothness—are often excluded from protection due to their inherent subjectivity and the difficulty of establishing objective measurement standards. This limitation not only constrains the strategic use of multisensory branding but also reflects a broader institutional neglect of non-visual sensory modalities within current legal frameworks.

With the advancement of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and wearable technologies, the application of touch in digital environments has expanded significantly. Developers are increasingly employing digital haptics—such as haptic gloves and force-feedback devices—to simulate tactile sensations in contexts like telemedicine, online retail, and remote education, thereby enhancing users' sense of presence and trust (Culbertson et al., 2018). This emerging trend invites a reexamination of the role and potential of embodied communication in the era of intelligent media.

In sum, touch is not merely one dimension of sensory experience; it is a fundamental mechanism embedded in processes of communication, cognition, and culture. Integrating touch into communication theory and design offers an opportunity to expand the conceptual scope of sensory communication while also providing practical pathways for brand differentiation, trust-building, and cultural adaptation.

Constructing Brand Meaning Through the Five Senses

At the practical level of sensory communication, Professor Lwin introduced the Five-sense Brand Evaluation Model developed by Martin Lindstrom, which systematically assesses brand performance across five sensory dimensions—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—within industries such as automotive, hospitality, and aviation (Lindstrom, 2006). The model's central premise is that the intensity of consumers' brand perception is closely tied to the brand's activation across multiple sensory channels.

Drawing on empirical studies conducted across several countries, Lindstrom (2010) further demonstrated that brands with a richer and more consistent array of sensory touchpoints are more likely to elicit emotional responses and exhibit greater longevity in terms of memory retention,

customer loyalty, and purchase intention. Building on these findings, Professor Lwin emphasized that in today's increasingly fragmented digital communication landscape, the integration of all five senses can facilitate the construction of a coherent and recognizable sensory symbol system, thereby enhancing brand recognition and fostering stronger emotional connections with users.

Using Singapore Airlines as a case study, Professor Lwin provided a systematic analysis of how multisensory strategies are employed to construct a culturally resonant and emotionally compelling brand experience. Visually, the flight attendants' uniforms incorporate iconic floral motifs and a distinctive blue-and-orange color scheme that reinforce Southeast Asian cultural imagery. Auditorily, the cabin features specially curated music to cultivate a calm and refined atmosphere. Tactile elements, such as warm moist towels and silk-textured cushions, contribute to a sense of comfort and sophistication. Olfactorily, a signature scent—"Stefan Floridian Waters"—is consistently applied across towels and cabin interiors, enhancing olfactory recognition and brand identity. Through this integrated sensory approach, Singapore Airlines has become widely recognized in the global aviation market as a brand that embodies attentiveness, elegance, and reliability.

Further research has substantiated the effectiveness of this multisensory branding strategy. Krishna and Schwarz (2014) found that brands offering a greater number of sensory touchpoints are more likely to elicit positive affective responses from consumers. Schmitt's (1999) experiential marketing theory likewise emphasizes that sensory stimuli not only influence perceptual judgments but also play a significant role in emotional regulation and behavioral decision-making. This effect is particularly salient in high-contact industries such as aviation, hospitality, and specialty coffee, where the coordinated activation of multiple senses enhances consumers' sense of immersion, thereby strengthening the brand's long-term impact.

Conclusion

In an increasingly disembodied media environment, Professor Lwin's lecture offers a theoretical response to the diminishing role of bodily perception in contemporary communication by proposing a framework of re-embodiment grounded in the philosophy of the senses. Through a focused examination of olfaction and touch—senses that have long been marginalized in media studies—she argues that multisensory integration is not merely a strategy for enhancing communicative efficacy, but a critical entry point for understanding the structures of human perception and patterns of social behavior.

Crucially, Professor Lwin calls for a departure from the visually centric orientation that has dominated Western communication paradigms, advocating instead for a culturally sensitive and pluralistic approach to sensory research. Drawing on Asian contexts, she illustrates how olfactory memory is deeply embedded within cultural practices, how the meaning of social touch varies across cultures, and how the development of localized olfactory tools is urgently needed. These examples collectively underscore the imperative that the globalization of communication studies must be anchored in a nuanced appreciation of sensory diversity and cultural specificity.

Thus, the call to return to the body and revalue the senses is not a merely expansion of experiential dimensions; it constitutes a structural critique of the “sensory impoverishment” characteristic of the digital communication age. It also represents a deliberate effort to extend the theoretical boundaries of communication studies. In a future marked by shifting and fragmented sensory ecologies, only by repositioning the neglected senses at the center of theory and practice can we reimagine and reconstruct the totality of human communicative experience. This, as Professor Lwin’s lecture makes clear, is the central scholarly proposition she advances—and it offers a critical direction for the future of sensory communication research.

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recipient of the Fulbright ASEAN scholar award. May is a Fellow of the International Communication Association. Amongst the awards she has received are Public Administration Medal Silver Award from the President of Singapore, Ogilvy Foundation Award for Academic Leadership and the 2019 Outstanding Applied Communication Scholar Award by the International Communication Association (ICA).

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