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## Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

Editors

Uta Russmann and Jakob Svensson

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Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical  
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Editorial

## Introduction to Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

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### Abstract

This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* focuses attention on the shift towards visual images on social media as well as the transformation of visual communication which has occurred within the online ecology of social media platforms. The sharing of images is becoming an integral part of the social media experience today, and given that social media platforms are the prime locus for sociability—at least among young people in the West—this shift towards visuals arguably transforms how we relate to each other and the world around us, as well as how we perceive and construct our sense of self. For researchers, this raises conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges. This thematic issue presents six articles as well as a book review on visual communication in social media focusing on developing a conceptual apparatus and precise definitions of objects and practices of study as well as contributions that address and discuss the methodological challenges as well as their potential solutions. The idea was to synergize research from a wide variety of communication-related disciplines on this rather new topic.

### Keywords

images; Instagram; Facebook; practices; qualitative methods; Twitter; visual communication; visual social media

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges”, edited by Uta Russmann (FH Wien der WKW University of Applied Sciences for Management & Communication, Austria) and Jakob Svensson (Malmö University, Sweden).

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### 1. Introduction

With the rise of YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat there has been a shift towards visual images in the ecology of social media. Some of the most popular social media platforms in terms of usage primarily focus on visuals such as pictures and videos. More ubiquitous platforms like Facebook and Twitter have followed and highlighted visual images in their services as well. Indeed, the sharing of images is becoming an integral part of the social media experience today, and given that social media platforms are the prime locus for sociability—at least among young people in the West—this shift towards visuals arguably transforms how we relate to each other and the

world around us, as well as how we perceive and construct our sense of self. This shift in social media practices is, according to Highfield and Leaver (2016) “requiring researchers to broaden and diversify the way social media is examined and addressed” (p. 49), as until recently, most research online focused on “text-only aspects of online communication or the structural elements like hyperlinks” (p. 48).

The visual image is a unique object (of research). Visual images are often understood as additional modes of communication complementing written or spoken text—they help the viewer to understand a message faster. Visual images also create meaning on their own and they often incorporate multiple meanings (Hand, 2017).



Visual images suggest reality, create causal relationships and foster interaction (Fahmy, Bock, & Wayne, 2014). Yet, to view this shift towards visual images on social media as merely the return of visual communication, would be to miss the point. Today social media platforms are becoming more multimodal as they now host pictures, videos, hashtags, emoticons as well as written text. On top of this, social media platforms also allow visual images to be framed, filtered and edited before being distributed. Hence, not only do online visuals add additional information to a message and elaborate on “who we are”, they also afford highly strategic and reflexive communication in order to give a specific impression of the sender, an object or a place among other things.

This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* focuses attention on the shift towards visual images on social media as well as the transformation of visual communication which has occurred within the online ecology of social media platforms. This raises conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges for researchers. For example, how do the online contexts of social media platforms transform visual communication and in which contexts is this particularly fruitful to study? What are the best practices for studying online visuals and how do we delineate and define images as an object of study or unit of analysis? For example, should we conceive an online visual image as static photography or as a locus of interaction?

To systemize approaches to visual communication on social media platforms as well as the articles in this thematic issue of *Media and Communication*, the framework by Rose (2016; first published in 2001) is helpful (for similar approaches see also Müller & Geise, 2015, as well as Laestadius, 2017). Rose (2016) differentiates the sites “at which the meanings of an image are made” (p. 24): The site(s) of production (referring to where an image is made); the site(s) of the image itself (referring to its visual content); the site(s) of its circulation (referring to where an image travels) as well as site(s) where the image encounters its spectators or users, something Rose (2016) labels audiencing. At each of these sites, there are three modalities (aspects): the technological, the compositional, and the social (Rose, 2016). As with all analytical delineations, these sites may intersect and overlap (as shown in some of the articles included in this thematic issue). The site of the (material) production (process) examines the conditions of origin and the production structures of visual communication (Müller & Geise, 2015). It is trying to understand when, why and how people create and use a visual image (Rose, 2016). For instance, to explore the practices of how visual images are introduced, authors of this thematic issue directly engaged with the producers themselves through interviews and ethnographies. These production aspects also interrelate with the affordances of the platforms used as highlighted in Rose’s conceptual framework. The site of the image itself and its content explores the meaning of the visual image by examining the substance as well as the motif

of the image (Müller & Geise, 2015; Rose, 2016). The main question here is, what is displayed in the picture and how?

Our own work in the field of visual social media mainly focuses on the site of the production and the site of the image itself. The methodological framework we have developed is theory-based, investigating use of Instagram for the purpose of strategic communication (see Russmann & Svensson, 2016). It asks whether organizations that use Instagram focus on one-way information and self-presentation, or whether they engage in two-way communication to establish and cultivate a relationship between themselves and the public. For instance, we have conducted a content analysis of postings, including the visual image, its captions and comments, on the Instagram accounts of Swedish political parties (Filimonov, Russmann, & Svensson, 2016; Russmann & Svensson, 2017).

The site(s) of circulation concern why and how visual images are shared and distributed across a platform or platforms. With the shift towards digital media, the importance of research on the circulation of visual images has increased tremendously, not least due to the rise and importance of algorithms mining users’ behaviour in order to tailor the circulation of online content (such as advertising for example). This also has a bearing on the site(s) of the audience, which deals with examining forms, structures and processes of the perception and reception of visual images as well as its effects on the audience (Müller & Geise, 2015). It is important for social media researchers to ask, “how people make sense of the visual in using social media” (Hand, 2017, p. 215)—it is about finding answers to questions of who interprets how which visual images with what effects.

The articles presented in this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* primarily focus on the production of images and their content, and to a lesser degree on the circulation of the visual images and their audience. However, as mentioned above, the four sites intersect and the articles also address the challenges that this brings for researchers. All the authors approach their topics qualitatively, but collectively they demonstrate a variety of different methods. What we can see is that when “we think qualitatively about specific images, observable streams and images, particular contexts of visual social media use and engagement, or the meaningful activities of producing, consuming and distributing images, then we tend toward the recalibration of established interpretative methods in the social sciences and humanities” (Hand, 2017, p. 227). Authors of this thematic issue underline this by relying on content, semiotic and discourse analyses as well as interviews and participant observation.

A question, which has not been addressed in this thematic issue, but needs further discussion, is the ethical commitment of researchers (see also Highfield & Leaver, 2016). During the process of putting this thematic issue together, authors and reviewers addressed this topic

on several occasions. Of course, ethics is always a topic when it comes to the use of an individual's data for research purposes, including visual data. The question is not only how we collect, research, store and archive data, but also to what extent do we display the visuals of others in our presentations and publications. The latter is particularly important as visuals (as discussed above) provide another, arguably richer, source of information than written text, which may raise different privacy concerns (see Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Working on this thematic issue, a frequently asked question was whether we as researchers have the right to display the visual data of our objects of investigation (see also the discussion in Laestadius, 2017). You will find that some authors have not included the analysed visual images whereas others have. Of the authors who included visual images in their articles, some displayed them fully and some depicted sensitive "things" in the visual image. In these cases, the producers of the visual images (pictures) themselves had deliberately made them accessible to the public across different platforms—often without password protection. Still, it should be discussed to which extent they were aware of the possible in-depth analyses of their pictures in this academic setting. On the other hand, uploading visuals online often entails losing control over the visuals, how they will travel and in which contexts they will be seen. Hence, should faces be glitched or blackened in general? As one reviewer highlighted: "Individual users might object to having their photos used without consent, others might not want their account to be given attention to, others might be pleased by it and explicitly ask to be mentioned by name". The authors of the articles of this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* have handled this topic differently, and we as editors have not provided any guidelines other than the guide provided by the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee (see [https://aoir.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/aoir\\_ethics\\_graphic\\_2016.pdf](https://aoir.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/aoir_ethics_graphic_2016.pdf) and <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>).

## 2. Articles in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue invited contributions on visual communication in social media that focus on developing a conceptual apparatus and precise definitions of objects and practices of study as well as contributions that address and discuss the methodological challenges and their potential solutions. The idea was to synergize research from a wide variety of communication-related disciplines on this rather new topic.

Åsa Thelander and Cecilia Cassinger (2017) start off the thematic issue by exploring how we relate to and perceive a place through Instagram images. The authors explore the place branding campaign of the Swedish municipality Landskrona involving Instagram takeover to imagining the city differently. Instagram take-over means that different citizens managed the city's Instagram account and, hence, giving the follower's an impression of their

view of the city. The study does not focus on images themselves, but on the practices of photography through everyday communication technology. The authors aim to develop an understanding of how non-professional visual images are produced, used, and shared on Instagram for strategic purposes to form and strengthen a place's brand. Åsa Thelander and Cecilia Cassinger (2017) use a practice approach to photography where the focus is on the performative aspect. In-depth interviews were carried out with participants in the Instagram takeover project. The procedure can be defined as photo-elicitation interviewing; implying that the photographs are serving as input for the interviews, although they are not analyzed *per se*. Based on the photo-elicitation interviews, the authors form and compare three ideal types of performances labelled as the acting tourist, the Instagrammer, and the professional. Åsa Thelander and Cecilia Cassinger (2017) conclude that when using Instagram for branding purposes it does not necessarily mean that novel visual images are generated, but that they are choreographed according to the affordances of Instagram as a medium.

In addition, Karin Liebhart and Petra Bernhardt's (2017) article focuses on Instagram, particularly its strategic use as a campaign tool in the 2016 Austrian federal presidential election by analyzing the Instagram account of the successful candidate Alexander Van der Bellen. The authors focus on the visual component of digital storytelling. Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) used an image type analysis in order to reconstruct underlying selection and presentation routines as well as visual strategies. The image type analysis, a research method that was originally developed for the analysis of photo-journalistic routines and selection criteria, allows researchers to classify visual content as specific image types according to their motifs. The authors examined the broad range of visual imagery from photographs, graphics, animated graphics (gifs), image-text combinations as well as short videos that were posted on Alexander Van der Bellen's Instagram account during the election campaign. The study identifies different visual image types that are central to strategic visual self-presentation, for example, of political candidates.

The article by Irmgard Wetzstein (2017) focuses on Twitter and the visual discourse of the 2014 Hong Kong protests (the so-called umbrella movement) on the widely used hashtag #hokongprotest. Using a documentary image interpretation, the article explores visual thematic patterns, depicted actors and relations among actors, the visual perspectives used as well as visual image sources and narrative strategies. The aim of the empirical study is to analyze the way discourses are formed and structured through visual images and how the visual documentation of a protest movement is shared through Twitter. The study is based on: a) an understanding of visuals as cultural products, which provide knowledge about the "world" and generate meaning by making things visible or unseen, as well as b) on a con-

cept of discourse referring to the sociology of knowledge. The concept of discourse aims to grasp collective knowledge repertoires, as Irmgard Wetzstein (2017) describes it, “thereby using a broad understanding of knowledge including daily-life theories, internalized everyday practices, stereotypes and routines”.

Collaborative meaning-making of visual images on social media platforms is also in the focus of Maria Schreiber’s article (2017), albeit with a focus on the individual. Visual communication on and in social media is understood as practices with pictures on platforms. The author introduces a framework, which aims to identify practices, pictures and platforms in order to understand habitual patterns of picture sharing and meaning-making within social media. Practices, i.e. the context and framing of the picture, are analyzed through qualitative methods such as interviews and ethnographic accounts. Pictures are examined on the levels of content and compositional structure. Interfaces, defaults and affordances are considered when focusing on platforms. To introduce and test the framework, two screenshots from Instagram and Facebook are analyzed on all three levels. Screenshots contain and show communicative practices and give us access to an in-depth understanding of mediated and multimodal communication.

Mona Kasra (2017) discusses the implications of social media image activism in her article. The article focuses on the meaning (formation) and impact of digital-network images that increasingly function as a novel venue for political advocacy and engagement. Therefore, Mona Kasra (2017) undertakes an in-depth analysis of the 2011 self-published nude self-portrait of Aliaa Elmahdy, a young Egyptian woman. She applies semiotic analysis using Barthes’ (1980) theoretical concept of the rhetoric. However, the meaning of Elmahdy’s image is also dependent on the engagement of others through their multiple and immediate comments. Here, the author uses the concept of participatory narratives. Participatory narratives reflect a dialectic relationship between individuals and digital technology that takes expression across social media. Her findings highlight the autonomous and participatory nature of digital-network images and their role in perpetuating activism. The online circulation of digital-networked images inspires ever-changing and overarching narratives, broadening the contextual scope around which visual images are traditionally viewed.

The exploration of self-portraits or “selfies” in the research process is also addressed in the last article. Katie Warfield (2017) is taking a different, rather “open” approach to studying visual social media when compared with the previous contributions. Based on a pilot study of selfie-taking processes through the methods of phenomenological interviews and photo elicitation, the author reflects on her research troubles and limitations and she re-materializes one of her interviews using new materialist methods (intra-views and post-human visual methods) to reveal data that would

otherwise not have been evidenced via her original more humanist-oriented methods. This reflection shows how the material-discursive-affective assemblage, or the arrangement of the interview room, such as the lighting in the room or the available props in the room, the technologies of data recording, the cellphone camera and the available imaging filters, and embodied interactions of the participants all matter in the production of research data. Thereby, the author highlights the importance of looking at the intra-action or entanglement of the different research entities such as participants, research methodology, recording tools, data, and researcher. Specifically, when it comes to exploring selfie-taking processes it is not enough to only look at the spoken data. The article ends by highlighting the benefits (for both data collection and reflection) of a post-human approach to intra-views and new materialist informed photo elicitation.

In addition, Laura Kerslake and Rupert Wegerif (2017) provide a book review of Marcel Danesi’s book *The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet*. The book review gives a short critical overview of Danesi’s new work and highlights the central role of emoji in online visual communication.

In summary, the articles within this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* provide new perspectives and the authors demonstrate how conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges in visual social media research can be addressed and overcome. Through the use of qualitative approaches, the authors provide in-depth analyses of (the use of) visual content and the meaning of such visual images. It is important for the research process that researchers keep in mind that these analyses are often more time consuming than those of text-based social media communication. These articles add to our understanding of visual communication in the age of social media. However, they also raise new questions and call for further theoretical and empirical research such as on the influence of different affordances. As this thematic issue shows, the questions and the methods used by researchers in the analysis of visual communication in the age of social media vary considerably and are strongly influenced by their respective professional origins (see also Müller & Geise, 2015). This openness in this rather new research field has to be perceived as being a strength (Müller & Geise, 2015), and a continuing interdisciplinary conversation on these matters will help to better capture, reveal and understand the production, the visual image itself as well as its impact, its circulation on social media, and the audience’s image-related practices. We hope this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* will contribute and stimulate such academic conversations.

#### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Brand New Images? Implications of Instagram Photography for Place Branding

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to develop an understanding of what happens when Instagram photography is used for branding a place. Questions raised are which photographs are taken and published, does the practice result in novel ways of representing a place, and, in turn the image of a place. A practice approach to photography is used where focus is directed to the performative aspect of photography. Fifteen qualitative interviews were conducted with participants in an Instagram takeover project concerning their photographs. The study shows that adopting a communication strategy based on visual social media is dependent on the participants' competencies and that it is embedded in everyday life. Moreover, the participants' photographic practices were found to be influenced by social conventions, which resulted in the city being imagined differently by different participants. To use visual social media such as Instagram for branding purposes does not necessarily mean that novel images are generated, but that they are choreographed according to the conditions of Instagram as medium.

### Keywords

Instagram; photography; place branding; practice; social media; strategic communication; visual

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Place branding strategies commonly incorporate visual social media to promote favorable, or counter negative, images of cities, regions and nations (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013). Visual social media applications and smartphones enable non-professionals to produce their own images of the city which are assumed to provide a more authentic and innovative image of a place than professional photographs produced for strategic reasons. There are great expectations regarding the effects of visual social media campaigns on citizen engagement in community life and to change and improve the image of a city. For instance, the Swedish municipality of Land-

skrona seeks to alter negative images of the city of Landskrona through a so-called Instagram takeover, in which a different citizen manages the account each week to represent his or her view of the city.

Strategies in which everyday practice is used for a particular aim are increasingly used to promote places, but, so far, critical examinations of such strategies are rare. To a great extent, place brands tend to be understood through visual artefacts. The problem is, however, as Kavaratzis (2009, p. 27) points out, that the visual is commonly understood as "elements of branding such as the incorporation of a new slogan and, at best, the design of advertising campaigns around those visual elements". In contrast, the concern of this article is not with the rep-



representational aspects of a place brand, but with gaining understanding of the change in power dynamics with regards to how such representations are produced. Practices on visual social media platforms challenge the distinction between professional and amateur and strategic and non-strategic. In order to explore this particular dynamic, this article is informed by practice theory taking into account the individual, social and technical aspects of how photos are taken and shared. The most distinguishing feature of the Instagram platform, for instance, is that it enables non-professional actors to enhance photos by adding a filter that gives them a glow and makes them appear professional. In Instagram takeovers, participants use media that they are familiar with, and draw on previous experiences and practices embedded in everyday life.

The aim of this article is to develop an understanding of how non-professional images are produced and used in the photo-sharing platform Instagram for strategic purposes to strengthen a place brand. The study is based on a single case of a city branding campaign involving Instagram-takeover in the Swedish municipality of Landskrona. The study contributes with knowledge on how everyday photography is included in communication strategies and what it means for the practice. Moreover, the study also contributes with glimpses of an emerging Instagram culture of taking and sharing images of place brands and the changing power between communication professionals and laymen in forming and sustaining a place image.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In previous research, photography has predominantly been approached from a representational perspective, i.e. focusing on how photographs reflect ideas, visions and places, etc. Less attention has been paid to the practice of taking and sharing photographs. The practice turn has influenced many other fields of studies for instance organizational studies, tourist studies, consumer studies, but has been relatively absent from studies of photography (Gomez Cruz & Lehmuskallio, 2016). However, the benefits of applying this approach to further the understanding of photography has been emphasized by several researchers (see for instance Chalfen, 2016; Gomez Cruz & Lehmuskallio, 2016; Pink, 2011; Van House, 2011). Research adopting a practice approach to photography is generally underpinned by a few basic assumptions, such as the role of structure for agency, the performativity of social life, that practices are collectively organized and coordinated by shared understandings, procedures and engagements, and that practices are relational and change over time. A few notable examples of studies that approach photography from a practice perspective can be found within sociology of consumption research tradition (Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007) and research informed by science and technology studies (STS) (Van House, 2009). Drawing on a combination of STS and non-representational geography (Thrift, 1999),

Larsen (2008) argues that everyday photography converges with tourist photography, which he broadly defines as an embodied social performance and “leisurely picturing practices conducted away from home” (p. 143). He further states that tourist photography is “bound up with performing social relations” turning places into “dramaturgical landscapes” and that digital tourist photography is “networked with everyday communication technologies” (Larsen, 2008, p. 143). In line with Larsen (2008), this study is concerned with the hybrid *practices* of photography and not the photographs. The focus of research is thus the doings of digital or smartphone photography and in particular the material production, display, and circulation of photographs. Digital photography is here viewed as, to quote Larsen (2008) once more, a “complex amalgam of technology, discourse, and practice” (p. 143; see also Orlikowski, 2007; Schatzki, 1996). In addition, to take photographs with a smartphone is a practice that is often enacted in the course of everyday life guided by social conventions and norms. Hence, photographic practice is viewed as combinations of mental frames, artefacts, technology, discourse, values and symbols (Orlikowski, 2007; Schatzki, 1996). A particular combination of these different building blocks constitutes practice, which can be captured through the “routinized ways in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250, in Postill, 2010). Edensor writes that “When stepping into particular stages, preexisting discursive, practical, embodied norms and concrete guiding by guides and signs usually choreograph tourists” (Edensor, 2001, p. 71). The practice studied here, to take photographs for instrumental purposes and publish them on an official and open Instagram account means that an everyday practice is put into a new context. We do not know if and which “pre-existing discursive, practical, embodied norms” guide the participants’ practice.

### 2.1. Photography as Everyday Practice

In order to understand digital photography as everyday practice we have turned to a classical study of how private family photo albums are produced (Chalfen, 1987). Chalfen (1987) argues that photographs are embedded in a communication process that includes five communication events that must be taken into consideration when analyzing photography. Hence, it is a communicative perspective on practices of picturing. First, *the planning event* which involves when photographs should be made, who makes them, what kind of equipment is used, what kind of preparation in terms of knowledge is needed for taking photographs. Second, *on camera shooting* includes the camera technique. Third, *behind the camera shooting*, means who is included or excluded from a photograph, the kind of settings, environments, activities, events, systematic arrangements, posing, social relationships, verbal instructions used in order to get

a feeling of managed presentations. Fourth, *the editing event*, if and how images are arranged or rearranged and finally, *the exhibition event*, how it is socially organized, who initiates it, promotes or restricts it and when it takes place. The components can be used to describe the operation and how an impression and event are formed into a visual code—the photograph.

The communicative events developed by Chalfen (1987) concern analogue photography but there are reasons to believe that the communicative events are relevant when digital technology is used. Chalfen (2002) states that camera technology does not control the practice. However, conditions for the activities are different. Van House (2011) concludes that more photographs are taken. Prior planning is reduced and photographs are taken more spontaneously, particularly when camera phones and smartphones are used. Everyday life situations are being photographed, so what is regarded as photo worthy has changed. Software makes it possible to easily change, remove and improve photographs. New technology makes it possible to archive large numbers of photographs. It is also possible to share photographs to an extent that has never previously been possible. Given these facts, researchers tend to overemphasize the changes due to new technology. New functions and behavior are claimed to have replaced old ones. They appear as new media and imply new behavior, which is in sharp contrast to and different from previous practices. However, empirical studies of photography (Pink, 2011) point to the fact that “old” ideas, practices and technique are integrated or exist parallel to the new ones.

Digital photography has also been paired with social media applications such as Instagram. Instagram allows the user to instantly share their images on a social networking site. Moreover, it provides the user with a number of digital photographic filters to use and possibilities for other manipulations, for instance cropping. It provides the user with easily used tools but it is also a constrained environment (Zappavigna, 2016) as there are restrictions, for instance, on image dimension. The types of image created have been studied and several scholars have pointed out that the “selfie” is the most common type of image (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) suggest that selfietaking, which is a social media related practice, has consequences for photography in other domains of life, i.e. tourist photography. The focus of tourist photography has moved from the extra-ordinary to a focus on social relations and a shift towards the personal to self-expression and identity formation. Hence, photography practice takes place in a networked society, and is influenced by social media practices. So far there are few studies of the role of Instagram for photographic practice.

### 3. Methodology and Empirical Material

This study is focused on photographic practices used for visual social media and their role for strengthen a place

brand. Interviews are used, as expression about action is important, and to elucidate how the participants make meaning of the photo task. Before giving a more in-depth presentation of the interviews and the analysis, the case will be presented.

#### 3.1. An Instagram Takeover Project

This study is based on an Instagram takeover project carried out by the mid-sized Swedish city Landskrona, situated on the south-west coast of Sweden. Like many other European cities formerly dominated by shipbuilding, the city has been forced to find alternative industries and new values for its identity. Social problems are well documented and a few incidents (assaults and honor killings) have gained enormous negative media attention. A study carried out in 2012 by the city administration, revealed that common associations of Landskrona, among those living and working there, were unemployment, criminality and multiculturalism. In order to improve the city’s reputation, a social media initiative was launched on December 3, 2012. The official Instagram account of the city is controlled by a different citizen each week to portray the city through his or her images.

Participants are recruited on a voluntary basis. Instructions for the participants are few, but have been developed during the progress of the project. Initially, restrictions on photographing people were communicated.

The project is anticipated to increase engagement and participation in city life among local actors, ultimately generating more positive associations of Landskrona city. Representations are expected to be personal and more of an inside perspective.

#### 3.2. Photo-Elicitation Interviews

In-depth interviews were carried out with participants in the project. The photographs the participants had taken and published on the official Instagram account served as input for the interviews. The procedure can be defined as photo-elicitation interviewing, implying that the photographs are important for the conversation but they are not analyzed per se (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). The experience of partaking and how the participants plan and perform the task were discussed. The communicative events defined by Chalfen were included. To acknowledge the role of structure, we asked explicitly about experience of the technology (digital cameras, Instagram and other social and visual media). Questions about conventions were asked and the interviewees also spontaneously discussed “normal” behavior and, explicitly, dos and don’ts. The guided conversation took from 45 minutes up to one hour depending on the number of photographs the interviewee had taken. All interviews were recorded and have been transcribed.

The Instagram takeover project had been running for eight months when the interviews were carried out. Almost thirty citizens had participated. Half of this group

were selected for an interview. In order to be able to understand practice and different practices we wanted a heterogeneous group of interviewees, i.e. a strategic selection. Participants of different ages were selected as this can indicate different experiences of photography and familiarity with social media. Participants with obviously different ways of representing the city were selected. The result was that fifteen participants were contacted, and they all agreed to an interview.

The analysis can be described as taking place in three steps, i.e. categorization, comparison, dimensionalization (Spiggle, 1994). The communicative events developed by Chalfen (1987) functioned as a frame for the analysis while the meaning and performance of the different steps were derived from the interviews. There were also ideas we had not foreseen that informed the analysis. For instance, the well-articulated guiding principles for their performance were unexpected, and therefore the analysis was expanded to cater for this important aspect. Hence, categories were formed based on theory as well as derived from the interviews.

Those categories were compared and organized, i.e. dimensionalization has been made. The different codes were grouped into more conceptual classes; categories were made (Spiggle, 1994). Differences were compared to form ideal types. Ideal types are defined by Weber as an abstract analytical construct, which will never be discovered in this specific form (Aronovitch, 2012). Ideal types are constructed and named by the researcher and are based on selected characteristics. The interpretation and way to perform the task as well as ideals used for discussing their way of performing are used for distinguishing between the three ideal types. The point is never to classify individual interviewees to any ideal type rather to present different performances (Halkier, 2011). Hence, unique characteristics and differences are emphasized. To identify and present performance in terms of ideal types is a way to illustrate the social constructed practice of taking photographs.

#### 4. Practices of Instagram Photography

From the interviewees' expression about photography we formed three ideal types labelled as the acting tourist, the Instagrammer, and the professional. Below, each ideal type is described and discussed in relation to the overarching aim of reimagining the city. The practice tied to each type is also exemplified by a photograph.

##### 4.1. The Acting Tourist

I did not put too much effort into it in terms of planning, but thought I should visit this, this and this. It should not be a boring week....In a way I felt I should show my favorite places. (Ingrid)

The acting tourist performs as vicarious tourists for whom they want to present a favorable image in order

to counterbalance the negative reputation of the city. Hence, they perform the activity as being tourists and relate to tourist discourses to make meaning of their practice. Therefore, this ideal type is called acting tourists.

They use their smartphones and seem perfectly fine with using this device, as they normally use it for taking photos. They plan the photo task in advance. An afternoon or daytrip is planned to be able to visit selected places and the activity is often undertaken with a friend.

Their imagined audience comprises citizens and tourists. It is a built image, consisting of landmarks as public reference points which they favour (see Figure 1). They are aware of the fact that landmarks are used in place marketing, but according to themselves, they add a personal touch to these familiar objects by using filters. However, their preferences for the built environment oriented towards older buildings and landmarks means a past temporal orientation. They combine the landmarks with photographs representing activities they appreciate, food and drink for instance. Taken together, it is similar to the combination of photographs used for place marketing (Warnaby, 2015). Moreover, their interpretation of the task and imagined audience resembles the duty of the marketing and communication department of the city. The acting tourist is annoyed by other participants who focus too much on themselves and use the official account for personal branding.

The acting tourist has adopted a realist perspective on photography. This epistemological standpoint guides their practice. According to Chalfen (2002) non-professional photographs are guided by evidentiary ideals. Images are made to prove or to reaffirm an event. In this case participants of the project discuss motives



**Figure 1.** The photographer wants to show the attractiveness of the city by using one of the most famous sculptures in the city.



and the true nature of the photographs and how the photographs resemble the object. The photographs taken inform about a place.

The acting tourist takes full advantage of digital technique when it comes to taking photographs. In accordance with their ideal, filters are used to improve a positive experience or add a personal touch, but never to the extent that reality is altered. Retro style filters are disliked. The iconic character of photographs guides them and is also an appreciated feature that seems to be important for them.

The possibility to show the positive side means that as many as ninety photographs are published during their week. They are merely variants of the same motives because they are regarded as a way to present a rich image of the city.

To conclude, the acting tourist activates knowledge and experience from being a tourist to perform the photo task. They explicitly compare their photographs to tourist photography and use it as their point of reference and ideal. Hence, it is the practice of tourist they rely on. They have a preference for the picturesque; landscapes and buildings in a past temporal orientation are some of the characteristics. A few of the conventions of the media application are taken into account, for instance the large audience and the ideal of being instant. They expressed their annoyance over participants who published a photograph obviously taken in the winter during the summer. Their past temporal orientation seems to contradict the instant character of Instagram. But for the acting tourist instant is related to when the photograph is taken and published.

#### 4.2. The Instagrammer

The private and this task blur. I can easily upload photographs on my work account during the weekend when I am logged in. I have a smartphone and I enjoy using it. You get such a direct response. (Sofia)

The Instagrammer activates knowledge from social media for making sense of the photo task. This group consists of highly experienced social media users. They have several Instagram accounts, for private as well as for professional use. Therefore, the photo task is easily integrated into their everyday use of social media. The smartphone camera is used, which is the equipment they normally use, for taking photographs. Moreover, it is in line with their ideal of instant photography. "Instagram photographs should not be technically perfect".

They want to counterbalance the negative image of Landskrona, but compared with the acting tourist, the Instagrammer focuses on activities and people rather than buildings and picturesque views. They want to contribute to a different view of the city by informing others about on-going projects and events. They want to photograph more of the ordinary practitioners of the city, or to borrow from De Certeau (1984), the elementary form of

experience of the city. The function of photography is merely to share a moment based on their self-interest. Hence, their appraisal of mundane worklife distinguishes the Instagrammer from the other types of user. However, the evidentiary role of photographs guides them. They are still taking photographs to inform viewers.

Spontaneous, natural, relaxed and real are words used for describing what they want to achieve. Therefore, they do not plan the photo task. Their preference for the spontaneous and mundane and their acceptance of imperfect photographs are ways to obtain a glimpse of an unexpected view of the city and accomplish authenticity and trustworthiness for their view (see Figure 2). They used filters but reflected on their use of filters and even #hashtagged photographs with "no filter". In contrast to the other groups, external filters are downloaded. Hence, they are not restricted to Instagram as a service, they take advantage of techniques available in social media.

Facebook is often used as an example of the blurring of boundaries between front and back regions of social lives. Uimonen (2013) claims that this is illusionary, as existing borders are maintained and enforced. Social norms of correct and accepted publication are actualized. The strategists were reluctant to display their private life and did not want to show their friends or family, or details of their private life. Hence, it is a personal but not private image they want to present during their week.

The Instagrammers argue that their main audience consists of followers of the account, i.e. users of Instagram, not necessarily geographically confined to Landskrona. The Instagrammer has the self-imposed objective to increase the number of followers for the account during their week. Based on their experience from Ins-



**Figure 2.** The photographer wants to emphasize positive everyday life in the city.

stagram and other social media, they apply strategies for increasing the number of followers. Their strategies include using #hashtags and geotags, i.e. tools are used that are within social media. Social media rules also guide the number of photographs they publish. One per day is their goal, as too many are disturbing for the followers. Moreover, it is unthinkable to publish old photographs.

It is important to generate positive reactions, i.e. likes. They believe it is well-known and picturesque views of Landskrona and photographs of well-known people with many followers that generate likes. They check the account and their photographs several times per day, or every day during their week. It is a kind of immediate feedback on their photographs. On the one hand, likes are stimulating for themselves, and on the other hand likes are seen as a reward for the followers. "You should publish photographs that your followers appreciate". The quest of achieving many likes guides their selection of photographs to publish. Their ideals of photography seem to clash with their self-imposed objective. Therefore, they are not pursuing their idea to present an interesting and personal image of Landskrona, they happen to chase likes and publish photographs attractive for a broad audience. Accordingly, controversial photographs or texts are avoided.

Social media conventions guide their performance and their preferences for photographs. But the fact that the Instagrammer publishes the photographs on an official Instagram account entails ambivalence. The goal to generate likes and increase the number of followers is not compatible with their preferences for the personal, mundane and authentic.

#### 4.3. The Professional

My purpose was to be a little subversive and present my picture of Landskrona. I'm quite allergic to doing the same thing as everyone else. But it was not so popular. People thought I was annoying and I did not meet expectations. My photographs did not generate an awful lot of likes. (Johan)

The professional relates the task to their professional knowledge, being a professional photographer. This group is very confident with the task and have a highly individual interpretation and approach to the task.

Their guiding principle is to explore and interpret rather than depicting a place. Some of them have an idea of a theme or themes they want to explore and display (see Figure 3). They do not think in terms of audiences of the Instagram account. They are focused on the photographs and their creation of photographs. The critical eye seems to be an important guiding principle. Moreover, in contrast to the other two types, the professionals make photographs rather than take them (Chalfen, 2002). Their epistemological perspective is different, as they regard photographs, and particularly their photographs, as a construct made by them to evoke a response.

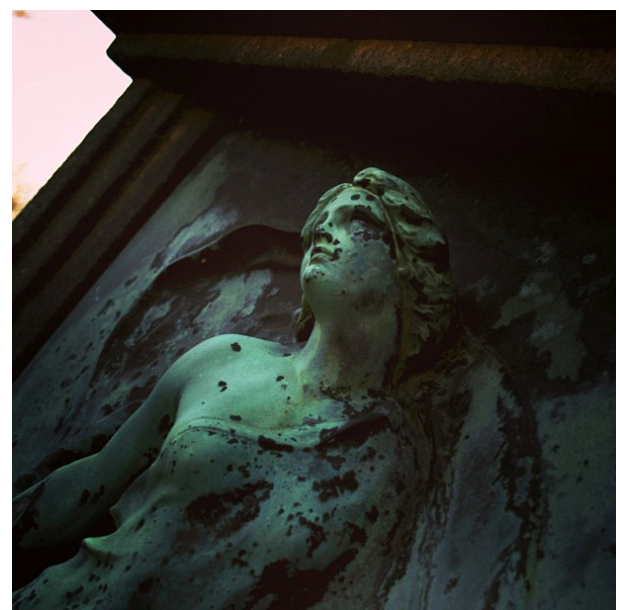
The professionals circumvent the limitations of smartphones and Instagram. They use their professional digital camera for the photo task, as smartphones cameras are considered to be limited and simple. The professional uses all available filters and ways of editing available for the professional. Their use is a careful consideration and is undertaken in regard to what they want to explore and emphasize.

Every photograph published is a careful consideration. If the photograph was taken today, last week or last year it does not matter. The instant character of Instagram is ignored. Their own ideas are privileged. The combinations of photographs during a day are also planned as are the comments to the photographs. They plan their publication as an exhibition.

This group are aware of likes and consider them a bonus. They recognize that their photographs do not follow the conventions of Instagram. The professional expresses opinions and takes a position with their photographs, which seems to be awkward and abnormal for the other ideal types.

Some of the service of Instagram is used, for instance hashtags. But compared to the strategists who use hashtags for increasing interest and number of followers, hashtags are used in a different way. The professional creates their own hashtags, guided by personal ideas, they invent concepts and words. Their aim is to frame the city in a different way. The media application is not about informing or restricting their practice. They take advantage of services, which can be used to further develop their ideas and to explore possibilities with the media.

To conclude, professional photography conventions guide their performance. The ambition is to explore phenomena rather than merely represent.



**Figure 3.** The photographer explored temporality of the city.

## 5. Discussion

So far, the analysis has been directed towards the micro practice of photography identified by Chalfen (1987). When comparing the different ideal types there are other distinguishing features.

The participants make meaning of the photo task by relating it to their previous experience of photography. Their performance is therefore guided by more general practices.

Their relation to and knowledge about Instagram guides their performance. The acting tourist acknowledges some of the conventions related to Instagram, which seem to have consequences for the photographs they decide to post. Instagram is the true element for the Instagrammer. The professional is aware of Instagram conventions but violates conventions and uses them for their own purposes. The professional regards photography as a way to explore a phenomenon, in this case the image of the city. Their interest in exploring means that they were thinking in a long-time perspective and that they were also future-oriented. Their time orientation is in stark contrast to the acting tourist and the Instagrammer. The acting tourist preferred the constant, stable, well-known, which resembles an orientation to the past, while the strategist was more oriented towards the present.

Different practices, and conventions related to them, seem to inform their ideals of photography. However, common characteristics can be found particularly between the acting tourist and the Instagrammer. Positive aspects of the city are regarded as photo worthy and proper to publish as they think they will generate likes. The distinction between private and public is discussed and the participants avoid being private and political on this account. Consequently, it is the established and well-known aspects of the city that are posted on the official account.

In this project, the participants draw upon three distinctly different practices, but in other contexts addi-

tional practices may be relevant. In a project initiated by the city and with vague instructions some roles may also appear as sanctioned or normal. With the growing number of users of Instagram and increased familiarity with social media we expect that the practice will have more in common with social media than with traditional photography (Van House, 2016).

## 6. Conclusions

The major aim of this article has been to examine how everyday practices of digital photography are mobilized in a place branding campaign involving Instagram takeover to improve a city's image. A performative approach to everyday photography enabled us to understand how photography is enacted and how different social conventions guided the way that citizens curated the city's Instagram account. The communicative events developed by Chalfen (1987) made it possible to distinguish between different performances among the participants, which were called the acting tourist, the Instagrammer and the professional. The acting tourist and the Instagrammer *take* photographs while the professional *makes* photographs of the city. These performances were tied to different interpretative repertoires and in part based on participants' previous experiences of photography. Partaking in an Instagram takeover resembles a performance in front of an audience in many ways.

A basic assumption in including everyday digital photography in place branding is to provide a more authentic and trustworthy image of the city. Hence, the expectation in place branding is that citizens' personal performances are put into the public domain through an official Instagram account, which is open for anyone to see. The participants in our study were highly aware of the publicity of their posts and were thus careful with what they posted on the platform. Images of the city produced in Instagram takeovers must therefore be viewed as produced and displayed for a wide audience as imagined by the participants. Consequently, the images of the

**Table 1.** Three ideal types of Instagram photography in the Instagram takeover project.

Event/ideal type	The Acting Tourist	The Instagrammer	The Professional
Planning	Sharing delights for tourists and citizens	Sharing personal moments with other citizens	Sharing self-perceived interesting aspects
Shooting	Past temporal orientation	Instant temporal orientation	Mix of different temporal orientations
Behind shooting	Postcard aesthetics	Authenticity	Complexity
Editing	Instagram filters to enhance color and contrast	Filters to express atmosphere and mood	Technically advanced filters
Display	Many photographs Indicative text—selective of followers	Few, selected photographs Geo- and #hash tags—strive for “likes” and followers	Many photographs personal #hashtags—ignorant of number of followers and “likes”

city were choreographed according to social conventions of what was considered appropriate to post on the social media platform and participants' own strategic rationales of participating in the project. Typical rationales of participation were to counter a negative image of the city in the news media and promote themselves or their businesses. In addition, photographic conventions and the logic of the visual social media platform influenced the way the city was imaged. It is the ideal, positive, well-known, beautiful and impersonal image of the city that is displayed on Instagram. The logic of the platform to accrue likes and followers results in aspirational photographs and imaginaries. This means that to use Instagram takeovers in a place branding strategy for the purpose of reinvigorating the city image is difficult. While Instagram takeovers are useful to strengthen an already existing image of the city, this strategy is not likely to change or contribute to novel ways of imagining the city.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Political Storytelling on Instagram: Key Aspects of Alexander Van der Bellen’s Successful 2016 Presidential Election Campaign

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### Abstract

This article addresses the strategic use of Instagram in election campaigns for the office of the Austrian Federal President in 2016. Based on a comprehensive visual analysis of 504 Instagram posts from Green-backed but independent presidential candidate Alexander Van der Bellen, who resulted as winner after almost one year of campaigning, this contribution reconstructs key aspects of digital storytelling on Instagram. By identifying relevant image types central to the self-representation of the candidate, this article shows how a politician makes use of a digital platform in order to project and manage desired images. The salience of image types allows for the reconstruction of underlying visual strategies: (1) the highlighting of the candidate’s biography (*biographical strategy*), (2) the presentation of his campaign team (*team strategy*), and (3) the presentation of the candidate as a legitimate office holder (*incumbent strategy*). The article thus sheds light on visual aspects of digital storytelling as relevant factor of political communication.

### Keywords

digital platforms; Instagram; political communication; presidential election campaigns; storytelling; visual imagery; visual strategies

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction: Digital Storytelling in Political Campaigns—The Example of Austria

The inauguration of Alexander Van der Bellen as Austria’s ninth Federal President on 26 January 2017 was preceded by an emotional election campaign. This campaign lasted almost a year and can be considered extraordinary—not only due to organizational circumstances like the annulment of the runoff by the Austrian Constitutional Court on 1 July 2016 and the postponement of the runoff vote from 2 October to 4 December 2016, but also due to increased modernization and professionalization processes regarding campaign communication. This included an extension of campaign channels and, along with it, a

diversification of target group messages. Especially the campaigns of the runoff candidates Norbert Hofer (Austrian Freedom Party/FPÖ) and Alexander Van der Bellen (Green-backed but independent) made use of various digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram to directly address target groups, bypass traditional media, or set the agenda for media coverage.

This article uses the diversification of digital platforms in the 2016 election campaigns for the office of the Austrian Federal President as a starting point for an analysis of Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram account as campaign channel. One has to consider the limits of such an approach in that it may fail “to recognize the diverse, fragmented, and complex modern media environ-

ment, of which a single media platform is only a small part” (Bode & Vraga, 2017, p. 1). However, focusing on a single digital platform can be “enormously useful, in that it gives us a better understanding of the use, the content, and the effects of specific media platforms” (Bode & Vraga, 2017, p. 1).

Van der Bellen’s campaign made use of *transmedia* (Jenkins, 2006, 2010) storytelling strategies aimed at amplifying the reach of campaign messages through synergistic use of multiple social media accounts and analogue media (e.g., political posters). Nowadays, political “storytellers use digital platforms alongside a range of other delivery channels so that each piece of media adds something significant to the overall experience of the story world” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 1062).

Digital Storytelling is not a new phenomenon (Kavoori, Lashley, & Creech, 2017, p. 1057). Henry Jenkins (2017, p. 1061) explains that it “could include stories generated via digital tools, stories that involve various forms of networked participation or interactivity, stories that are distributed via digital platforms, or stories that are consumed on digital platforms”. For Jenkins (2017, p. 1062), “storytelling practices persist because they are meaningful to those who produce and consume them”. Kevin J. Hunt (2015) states that “an inevitable part of political rhetoric relies upon telling stories”. The latter help potential voters to relate to rather abstract political ideas (Hunt, 2015) as well as political candidates: “People connect with candidates...the same way they connect with books and movies; they simply won’t engage without a good story” (Weber, 2016).

Storytelling in politics generally relies on a wide range of strategies to shape personal and political narratives. Such strategies comprise references to biographically relevant settings and locations, family histories, or the use of personal photos within the context of the political campaign (e.g., so-called throwback photos on Instagram). Austrian presidential candidate Alexander Van der Bellen used the story of the *homeland* (in German: *Heimat*) as a central narration of his campaign. The Green-backed candidate defined *homeland* as inclusive concept in order to differentiate himself from his right-wing contestant Norbert Hofer (Austrian Freedom Party/FPÖ). For Van der Bellen, *home* can be the Tyrolean valley where his family found refuge during his childhood, but also some place in the European Union. According to this definition, “feeling home” is not bound to a place, but to a sense of belonging. The story of the Van der Bellen family is connected with the campaign narrative and becomes a focal point of a personalized storytelling strategy on a verbal and visual level.

Political and communication scholars alike stress that a stronger personalization of politics and political communication (cf. Garzia, 2014; Karvonen, 2009; Kriesi, 2012; McNair, 2016; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011) supports the “growing centrality of the individual” (Balmas & Sheafer, 2016, p. 944) in contemporary election campaigns. Along with “centralized media personaliza-

tion (or concentrated visibility)” (Balmas & Sheafer, 2016, p. 945), a shift from topic-based to personality-based campaigns also affects the visual presentation of politics (Keim & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 313; Van Aelst et al., 2011). Furthermore, the increasing influence of non-political topics tends to blur boundaries between the political and the non-political. Holtz-Bacha, Langer and Merkle (2014, p. 156) also stress this “shift in emphasis from the political to the personal sphere”. This is particularly relevant for a strongly personality-influenced vote like the one for the Austrian Federal Presidency, which is the only nationwide *ad personam* election in Austria.

This article builds on previous studies while placing special emphasis on the visual component of digital storytelling. While adding to the steadily growing scientific literature on the strategic function of social media platforms in election campaigns—which started in the early 2000s after being boosted by the successful campaign of Barack Obama in the US (Keim & Rosenthal, 2016)—the article also reacts to a request for research to be conducted on the role of visibility and imagery in political communication (cf. Schill, 2012). This research gap must be taken seriously in the light of a growing shift of communication into the so-called “visual web”, which particularly privileges visual forms of communication on digital platforms. In an article on Instagram analyses, Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver (2016, p. 48) therefore declared the visual aspect to be a central topic of social media research. While previous studies have already discussed the fact that “political messages are communicated [in] oral, written and visual language” (McNair, 2016, p. 506) and provided, for instance, quantitative findings such as the presence of different political actors in photographs, qualitative approaches to the analysis of visual imagery and strategies have not yet been applied to a sufficient extent. This article increases the existing literature by a qualitative-interpretative discussion of the visual dimension of digital storytelling.

The empirically based contribution provides an in-depth visual analysis of the strategic self-presentation of the successful Austrian presidential candidate. Strategic self-presentation refers to the intentionality of selection and presentation routines on Instagram. Politicians employ personal photographers who have privileged access in official and semi-private situations of the campaign. The resulting photos are meticulously selected and arranged (e.g., with texts, hashtags, links) by the campaign team: “Public relations (PR) personnel are curtail access to political leaders while planning, producing, selecting, and distributing their own favorable photos and videos....These managed visuals can reflect serious matters and routine government business, such as politicians meeting with their counterparts or working in their offices, and can offer a glimpse of otherwise private moments” (Marland, 2012, p. 215). The reconstruction of selection routines can provide important information about the relevance of visual imagery for the candidate and the overarching campaign story.

The article first examines how the incumbent president presented himself on his Instagram account during the whole campaign cycle, in which situational moments and contexts he was shown, and which interactional patterns had dominated his visual portrayal. The second aim of the study is to examine which storytelling strategies the candidate pursued in his choice of visual imagery. The analysis covers the whole range of visual imagery that was posted on Instagram including photographs, graphics, animated graphics (GIFs), image-text combinations, and short videos. The aim of the study was to gain information on the “selection and portrayal routines” (Grittmann, 2012, p. 135)<sup>1</sup> of the strategic visual communication of a politician during an election campaign. The study covers the period of almost twelve months, from 1 January to 4 December 2016.

## 2. Researching Instagram: Research Framework, Corpus, and Methodological Design

Researching Instagram as a tool in political communication is a relatively new phenomenon. The platform began to operate in 2010 and has constantly gained popularity since then. Instagram is currently one of the fastest growing social networks. The photo-sharing app has been counted among the most famous social networking sites worldwide with over 800 million monthly active accounts as of September 2017, and has ranked number seven in terms of active users (de.statista.com, 2017a). In Austria, Instagram use has increased from 340,000 active accounts in February 2016 to 1,000,000 active accounts in December 2016, and 1,600,000 active accounts in March 2017 (de.statista.com, 2017b).

The app allows users to add filters to pictures and videos and to distribute them on the platform and in other social media. Instagram users can follow other users and search, comment, or like other people’s photos. Instagram, which became part of Facebook in August 2012, has constantly been upgraded with new functions such as the introduction of the photo card tool, which is able to sort Instagram photos by place of origin, the integration of the *stories feature*, which allows for the creation of video or photo sequences that are only visible for 24 hours, and recently the introduction of new face filters. Since May 2017 location stories and hashtag stories help users find stories relating to individual interests (instagram-press.com, 2017).

In 2012, The Heritage Foundation (Sylvester, 2012) asserted that politicians had become aware of the communicative power of Instagram:

By jumping into already-buzzing communities such as Instagram, political leaders can harness fresh energy by getting personal and taking advantage of possibilities to connect with both influential personalities and everyday Americans. (Sylvester, 2012)

In the US presidential election campaign in the same year, both Barack Obama and his opponent Mitt Romney made use of the app “to give citizens a different, behind-the-scenes look at what you might not see on other platforms” (Sylvester, 2012) and to directly address different target groups.

The praise that Instagram has received as political communication tool has tended to focus on how it provides politicians with a concise, direct method of sharing their message and enhancing their image, and how it helps citizens feel personally connected to government and its leaders. (Glantz, 2013, p. 695)

Despite the growing popularity and importance of Instagram, research has been relatively limited compared with other platforms like Twitter (cf. Laestadius, 2017, p. 573). A literature review on the use of Instagram in election campaigns and political communication indicated that (1) only very few studies are using Instagram to understand political communication, and (2) that most research focuses on the strategic context of Instagram usage (e.g., Filimonov, Russmann, & Svensson, 2016; Russmann & Svensson, 2017) rather than on the specific meanings made by visual imagery (e.g., Muñoz & Towner, 2017).

Visual imagery on politicians’ Instagram accounts as material pictures, which are the basis of immaterial images, can be used “as first indicators for an approximation to the study of images” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 36).<sup>2</sup> However, the use of Instagram in political communication as both a means of staging a political personality and a form of image management has not been sufficiently studied yet. According to German communication scholars Marion G. Müller and Stephanie Geise, “staging may generally be defined as a public exhibition of a work, event, person or object” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 32).<sup>3</sup> Associated with the staging of a politician are presentation techniques in order to “make it appear visually before an audience...and to provide it with a corresponding visual interpretation frame” (Müller & Geise, 2015).<sup>4</sup> In professional political communication efforts, strategic stagings as “consciously shaped reality” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 34)<sup>5</sup> have growing influence on the production, selection, and dissemination of visual mate-

<sup>1</sup> Original quote in German: “Auswahl- und Darstellungsrouinen” (Grittmann, 2012, p. 135).

<sup>2</sup> Original quote in German: Materielle Abbilder können “als erste Anhaltspunkte zur Annäherung an die Erforschung von Images herangezogen werden” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 36).

<sup>3</sup> Original quote in German: “Dabei kann eine Inszenierung allgemein als öffentliche Zurschaustellung eines Werkes, Ereignisses, einer Person oder eines Objekts definiert werden” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 32).

<sup>4</sup> Original quote in German: Präsentationstechniken der Inszenierung, um etwas “für ein Publikum visuell in Erscheinung zu bringen und es dabei mit einem entsprechenden visuellen Interpretationsrahmen zu versehen” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 32).

<sup>5</sup> Original quote in German: “bewusst gestaltete Realität” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 34).



rial in creative terms, which helps candidates appear in a positive light. Stagings are primarily used to consciously shape intended images (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 35; cf. also McNair, 2016). The term *image* refers to “a mental construct of an object or a person, which is generated on the basis of consciously or unconsciously perceived (media) images, facts, associations, experiences or judgments” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 35).<sup>6</sup>

The production, selection, and distribution of visual imagery in terms of image management by politicians may thus help to shape “the image of persons or groups of persons, their behaviour and lifestyle as well as their character traits” (Grittmann, 2012, p. 128). In this context, it should be noted that images as a *visual imagination* (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 35; italics in original text) “are not objective, unequivocal and comprehensive, but subjective and, hence, ambiguous, selective, and often stereotyped and unconscious” (Müller & Geise, 2015).<sup>7</sup>

Communication scholar Elke Grittmann (2007) has convincingly shown that the visual presentation of politics is condensed to a repertory of visual imagery, which is constructed by “selection and, thus, attribution of meaning” (Grittmann, 2012, p. 142).<sup>8</sup> This observation applies not only to journalistic photo-reporting, but also to the strategic self-representation of politicians. Among typical motifs we find formal or informal speech, official encounters with other politicians, meetings, talks, or the staging of closeness to citizens (Grittmann, 2012, pp. 142–144).

The framework outlined above leads to the research question how Alexander Van der Bellen used his Instagram account during the 2016 presidential election campaign in order to project and manage desired images, and which visual imagery he emphasized for that purpose.

The study drew on several Instagram posts of Alexander Van der Bellen’s verified account (@vanderbellen, instagram.com/vanderbellen) during the Austrian presidential election campaign 2016 (n = 504). The full sample comprised posts between 8 January 2016 (first entry) and 4 December 2016 (last entry on election night). Since his victory, Van der Bellen’s Instagram account has continued to serve as the official account of the Federal President. The unit of analysis for this study was the single Instagram post: photos, short videos, graphics, animated graphics (GIFs) with captions and hashtags. User comments were not included in the analysis due to the research focus on strategic visual self-presentation.

Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver (2016, p. 49) emphasize that visual content requires “researchers to broaden and diversify the way social media is examined and addressed” in order to make sense of the polysemic struc-

ture of visuals in concert with text (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). The posts were screen-captured, archived, and manually annotated by a coder experienced with visual content. The annotation particularly focused on actors, settings, and depicted constellations of interactions.

The methodological design employed was an image type analysis, a method developed by the German communication scholars Elke Grittmann and Ilona Ammann (2009, 2011). It allows to classify visual content as specific image types according to their motifs. While the method was originally developed for the analysis of photo-journalistic routines and selection criteria (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 167), the image type analysis may also be applied to strategic visual imagery of politicians in order to make statements on routines and selection criteria in the choice of imagery.

The image type analysis follows a two-step approach: where conclusions on “patterns and strategies are drawn, a quantitative approach is required whereas the analysis of meanings and symbols calls for a more qualitative procedure” (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 165).<sup>9</sup> The development of image types requires an in-depth knowledge of the selected visual content (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 169) and is oriented around the process of the iconographic approach developed by Erwin Panofsky in the 1920s and 1930s. This approach is based on a three-step procedure: a pre-iconographic description, an iconographic analysis, and an iconological interpretation (cf. Panofsky, 1972, pp. 1–17). This contribution specifically refers to the process of iconographic analysis.

The material was first classified by recurring visual motifs in order to identify topic domains of the full sample. Research suggests that visual portrayals of politicians tend to follow certain archetypes (cf. Bucy & Grabe, 2009; Grittmann, 2007, 2012; Müller, 1997). Such archetypes like meeting with supporters and mass appeal, presenting the family, or meeting with fellow politicians provide a framework for the classification of the visual material according to known categories. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that most of these archetypes were derived from the journalistic presentation of political candidates. Bucy and Grabe (2009) have focused on the presentation of presidential candidates in network news coverage of US elections. Grittmann (2007) has focused on press photography in Germany. For this reason, known categories do not necessarily reflect selection and presentation routines of political self-presentation on Instagram. For this study, known categories were complemented by inductively generated categories that consider the specific context of personalized campaign storytelling (e.g., the importance of the personal background of the candidate and his connect-

<sup>6</sup> Original quote in German: Ein Image bezeichnet “ein mentales Konstrukt von einem Objekt oder einer Person, das auf Basis bewusst oder unbewusst wahrgenommener (Medien-)Bilder, Fakten, Assoziationen, Erfahrungen, oder Bewertungen beim Rezipienten entsteht” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 35).

<sup>7</sup> Original quote in German: Als “visuelle Vorstellung” sind Images “nicht objektiv, eindeutig und umfassend, sondern subjektiv und damit mehrdeutig, selektiv, häufig stereotyp und häufig unbewusst” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 25).

<sup>8</sup> Original quote in German: “Auswahl und Bedeutungszuweisung” (Grittmann, 2012, p. 142).

<sup>9</sup> Original quote in German: Wo Schlussfolgerungen über “Muster und Strategien gezogen werden, ist ein quantitatives Vorgehen nötig, die Analyse von Bedeutungen und Symboliken verlangt jedoch ein stärker qualitatives Vorgehen” (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 165).

edness with the country of which he wanted to be elected president).

Image types differ from motifs in terms of their degree of abstraction. They reduce the meaning of individual motifs to their central message (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 170) and therefore also condense complex political contexts. Since according to Grittmann and Ammann (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 170) image types need to be homogeneous internally and heterogeneous externally, motifs with the same implicit statement are grouped together on the basis of generalized meanings (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011). To give an example: While settings and actors during a presidential campaign may vary (e.g., journalists and studio settings when it comes to the image type *media work*), the essential message remains the same (in this case: media interest in the candidate).

After the classification process, the image types were quantified and interpreted (cf. Figure 2). This allows for conclusions regarding “selection and production routines and the interpretation frames, ideas and ideologies transported by images” (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 171).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, selection routines provide important information about the relevance of an image type for the overarching campaign story.

### 3. Selected Results of the Image Type Analysis

Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram account was regularly updated throughout the whole study period. Chronological posts were organized around relevant

campaign events. This gave Instagram the function of a *visual diary*, which documented campaign activities, referred to upcoming events (e.g., press conferences, public appearances, site visits, cf. Figure 1) or presented new articles in the fan shop (fanderbellen.at; page no longer accessible). By posting not only photos and short videos, but also graphics and animated graphics (GIFs) in the corporate design of the campaign, Van der Bellen’s Instagram strategy made use of the full spectrum of visual imagery. The regular use of text and hashtags provided relevant context for the posts.

In Figure 2, the following image types were emphasized on Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram account:

The image type *campaign* (n = 119) includes visual imagery that presents the candidate in campaign-related activities and conveys information that is relevant to the campaign (e.g., survey results) as well as advertising material. It also comprises the collection of supportive declarations signed by voters, the distribution of campaign material, speeches delivered at party rallies, or posts of survey results. Van der Bellen’s account staging underscored his election campaign staff and his good standing with young supporters and volunteers. Further, Van der Bellen’s campaign referred to the release of new campaign posters or announced public debates or performances (e.g., the “Presidential Rave 2.0” in August 2016).

The image type *media work* (n = 79) comprises visual imagery that shows the candidate during interviews or press conferences, or at events organized by media representatives (e.g., panel discussions). Among these



Figure 1. Van der Bellen on tour, posted on 6 April 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Original quote in German: Schlussfolgerungen bezüglich “Selektions- und Produktionsroutinen sowie die über Bilder vermittelten Deutungsrahmen, Ideen und Weltanschauungen” (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 171).

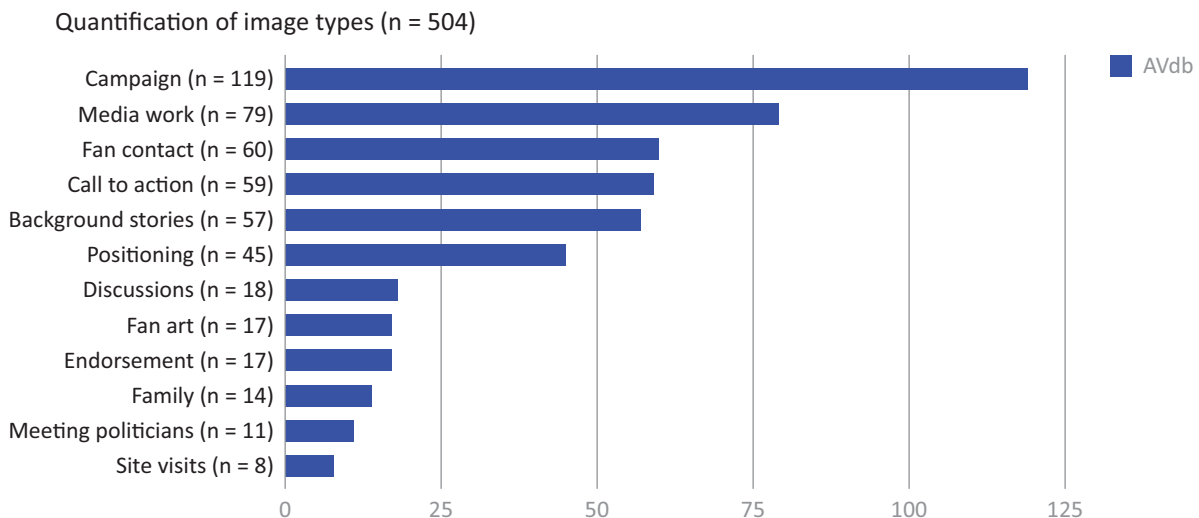


Figure 2. Quantification of image types on Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram account.

are studio settings, the presence of cameras and microphones, and talks with journalists. This image type suggested an ongoing media interest throughout the whole campaign cycle.

The image type *fan contact* (n = 60) defines and emphasizes specific target groups. It includes photo material showing the candidate as he mingles with people from various segments of the population, where everybody in the picture is engaged in a conversation or posing for a photo or taking a “selfie” with the candidate. A further image type is *fan art* (n = 17). Relevant photo material shows gifts received from fans and stages the gift presentation to express the candidate’s popularity with constituents. Van der Bellen, for example, received heart-shaped gingerbread with an inscription, a photo of a cat sitting beside Van der Bellen promotion stickers (in August 2016), or a photo of a dog with a Van der Bellen bonnet (in November 2016).

The image type *call to action* (n = 59) comprises visual imagery that explicitly invites users to support the campaign in various ways. A call to action usually comes in a text format which may be inserted in the picture as a quotation or integrated in the accompanying text. In Van der Bellen’s campaign, special graphics or animated graphics (GIFs) were produced in the corporate design of the campaign to ask users to volunteer, participate in public events, make donations, or cast their votes.

The image type *background stories* (n = 57) can be described as the most interesting image type emphasized on Instagram during the Austrian presidential election campaign. This category comprises visual imagery which presents the candidate as a person rather than a political figure, places him/her in an individual, biographical context, emphasizes his/her personal attributes (cf. Balmas & Sheafer, 2016, p. 948) and indicates the politician’s “private” interests and priorities. This image type particularly supports personalization because it “refers

to heightened attention devoted to the personal characteristics and private lives of candidates” (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, p.160). On Instagram, background stories with photos presented Alexander Van der Bellen in semi-private moments, or in his youth and early years in so-called *throwback photos*. As emphasized by his throwback photos, Van der Bellen gave special importance to his hiking hobby in his staging of mountain landscapes and himself hiking. Van der Bellen was shown several times as a child with his parents in the mountains (e.g., throwback photo in May 2016) or as a young adult with his sister (cf. Figure 3).<sup>11</sup> Hiking was the Tyrolean mountains is closely linked to the *homeland* (in German: *Heimat*) motif, which Van der Bellen intensively emphasized and reframed during the election campaign and presented as an inclusive concept.

*Background stories* are used to “normalize” political candidates and to project authenticity. Hobbies and other pastimes indicate aspects of their personality outside the political arena or from before their political career. Van der Bellen was depicted as a passionate reader. On one occasion, passing time between two press meetings, he was shown browsing in a bookshop (February 2016) or on a trip from Graz back to Vienna reading a Donald Duck comic book (in German: *Lustiges Taschenbuch*) (April 2016, cf. Figure 4).

The candidate’s enthusiasm for the cartoon character Donald Duck was a recurrent theme for Van der Bellen. On a trip to Brussels, for instance, he was depicted with a Donald Duck figure (March 2016). Hobbies like solving Sudoku puzzles (e.g., in November 2016) or passions like drinking coffee were also displayed (e.g., in January, March and June 2016, cf. Figure 5).

Another recurring topic was Van der Bellen’s interest in soccer. He attended games in a Viennese Soccer Stadium (for instance, watching the team of Rapid Vienna in July 2016 or the Austrian national soccer team in October

<sup>11</sup> *Throwback photos* can show family members (e.g., Van der Bellen’s sister), but nevertheless classify as *background stories* due to their captions and the importance attributed to the Tyrolean mountains, the *homeland* (in German: *Heimat*) motif and Van der Bellen’s passion for hiking.





Figure 3. Throwback photo of Alexander Van der Bellen, posted on 4 February 2016.



Figure 4. Reading a Donald Duck comic book, posted on 11 April 2016.

2016), watched a game on a television screen before an interview (in May 2016), or posed for photos with soccer fans in July 2016 and in October 2016.

The image type *positioning* (n = 45) includes visual imagery which points to political issues and causes of the candidate, explains his understanding of the presidential role, and helps him to position himself on the political scale. By using photo-text combinations, quotations on a variety of topics are highlighted (for instance, on the free

trade agreement CETA in October 2016), and the position of the candidate is emphasized. Van der Bellen combined the presentation of new posters with an opportunity to position himself, e.g. in May or in August 2016. In April 2016, he presented himself with a sign reading “I am a feminist....Because women’s rights are human rights”.

Image types such as *meeting politicians* (n = 11; which showed the candidate together with regional governors or federal ministers either in a conversation



Figure 5. Coffee and Newspapers, posted on 9 January 2016.

or welcome ceremony, or shaking hands), *discussion* (n = 18; Van der Bellen was frequently presented in debates with young voters) and *endorsement* (n = 17; which showed mostly prominent supporters, e.g. in March, April and May 2016) underscore the political importance of the candidate.

The image type *family* (n = 14) comprises visual imagery in which the candidate and his family are presented in semi-private moments. Marion G. Müller (1997, p. 204) points out that the family strategy is usually applied to support a “common-man image of a candidate” (Müller, 1997, p. 204). Alexander Van der Bellen only started presenting himself together with his wife at the onset of the runoff campaign, e.g. while taking part in a hike with journalists in the Tyrolean mountains in August 2016 or going for a walk in the Tyrolean Kauner valley in September 2016 and in Lustenau (Vorarlberg) in October 2016. On election day, Van der Bellen and his wife Doris Schmidauer posed in front of the Austrian flag to thank supporters before casting their votes.

#### 4. Conclusion and Outlook

Starting from the premise that the production, selection, and distribution of visual imagery may help to shape and manage political images, this article has examined the use of the digital platform Instagram during the Austrian federal presidential election 2016. At the center of interest was the strategic use of the platform as campaign channel by successful runoff candidate Alexander Van der Bellen. Visual imagery on Instagram was classified with an image type analysis (cf. Grittmann & Ammann,

2009, 2011) in order to reconstruct underlying selection routines and visual strategies.

What can we learn about political communication when we focus on Instagram? Henry Jenkins stated that in storytelling, “each piece of media adds something significant to the overall experience of the story world” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 1062). What does Instagram add? This article has demonstrated that the strategic selection and presentation of visual imagery on digital platforms can be considered a crucial factor for the delivering of political stories. Selection routines provide important information about the relevance of an image type for the candidate and for the overall campaign narrative. Politicians *show* different aspects of their personalities, their qualifications for the office, or their understanding of politics than they articulate in verbal or textual form. Since the emphasis on specific image types does not only reveal *how* a candidate wants to be seen, but also which policies he wants to advocate, in-depth knowledge about strategic visual imagery on politicians’ Instagram feeds can advance our understanding of political communication. Furthermore, the reception situation of Instagram imagery can be considered a crucial factor as soon as it comes to the projection of “authentic” imagery. Michele Zappavigna explains that “the temporality of the social network to which these images are posted as chronologically unfolding stream of content, privilege a ‘you could be here with me’ style of photography since the ambient viewer may view the image in ‘real-time’ as soon as it is posted” (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 283).

The visual analysis of Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram posts has shown an emphasis on specific image

types. The salience of these image types allows for the reconstruction of underlying visual strategies: (1) the highlighting of the candidate's biography (*biographical strategy*), (2) the presentation of his campaign team (*team strategy*), and (3) the presentation of the candidate as a legitimate office holder (*incumbent strategy*).

- (1) **Biographical Strategy:** Van der Bellen used background stories to draw attention to personal qualities, competences, and experiences that qualified him for the office of Federal President. He took his family's refugee background as the starting point for a story of home and togetherness and anchored this story in the Tyrolean Kauner Valley. However, he also underlined the image of an intellectual and university professor. He browsed books, gave interviews in libraries, solved Sudoku puzzles, or exhibited his coffee cup in front of a stack of newspapers;
- (2) **Team strategy:** Van der Bellen put a focus on the presentation of his campaign team, which consisted largely of young supporters. He thereby made the work behind the campaign visible, emphasized his good relationship with his staff, and presented his election campaign as a collective effort and a joint success;
- (3) **Incumbent strategy:** Van der Bellen, in the second half of the campaign after the annulment of the first runoff by the Constitutional Court, acted as if he was already president: he wished pupils a good start to the school year, he attended a national soccer team game, he held a press conference on the National Holiday and delivered a video message in which he recited the words of the federal anthem. With this strategy, Van der Bellen presented himself as the legitimate office holder who had won the election once and considered his re-election a logical consequence.

McNair (2016, p. 509) states that "in social networking...political actors must be able to use the tools efficiently, conveying an up-to-date, tech-savvy image". This analysis shows that Van der Bellen used Instagram as campaign channel in a highly professional way. On the account, the entire campaign could be observed with the help of chronological entries and numerous references as *visual diary*. These included announcements of events (e.g., start or end of campaign events, site visits, hiking tours with journalists), references to other campaign channels (e.g., Facebook-Livestreams), to new promotional materials (e.g., posters or window flags), to new services (e.g., WhatsApp-Service or Selfie App) or to the campaign fan shop (fanderbellen.at; page no longer accessible). Instagram was also used for calls (e.g., to sign declarations of support or to collect donations) and served to highlight important statements and quotations of the candidate. Thus, the account followed several functions that Filimonov et al. (2016, p. 3) have iden-

tified for the use of Instagram as a strategic campaign tool: (1) it serves to disseminate campaign messages, (2) it helps to mobilize voters, (3) it is used for image management, and (4) it amplifies and complements other campaign channels (Filimonov et al., 2016, p. 3).

Further research on digital storytelling in the field of political communication may help to examine and compare image types on different platforms, to examine the use of specific image types across platforms, or to analyse which types of images illicit the most engagement. In the introductory chapter to the publication "Storytelling and Politics", Caren Schnur Neile (2015, pp. 1–14) focuses on the importance of tracing transmedia storytelling which unfolds across multiple media platforms. Further research is needed to understand how political stories spread across platforms and how specific platform affordances influence the ways in which these stories are visually rendered.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# The Visual Discourse of Protest Movements on Twitter: The Case of Hong Kong 2014

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## Abstract

The article presents the results of a qualitative documentary image interpretation of the visual discourse of the Hong Kong protests on the Twitter hashtag #hongkongprotests. Visual thematic patterns, the actors depicted, and the relations between actors as well as visual perspectives were analyzed to derive the function of visual images and to give insights into visual protest storytelling. Visuals and image-text relations in Tweets within #hongkongprotests revealed an application of images in clear favor of the protest movement taking an ‘at the scene’/‘on the ground’ perspective, with media workers being active in front of the camera rather than mere observers behind the camera. While the approach used proved to be suitable for the research project, the research design comes with some limitations, for example in terms of the non-generalizability of results.

## Keywords

documentary image interpretation; Hong Kong; protest movement; social media; Twitter; visual discourse

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

Media scholars have been discussing the role of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, in various contexts, including protest movements, with recent studies attesting to social media’s positive role in democratic engagement and its impact in supporting and even participating in protest movements such as the civil disobedience movement that took place in Hong Kong from September to December 2014, the focus of the present article (Chen, Chan, & Lee, 2016; Lee, Chen, & Chan, 2017; Tufekci, 2017; Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017). Findings regarding the role of social media and mobile communication in the 2014 Hong Kong protests indicate that young people, as key participants, used their media literacy skills to mobilize, organize, and initiate the protests and collective actions using not only social media and mobile networks but also mass media and street booths,

adopting an integrated, holistic approach to disseminating and receiving information (Lee & Ting, 2015). The Hong Kong protests highlight how digital media activities are positively related to people’s involvement in the protests (Lee & Chan, 2016).

This article assumes social media as assisting supporters to spread the word (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) and to call global attention to protest movements *visually*, when exploring the visual discourse within the Hong Kong protests 2014, using the #hongkongprotests Twitter hashtag. The Hong Kong protests, also known as Umbrella Movement or Umbrella Revolution, were a civil disobedience movement directed against the decisions of the Chinese Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress to reform the Hong Kong electoral system. According to the reforms, only candidates approved by the Chinese government would be allowed to present themselves for election in Hong Kong in the future. In Hong

Kong, which has the status of a Special Administrative Region and therefore some legal and political autonomy from 'mainland' China, those reforms were widely perceived as restrictions.

The article presents the results of a documentary image interpretation, based on an understanding of visuals as cultural products providing knowledge about the 'world' and generating meaning by making things visible or unseen (Rose, 2012), and a concept of discourse referring to sociology of knowledge, aiming at grasping collective knowledge repertoires, thereby using a broad understanding of knowledge including daily-life theories, internalized everyday practices, stereotypes and routines. The concept of discourse underlying the present study, *inter alia*, addresses thematic patterns and narrative structures forming meanings and social practices and respective power/knowledge regimes (Keller, 2005, 2013; Wetzstein & Huber, 2016)—aspects which, as a consequence, appear in the present study's research questions.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Questions

Visual communication researchers have been manifoldly interested in protest movements. For example, based on a content analysis of Romanian politicians' Facebook pages, Ionescu (2013) comes to the conclusion that the number of images used positively correlates with the public response rate. Andén-Papadopoulos (2014) establishes a deeper link between images and emerging modes of civic engagement when protesters use the mobile camera phone to record and distribute their own repression through social networks. Ekstrand and Silver (2014) emphasize the dialogic character of images especially in mobile contexts, and, dealing with mobile visual communication as well, Villi (2007) highlights perpetual visual contact as a capacity of the ubiquitous camera phone.

Focusing on the different ways that different communities interpreted a video circulated over mainstream and social media showing police violence against a Hong Kong protester, Jones and Neville Chi Hang (2016) emphasize the relevance of (moving) visual images in protest movements when arguing that 'such videos serve both as evidence of police abuses and discursive artefacts around which viewers construct bodies of shared knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding events by engaging in exercises of 'collective seeing'' (p. 567). In her ethnographic and visual-analytical research on camera phone practices in Hong Kong and referring to earlier vernacular image making, Grace (2014) discusses the role of the visual image in producing historical memory and focuses on images in the context of camera phones as being new practices of creativity and subjectivity distributed via social media, therewith becoming a form of everyday communication. Moreover, Grace (2014) points out Hong Kong as being 'the ideal place from which to study the significance of the relatively re-

cent and unprecedented avalanche of images in popular culture because of the particularly high use of mobile media' (p. 12) and explains that protest movements are not a new phenomenon in the city due to the wide wealth gap and income inequalities among its population.

Without doubt, all of those studies clearly highlight the importance of visual images in social media and mobile communication in context to protest movements and civic engagement. The present study aims at providing deeper insights into the visual discourse of the 2014 Hong Kong protests in social media, in particular on the micro-blogging platform Twitter, in order to derive visual discursive strategies and the possible functioning of images posted on social media in context of protest movements, based on an in-depth study of visuals linked to the intensively used #hongkongprotests Twitter hashtag during the 2014 democratization protests in Hong Kong, focusing the following research questions derived from a perspective to discourse in the sociology of knowledge as described above:

RQ1: How is the discourse of the Hong Kong protests organized on Twitter?

RQ1a: Which thematic patterns are narrated?

This research question focuses on the detection of visual protest narratives. Thematic patterns refer to highlighted topics within each visual and accompanying (written) verbal text. Visual and verbal contents were therewith approached as mutually dependent in terms of forming the message.

RQ1b: Which actors are depicted visually? What relations are visible among the identified actors?

RQ1b takes a deeper look at the visuals of interest. When identifying depicted actors by name (e.g. certain protest leaders or politicians) and/or role (e.g. a group of protesters, policemen) accompanying verbal text was used whenever it provided useful context information.

RQ1c: Which visual perspectives are used in which context?

The term visual perspectives refers to the camera angle and subject-camera distance. Regarding camera angle, the present study distinguishes low-angle shot, neutral (eye-level) shot, high-angle shot, the bird's-eye view and oblique view. The subject-camera distance and position of the camera towards actors within the image frame refers to either long shots or close-ups. Referring to film studies, both, camera angles and subject-camera distance, promise to give further insights into the characterization of the protests in general and the actors in particular: While low-angle shots might be used to demonstrate power and a higher level of hierarchy, neutral shots might convey a participation in the scene to the viewer. High-angle shots might help to include a large number of actors, and the bird's-eye view and especially top shots suggest collectivity, while an oblique view might give the image contents more dynamism or con-

vey the instability of the situation. Regarding the subject-camera distance, the differentiation between long shots and close-ups might suggest the level of proximity to, accessibility of and familiarity with the actors (the latter especially when there is direct eye-contact with the camera and the observer respectively) from the image observers' point of view (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Sikov, 2010).

RQ2: What information can be derived from image sources and Twitter users and used Twitter accounts respectively?

Any analysis focusing on visuals must not ignore the producers of the images and those distributing those visuals. Therefore, as far as possible, RQ2 identifies image sources (as far as credits are given) and discovers more about Twitter users and accounts using those images.

RQ3: Which strategies are used to (de-)legitimize the protest movement in general as well as the protesters' and authorities' actions?

Drawing on the insights based on the previous research questions, this research question investigates how the protest movement is depicted, whether in a favorable or unfavorable light.

These questions clearly reflect a sociological (and not linguistic) research interest, with the concept of discourse linked to sociology of knowledge asking for (visually) conveyed social practices and systems of thought: Keller (2011) traces back the concept of discourse in the sociology of knowledge to Foucault's (1972) understanding of discourses as 'historically situated 'real' social practices, not representing external objects but constituting them' (Keller, 2011, p. 46) which implies analyzing the way discourses are formed and structured and how they are 'structuring knowledge domains' (p. 47), through the use of concrete data.

### 3. Method and Sampling Approach

The documentary image interpretation as described by Bohnsack (2009) promised to form a suitable analytical framework to elaborate on the above-mentioned research questions. Using sociology of knowledge as a fundament and therewith following the discourse in the sociology of knowledge applied for the present study, it addresses sociological rather than linguistic perspectives, on which multimodal (discourse) analysis approaches are mostly based (see for example Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Royce & Bowcher, 2007). It emphasizes power practices-related discursive construction of reality and collective knowledge repertoires as an empirical process and combines qualitative and interpretive research perspectives. Moreover, documentary image interpretation provides a clearly structured toolkit covering all aspects of the research interest as condensed in the research questions. Concretely, the approach consists of a formulating interpretation of each visual under study as a first step, consisting of a

pre-iconographic layer (description of motifs, phenomena, objects/subjects) and an iconographic layer (identifiable activities/plots), therewith especially informing RQ1a. After the formulating interpretation, a reflecting interpretation follows as a second step, containing the analysis of the formal composition of each visual (visual perspective taken from observers' view, linked to RQ1c; planimetric composition of images and scenic choreography, linked to RQ1b) as well as an iconological-iconic interpretation (detecting behavioral perspectives and social relations, linked to RQ2 and RQ3). As Bohnsack (2009) suggests, (written) verbal texts accompanying visual elements were included in the analysis only after image interpretation.

The explained method approach promised an in-depth and thorough detection of visual patterns forming the discourse of interest, namely the anti-governmental democratization protests which were demanding universal suffrage and which took place in Hong Kong from September 26 until December 15, 2014, on the Twitter hashtag #hongkongprotests within which a multitude of visual-containing Tweets are tagged. The Hong Kong protests constitute a good case example when focusing on protest movements in the realm of social media, not only due to the high penetration rate of (camera phone/mobile) technologies and the protest 'tradition' in the city (both highlighted by Grace, 2014 as mentioned above), but also because the protests happened quite recently, and because protesters were mainly young people and students belonging to a generation who grew up with digital media, who are active and savvy in using social media and who have a high affinity to mobile communication, as emphasized by Lee and Ting (2015) and, for example, addressed in link 1 (see annex), taken from the analysis corpus.

While a multitude of Twitter hashtags were (often simultaneously) used when addressing the civil disobedience movement in Hong Kong, the analysis material only includes still images within the widely used Twitter hashtag #hongkongprotests. This is due not only to research pragmatic reasons (referring to the quantity of material) but also because #hongkongprotests is a more general description than the widely used labels such as #occupycentral, #umbrellamovement or #umbrellarevolution, and, to give an example, not everybody might have known that the so-called Umbrella Movement evolved from Occupy Central. The analyzed hashtag might have been used more frequently by tourists, less informed people as well as by journalists and non-residents in addition to the other previously mentioned hashtags, which of course might have influenced the visual content in this hashtag.

Moving images were excluded from this study because they would need an analysis approach beyond still images due to the manifold modes to be considered additional to the (written) verbal and visual mode (especially movement, sound, and speech). Lead images serving as teasers or marketing while linked to external websites, mostly to journalistic articles within news media or

ganizations' web appearances, were excluded from the analysis material as well. This is because visual logics of traditional news media outlets probably provide a different way of storytelling and therewith perspective on protests than the visual discourse taking place directly on Twitter, for example in terms of elite-orientation which researchers have identified in mainstream news media's political conflict coverage (Ottosen, 2007; Wetstein, 2011). Even though conducting a full survey of all still images linked to #hongkongprotests was not feasible due to their sheer quantity, the study aimed at gaining knowledge to answer the research questions and derive the functioning of images posted on social media within protest movements as comprehensively as possible. The material selection and collection aimed at creating a most thorough analysis corpus in terms of image contents and perspectives, making sure that each visual was screened in terms of sample selection. The manual material selection helped to make an initial assessment of visual and verbal contents, actors and visual thematic patterns. Repeatedly occurring image content was collected and analyzed only once. Repeatedly occurring image content was referred to as (1) taking the same visual perspective, (2) depicting the same actors (either the same individuals or the same actor group, such as policemen or a group of protesters), and (3) not contributing new insights regarding the verbal context. This approach of material collection and selection resulted in an analysis corpus consisting of 1,521 images linked to Tweets marked with #hongkongprotests which underwent the research process as described above.

#### 4. Results

A first overview of the research material had already suggested that different visual perspectives are taken in photographs, where the depiction of masses of people from above (also top shots with the use of drones) or from an oblique angle and elevated position (taken for example from hotel rooms) as well as individual or groups of protesters from the front seem to be dominant. Photographs are the most common image type in #hongkongprotests and tend to function *inter alia* as 'recorders' of slogans and messages from banners set up by activists. Images generally legitimize the movement, for example when using them to demonstrate disproportionate actions of the police against protesters. The following sections will go into the results according to the research questions mentioned above. Exemplary hyperlinks to Tweets in the annex illustrate the results.

##### 4.1. Thematic Patterns (RQ1a)

Telling a story visually is more than converting verbal text to images. In contrast to verbal text and their argumentative logic, visuals are processed associatively and not in a linear way. Recurring motives can form a story by establishing visual thematic patterns (Fuchs, 2015).

Thematic patterns widely refer to the characterization of the protesters and the protest movement within #hongkongprotests. Visually, medium shots with a neutral camera angle make the protesters appear approachable and familiar. Verbally, they are described in a way that implicitly attributes them as smart, polite, peaceful, educated, decent, responsible, innocent and harmless and even weak when facing armed officials such as the police (see for example links 2–5).

The study also revealed a clear focus on the dimension and size of the protests by depicting masses of people at the protest sites using a high angle and bird's-eye view, as a rule, accompanied by written text expressing appreciation for the protesters and their commitment to democracy (links 6–8). Additionally, visuals focus on the protest sites and camps, referring especially to the organization of the occupied space. Tents built in a clear structure are as prevalent motives as barricades and uniformed police standing in a row like 'human barricades' (links 9–13). Those motives convey an impression of the protests sites as being clearly arranged and organized regarding the individuals involved in the protests (mainly protesters and police) as well as the protest camp's infrastructure. Regarding the latter, the protest camps are depicted as living spaces, more concretely as spaces in which protesters are able to go about their daily routines, such as studying (link 4) but also playing cards, doing yoga or even getting married (link 14), the latter prodding to a certain romanticization of the protests in their visual depiction. The multitude of photographs of banners and installations produced by protesters at the protest sites and drawings and graphics produced by protest supporters give the protest movement the notion of being artistic, creative, colorful and (new) media affine, giving references to computer technology (links 15–17).

Visual branding and identity-building of the movement started in late September with banners and installations at or near the project sites (such as the Lennon Wall or the Lion Rock installation) as well as drawings and cartoons using protest symbols—such as the yellow umbrella (used first as a protection tool against tear gas before becoming a symbol of resistance) as well as the yellow ribbon—posted on Twitter by protest supporters. The manifold protest artwork and symbols, often showing clear references to popular culture, are repeatedly depicted throughout the analyzed visual material, using the color yellow as the as the main color representing the protests, while red is used to represent the Chinese government (links 18–27).

Besides the reference to the creative productivity of the protests, the visual contents of #hongkongprotests revealed the uneven power distribution between the police and the protesters as another dominant thematic pattern emerging from the outset and re-occurring throughout the visual discourse (explained in more detail in the 'actors and relations among actors' section). While the visual discourse within #hongkongprotests is

less intense from November 2014 (the second months of the protests), the images in the Twitter hashtag become more colorful. Tents in various colors and protest artwork become main motives with protesters being depicted mainly in the background, if at all. When, for example, tourists and visitors share photographs of tents and artwork as well as photographs of themselves or selfies at the protest camps, they are showing their support and visually referring to the protest camps as being a 'must see' for visitors and tourists (link 28). While its camps remain the main 'scenes' of the protest movement in November, the visual story also considers other places and events outside of the actual protest sites, such as groups of people at European or US universities, lecture rooms providing academic discussion forums regarding the Hong Kong protests, sights in other cities decorated with protest symbols, and solidarity of the Ferguson protesters with the movement in Hong Kong, as a reference to geographically widespread support, and suggesting an expansion of the movement beyond the original protest sites (links 29–31).

Photographs also capture media workers' TV reporting activities at the protest sites and show whole newspaper articles or facsimiles addressing, for example, news coverage of the movement for the purpose of information distribution, or governmental media censorship in China (links 32 and 33). From December 11, shortly before the end of the protests on December 15, photographs document protesters but also reporters packing their things and the police clearing protest camps. Users also use photographs to contrast the protest sites during the protests and afterwards, referring to the absence of the protest camps and a return to 'normality', when documenting street traffic where the protest camps had been (links 34 and 35).

#### 4.2. Actors and Relations among Actors (RQ1b)

Staying mainly at the protest sites, the visual discourse at hand is hardly oriented on political elites but widely focuses the pro-democracy protesters, takes advocacy for them and generally addresses the Hong Kong protests as a democracy movement of the many. At the beginning of the protests some *protesters* are verbally addressed as protest leaders, and mainly the 17-year-old founder of the Hong Kong student activist group 'Scholarism' Joshua Wong<sup>1</sup> is addressed as being an initiator, spokesperson, and promoter of the protests throughout the discourse (links 36 and 37). However, the visual depiction of protesters remains diverse suggesting that Wong is part of the movement rather than representing it as a whole.

Besides the protesters, the *police* form a second main actor being visually positioned mostly as the protesters' adversaries. In fact, *police–protester relations* widely characterize and further the visual storyline of

#hongkongprotests. The visual depiction of protester–police encounters suggests a rather unstable relationship, switching between neutral to friendly and conflicting with physical confrontations and the police using violence against protesters. Clashes or confrontations between protesters and the police became main visual motives whenever police were going to or were attempting to clear one of the three protest sites and particularly became a repeated motive when police cleared the Mongkok protest camp at the end of November, with protesters occurring either as individuals whom police used violence against, or as a 'front' of many with several umbrellas (links 38–42).

While the police are also visualized positively and characterized as friendly in less conflictual phases of the protests, the opposition between both groups remains visible with the main motive of police being depicted as a group of uniformed people statically standing in a row in front of protesters, therewith acting as human barricades or walls blocking the protesters (links 10–13). Protesters are visualized behaving politely or even supportive towards the police, for example when a protester protected a policeman from rain with an umbrella (link 16). The visual communication of uneven power distribution and disproportionate power use by the police was one main theme established and continued to be so throughout #hongkongprotests which brings to mind the David–Goliath frame as a common pattern in journalistic coverage when describing and visualizing conflict events and opponents (Dobernic, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2010; Wetzstein, 2011).

While the visual discourse remains traditional in terms of its narration of protester–police relations, it is not traditional when depicting media workers, mainly photographers and TV journalists, as being active actors rather than simply passive observers behind the cameras who are not normally depicted in the events themselves. With professional photographers and journalists being present in photographs while doing their work, they become part of the visual discourse, which consequently allows the observation of those who normally observe, therewith widening the 'traditional' visual frame and giving an impression of their heavy presence and space occupation in protest movements and other conflict events. Within the visual depiction of media workers in #hongkongprotests, they either occur as central individual actors when 'proving' via Twitter that they are at the scene or announcing TV coverage of the protests, or within a large group of people capturing protest situations or events (links 43–45).

From November onwards, protest movement opponents started occurring in the visual discourse, although only sporadically and mostly in the (verbally mentioned) context of them disturbing the peaceful protests (link 46) or in the context of the depiction of an 'anti-occupier flotilla' consisting of boats with blue banners saying 'Go

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Wong and two other young protest leaders were given several months sentences for their roles in the Hong Kong protests only in August 2017 (Phillips, 2017, August 17).



Home' (link 47). Pro-government voices were generally rare within #hongkongprotests. A reason for this was surely the blocking of Twitter in 'mainland' China while the micro-blogging service was freely accessible in Hong Kong. Political elites and events, such as Barack Obama's visit to Beijing in November, remained side issues within #hongkongprotests, while civil society actors and their visual support of the movement were dominant besides police–protester relations, which depicted, for example, laughing children at protest sites as well as babies or locations in other cities alongside protest symbols such as yellow ribbons. In addition, the protest camps seem to become sights in and of themselves, attracting visitors and tourists making selfies or taking pictures at and of the protest camps with its manifold artwork, installations, and banners, which helps the protesters to mediate and communicate their claims, demands and attitude (links 15–28). The same goes for protest symbols and tools, mainly the yellow umbrella, visualized not only as a symbol of resistance but also as a protection tool against armed police, with 'weapons versus umbrellas' again emphasizing the uneven power distribution between police and protesters (link 41).

#### 4.3. Visual Perspectives (RQ1c)

Though visual perspectives were briefly mentioned in the context of thematic patterns and actors' depictions, they are worth focusing on more explicitly as they create the mise-en-scene of image contents (Sikov, 2010). First of all, it is striking that clashes between protesters and the police are mostly depicted oblique, often in combination with an elevated position (link 41). This perspective certainly reinforces the dynamic character of such events and supports a spontaneous and authentic impression of the image. Masses or large groups of protesters as well as protest sites are generally depicted from bird's eye view or even as a top shot (links 6–8), giving an overview of the whole scene, illustrating the large size, collectivity, and possible impact and power of the movement. Images taking a neutral on-the-ground angle, shared for example by reporters or visitors at a protest site, convey a 'being directly at the scene' and aim to document current events or the protest camps, while close shots are used to portray protesters, revealing their character, seeing them as individuals and focusing on the physical consequences of police brutality (links 2, 3, 39, and 40). While the photographs, in general, seem to provide an authentic depiction of the movement, some seem to be trying to create iconic moments with colors obviously edited in photographic post-production or through the depiction of apparently 'staged' situations (links 54–56).

#### 4.4. Image Sources, Twitter Users, and Strategies of (De-)Legitimation (RQs 2 and 3)

Even though only a little can be said about image producers and authors of the Tweets linked to #hongkong-

protests mainly as a result of missing source credits and several re-tweets not being individually traceable due to the large size of the analysis corpus, it becomes clear that many of the image producers are professional photographers and journalists working either independently or for media outlets and news organizations, who often share their visual material on Twitter themselves. Images were also shared and re-tweeted by protesters and individual supporters, including tourists and visitors to the protest sites, as well as with accounts of activist groups, online media services, and academic institutions. Verbal hate speech against the protest movement came from one single Twitter account, mainly re-tweeting photographs of people, allegedly tourists or visitors, with the accompanying verbal text carrying an insulting tone.

Support, sympathy for the movement, and empathy for the protesters are, however, clearly the main narrative within the visual discourse. Therefore, the direction towards the legitimation of the protest movement is obvious while the de-legitimation of the movement as a possible competing narrative approach is non-existent. Strategies used to visually legitimize the Hong Kong protests include the positive characterization of the protests and protesters and the visual narration of power contrasts between protesters and police, as previously illustrated. The Hong Kong protests have also been positively characterized through 'visual comparisons', such as the example where a burning vehicle linked to the 'London riots' was placed next to an image of well-sorted bags linked to the Hong Kong protests, therewith making a distinction between 'good', constructive and well-behaved, and 'bad', destructive and rioting protests and protesters (link 48). Occasionally, users also express concerns about possible negative consequences for protesters caused by the Chinese government, when for example the 2014 movement was visually linked to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, which resulted in what is known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre (link 49).

While photographs are the most used image type within #hongkongprotests, the role of memes, infographics, and drawings cannot not be ignored as they were also used to serve either information and campaigning purposes as well as to spread messages and make fun of domestic political elites. The visual de-legitimation of political elites by their objectification is also observed within the artwork and installations at the protest sites, as has been captured photographically (links 50–53).

## 5. Discussion

The function of the images in #hongkongprotests is to suggest authenticity, the images capture moments spontaneously on the ground, communicating 'this is happening right now'. Similarly, Vis, Parry, Manyukhina and Evans (2013) address the presentation of what is happening right now within their analysis of images shared on Twitter during the 2011 UK riots, regarding still images

created from live TV and posted on Twitter as screenshots. Due to its potential for real-time photo sharing Twitter surely constitutes a supportive environment for this immediacy and perceived authenticity. Yet, as identified from the visual discourse of interest, images can also create iconic moments and can alternatively have an artistic rather than a spontaneous or authentic character, therewith providing a good example of how image making as a creative action can enter everyday communication when images are distributed via social media, as Grace (2014) suggests.

In terms of image functioning, what Grace (2014) calls the production of historical memory can be understood as an informative or documenting image function. That is for example, when newspaper articles and other written information material are photographed, or when protesters and supporters use graphics to inform about developments of the movement, and when certain events, such as in context of police violence, are captured and framed accordingly using verbal text. Images illustrating verbal text and dramaturgic image-text relations building up tension or loosening up verbal texts, as known from journalistic contexts (Holicki, 1993), occur as well, when for example using images of injured people to illustrate police violence, or protest symbols without referring to certain events or situations, such as yellow umbrellas in front of skyscrapers (see for example link 26).

The visual discourse of #hongkongprotests also brought to light a clear use of images in favor of the protest movement, legitimizing and supporting it, consequently revealing a general supportive image function. This supportive image function is not only obvious in image-text relations, but also in image-image relations within Tweets using a visual comparison strategy, when for example, comparing protesters in Hong Kong to protesters in London or contrasting the uneven power distribution between protesters and the police (see for example links 3 and 48). Images in #hongkongprotests largely take an 'at the scene' and 'on the ground' perspective when mainly centering on protest sites, protesters, as well as events at the protest camps. With a clear supportive function and an 'on the ground' perspective, visual protest storytelling on Twitter obviously follows an approach of empowering the protesters.

## 6. Conclusion

The employed documentary image interpretation gave insights into the supportive character of visual protest storytelling and image functioning in the #hongkongprotests Twitter hashtag. Due to the non-generalizability of the results, the present results certainly need to be challenged in future research dealing with the visual discourse of other pro-democracy protest movements as well as within other Twitter hashtags or even social media services. Furthermore, future research should challenge the present findings by interviewing protesters, focus on the protest artwork itself and assess the possible

cultural implications such as the influence of a 'Western lens' when performing documentary image interpretation. Future research should also scrutinize the reinforcement of social capital through visual protest discourses in social media, compare visual representations among non-journalist Twitter accounts and media journalist accounts, and give more emphasis to the different roles of different image types (such as drawings, cartoons, memes, photographs) in communicating protest movements. Finally, while automated monitoring tools are not (yet) sophisticated enough to reliably grasp qualitative visual contexts (Geise, Rössler, & Kruschinski, 2016), a quantitative approach possibly supported by automated tools providing simple real-time statistics and historical data (with the latter being quite cost-intensive, however) certainly has potential. Nevertheless, with the qualitative method used in this study focusing particularly on visual images, solid steps were made in grasping the visual discourse of the #hongkongprotests and respective image functioning on Twitter, providing helpful data for future studies examining, for example, other hashtags.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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## Annex

All of the following exemplary Twitter links are public and freely accessible.

- 
- 1 <https://twitter.com/Kaandeev/status/516538840970821632>
  - 2 <https://twitter.com/prepperknowhow/status/517481223351181312>
  - 3 <https://twitter.com/storiebox/status/516244616488955904>
  - 4 <https://twitter.com/doublewingble/status/521237645989404672>
  - 5 <https://twitter.com/GuardianWitness/status/516913040676372480>
  - 6 <https://twitter.com/FraserLi1/status/517631574804676609>
  - 7 <https://twitter.com/jimsciutto/status/518013187464384512>
  - 8 <https://twitter.com/stephenmengland/status/517362285413560321>
  - 9 <https://twitter.com/prashanrao/status/529054701418188802>
  - 10 <https://twitter.com/YushanVentures/status/523869306132508673>
  - 11 <https://twitter.com/donplusn/status/522415659800489984>
  - 12 <https://twitter.com/SputnikInt/status/539107885511229441>
  - 13 <https://twitter.com/WatchGirlInTown/status/523044173012692993>
  - 14 <https://twitter.com/GroundTruth/status/517312956829540352>
  - 15 <https://twitter.com/BUZZCLOUDTWEETS/status/532922690542129154>
  - 16 <https://twitter.com/FromCaserta/status/524397415076335616>
  - 17 [https://twitter.com/Ancient\\_Warrior/status/542748194267230208](https://twitter.com/Ancient_Warrior/status/542748194267230208)
  - 18 [https://twitter.com/queen\\_for\\_a\\_day/status/543406180471955456](https://twitter.com/queen_for_a_day/status/543406180471955456)
  - 19 <https://twitter.com/umbrellarthk/status/524576118448197632>
  - 20 [https://twitter.com/yessir\\_risa/status/527789755962900480](https://twitter.com/yessir_risa/status/527789755962900480)
  - 21 <https://twitter.com/ivanlivic/status/527315328213061635>
  - 22 <https://twitter.com/AlamyNews/status/542634072670220288>
  - 23 <https://twitter.com/NOsurenderingNO/status/533894532828385280>
  - 24 <https://twitter.com/kingwine4698/status/533189205266935809>
  - 25 <https://twitter.com/donplusn/status/527482783208206336>
  - 26 <https://twitter.com/ElaineToHK/status/517275008855318528>
  - 27 <https://twitter.com/chrisdavis31/status/539465761748942848>
  - 28 <https://twitter.com/mishfit23/status/536469158800527360>
  - 29 <https://twitter.com/MSULaw/status/535137069937721346>
  - 30 <https://twitter.com/brandonyvr/status/517571089812451328>
  - 31 <https://twitter.com/hlrecord/status/520930168052129793>
  - 32 <https://twitter.com/TunstallAsc/status/544408361081790464>
  - 33 <https://twitter.com/sdmoores/status/540523002689900545>
  - 34 <https://twitter.com/citypatarantola/status/543534951086698496>
  - 35 <https://twitter.com/wallerpan/status/543627495061200899>
  - 36 <https://twitter.com/hashtag/hongkongprotests?vertical=default&f=images>
  - 37 <https://twitter.com/reporterphoenix/status/540233112350105601>
  - 38 [https://twitter.com/Bill\\_GP/status/522947325568618496](https://twitter.com/Bill_GP/status/522947325568618496)
  - 39 <https://twitter.com/masanaminori/status/539187457179152384>
  - 40 <https://twitter.com/anadoluiimages/status/523144301065564160>
  - 41 <https://twitter.com/friendsoftibet/status/523768353463087104>
  - 42 <https://twitter.com/DevicaKong/status/522571589456375808>
  - 43 [https://twitter.com/fauziah\\_ibrahim/status/518039501378043904](https://twitter.com/fauziah_ibrahim/status/518039501378043904)
  - 44 <https://twitter.com/SexenioGTO/status/523625061748858882>
  - 45 <https://twitter.com/YahooSG/status/526557928023539712>
  - 46 <https://twitter.com/donplusn/status/525657247750176768>
  - 47 <https://twitter.com/jfung1/status/528430310728294400>
  - 48 <https://twitter.com/alanlambodublin/status/517056272634359808>
  - 49 <https://twitter.com/Dispropoganda/status/523215271993946112>
  - 50 <https://twitter.com/isaacaranjuez/status/524669384238039041>
  - 51 <https://twitter.com/middleburgh/status/526315411579478016>
  - 52 <https://twitter.com/Aoibaris/status/524581486066794497>
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- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 53 | <a href="https://twitter.com/donplusn/status/525931616682516483">https://twitter.com/donplusn/status/525931616682516483</a>             |
| 54 | <a href="https://twitter.com/MoveDemocracy/status/544510301161680898">https://twitter.com/MoveDemocracy/status/544510301161680898</a>   |
| 55 | <a href="https://twitter.com/isaacchongwai/status/543766409201717248">https://twitter.com/isaacchongwai/status/543766409201717248</a>   |
| 56 | <a href="https://twitter.com/thehongkongkid/status/527343411716571137">https://twitter.com/thehongkongkid/status/527343411716571137</a> |
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Article

## Showing/Sharing: Analysing Visual Communication from a Praxeological Perspective

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### Abstract

This contribution proposes a methodological framework for empirical research into visual practices on social media. The framework identifies practices, pictures and platforms as relevant dimensions of analysis. It is mainly developed within, and is compatible with qualitative, interpretive approaches which focus on visual communication as part of everyday personal communicative practices. Two screenshots from Instagram and Facebook are introduced as empirical examples to investigate collaborative practices of meaning-making relating to pictures on social media. While social media seems to augment reflexive, processual practices of negotiating identities, visual media, in particular, amps up aesthetic, ambivalent and embodied dimensions within these practices.

### Keywords

Facebook; iconography/iconology; Instagram; Internet research; media practices; practice theory; qualitative research; social media; visual communication; visual methods

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges”, edited by Uta Russmann (FH Wien der WKW University of Applied Sciences for Management & Communication, Austria) and Jakob Svensson (Malmö University, Sweden).

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## 1. Introduction

Visual communication on social media is on the rise—with networked, ubiquitous cameras on devices like smartphones, communicating in and through pictures and especially photos became a common everyday practice (Hand, 2012; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Lehmuskallio & Gómez-Cruz, 2016). In 2016 for example, 400M photos have been uploaded on Facebook, compared to 250M in 2013, and 760M were shared on Snapchat.<sup>1</sup> While enormous amounts of pictures are shared through a broad variety of apps every day, the crucial question for qualitative research is how these sharing practices become relevant in specific contexts and lifeworlds. Communication on social media is made up of a complex array of visual, textual, aural and other articulations, within specific soft-

ware environments. While quantitative approaches or automated analyses of digital communication data tend to grasp traces of *what* users do online,<sup>2</sup> qualitative approaches are interested in *why* and *how* they do it.

The research described in this contribution was guided and framed by the following research question: How does collaborative meaning-making of visual media take place on social media platforms? Recent research has shown that performing and constituting identities online is strongly socially entangled (Marwick, 2013; J.-H. Schmidt, 2013), iterative, productive and interpellated (Thiel-Stern, 2012). While identities have always been constituted socially and collaboratively (Bourdieu, 1972; Goffman, 1959), the ways, how, and where these practices take place have transformed: social realities are increasingly constructed and organized within specific net-

<sup>1</sup> <https://cewe-photoworld.com/how-big-is-snapchat>

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed accounts on the possibilities and constraints of big data in digital research and automated analyses of platform content see (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Mahrt & Scharnow, 2013)

worked media logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), which emerge in individualized, networked and prod-used content and practices (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Practices of social identity-making have become potentially more reflexive through their visibility and mediation in and on social media (Leaning, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Therefore, it is fundamental to conceptually and methodologically take into account the *visual and material character of practices* of identity/sociality-making when researching visual social media (Lehmuskallio & Gómez-Cruz, 2016).

Couldry and Van Dijck (2015) deem empirical work “that tracks in everyday life the mechanisms by which today’s space of social appearances is being built, its entry and exit points, and rules of operation” as particularly important—yet we have to continuously develop, question and adapt the methods and methodologies we use to carry out our empirical work. Therefore, this article outlines and applies a flexible framework for qualitative, interpretive research on visual communication in social media which is based on a praxeological approach (Bourdieu et al., 1990; Burri, 2012; Reckwitz, 2002). Strategies of interpretation of multimodal material such as screenshots are introduced, which take into account the respective logics and (visual) modalities of the available data.

First, I briefly situate the framework within qualitative internet research (2), then theoretical implications and conceptual prerequisites are discussed before (3) the framework as a link between theory and empirical research is introduced. (4) The framework is then empirically applied in an in-depth analysis of two screenshots, followed by (5) a comparative analysis which lead up to (6) conclusions regarding the research questions and the applicability of the framework in general.

## 2. A Qualitative Approach to Internet Studies and Digital Data

Qualitative research contextualizes, interrogates and compares data and is interested in how meaning is constituted and negotiated in specific contexts (Markham, 2012, 2013; Schirmer, Sander, & Wenninger, 2015). Digital data, therefore, is both a blessing and a curse for qualitative research: self-expression and interaction become bit-based data-objects, which can be easily stored and analysed. Within an interpretive paradigm, it is crucial to understand how a piece of data is relevant in the lifeworld of a participant and what it actually represents or constitutes within this context—yet this challenge is hardly new or specific to digital data. The strengths of qualitative internet studies as elaborated by Baym (Baym, 2009, p. 179) can, therefore, be understood as quality criteria of qualitative research in general and also for the framework, which will be developed:

- grounded in theory and data;
- demonstrates rigour in data collection and analysis;
- uses multiple strategies to obtain data;

- takes into account the perspective of the participant;
- demonstrates awareness of and self-reflexivity regarding the research process;
- takes into consideration interconnections between the internet and the life-world within which it is situated.

As general complexities and challenges of “internet research” are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Ardèvol & Gómez-Cruz, 2013; Hine, 2015; Markham, 2004; Markham & Baym, 2009; Pink et al., 2015), this contribution will focus on the question of how to specifically deal with *visual* data in social media contexts from a qualitative perspective.

While research on visual social media has recently become more prominent in many disciplines (see Russmann & Jakob, 2017), theories, methods and methodologies rarely relate to previous theoretical or methodological scholarship on visuality, as Rose (Rose, 2014, p. 41) points out. Research on the specifics of visual social media lags behind that of text-based media, as Highfield & Leaver (2016) point out in a “rallying cry and provocation for further research into visual (and textual and mixed) social media content, practices, and cultures, mindful of both the specificities of each form, but also, and importantly, the ongoing dialogues and interrelations between them as communication forms” (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 47). The speed and diversity of recent innovations and developments in visual online communication (such as Memes, Vines, GIFs, Stories, augmented reality visualisations etc.) might certainly feel overwhelming and conceptually confusing to researchers. This contribution aims to outline a theoretically informed and empirically tested framework for analysing visual data embedded in social media from a praxeological perspective.

A crucial methodological prerequisite is that the analysis of a visual itself cannot show or explain how a visual element is relevant in an actor’s life world or how it is perceived by other users. However, visual data analysis can unearth aesthetic, embodied and affective aspects of communicative relations which might otherwise be overlooked (Grace, 2014; Przyborski, 2017; Rose, 2012; Tinkler, 2013). To understand the complex entanglements of visual and social media, both their “media logics” have to be taken into account method(olog)ically. I, therefore, propose a *triangulation of methods* as fundamental; this implies that three conceptual aspects—practices, pictures and platforms—are objects of investigation of three methods—visual analysis, text analysis and platform analysis.

As mentioned previously, visual analysis has to be combined with additional data, such as interviews or ethnographic accounts to analyse the relevance, meaning and communicative context of visual elements. Moreover, taking into account recent theoretical scholarship (Burri, 2012; Lehmuskallio & Gómez-Cruz, 2016; Schade & Wenk, 2011), the framework advocates and empha-



sizes the importance of *visuality* and *materiality* of any picture practice. In her “Sociology of Images”, Burri (2012) points out that the triad of practice, materiality, and visuality has to be conceptually entangled to understand pictures and pictorial practices in their epistemic, material and social multiplicity. Lehmuskallio & Gómez-Cruz (2016, p. 5) also propose to understand visual communicative practices as being “both part of social symbolization processes and materially mediated”. While this is usually not contested on a theoretical level, visuality and materiality are rarely accounted for in concrete research methods. The integration of the respective specifics is therefore critical to the proposed framework. The conceptual implications of the framework will now be introduced in more detail.

### 3. Theoretical Implications of the Proposed Framework

Visual communication on social media is conceptualized as a digitally mediated communicative *practice* which leaves traces: “Both self-expressions and interactions between people produce bit-based content in networked publics” (boyd, 2011, p. 46). As pointed out above, the challenges of interpreting visual bits of data are twofold: Researchers have to understand the particularities of *pictures* as symbolic, visual media which are embedded in communicative practices, and they have to take into account social media *platforms*, which are understood as active participants with specific possibilities and constraints.

These three layers—practices, pictures and platforms—are therefore rendered as the three conceptually important objects of investigation, data collection and interpretation in the proposed framework. While “in action” these layers are of course always entangled and enmeshed, they will be dissected for analytical purposes. First, the theoretical implications of a practice approach (3.1) which takes into account visuality (3.2) and materiality (3.3) as constitutive will be briefly outlined. Then, concrete steps of analysis and interpretation will be introduced (3.4). An exemplary analysis will be conducted along two concrete empirical examples of step-by-step interpretations of screenshots from Instagram and Facebook (4).

#### 3.1. Practices

The proposed framework is based on a praxeological understanding of media use, which focuses on everyday media practices and their entanglement with lifeworlds. Praxeological approaches imply a social-constructivist, cultural theoretical perspective on media practices. They focus on actors and their habitualised doings and sayings (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010; Couldry, 2004) mostly on a micro-level, but understand these as linked to social structures: practices are understood to be structured by implicit, incorporated knowledge and habits which are shared collectively (Bourdieu, 1972; Mannheim, 1998).

Praxeological approaches aim to understand underlying cultural orientations and routines which make seemingly mundane and predictable practices so mundane and predictable (Hörnig & Reuter, 2004, p. 13).

Meaning and identities are understood as collaboratively produced—and continuously reproduced—in communicative interactions (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1967). While the collaborative negotiation of meanings is not new *per se*, recent research shows that digital, networked media may allow practices of negotiation to be quicker, more public and also potentially more reflexive and conscious (Leaning, 2009; Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011)—they are, so to say, “amped up by immediacy and hyper-social nature of digital media today” (Thiel-Stern, 2012, p. 100). Leaning also argues that “The internet brings particular social processes “closer” to the user and increases the individual’s experience of them—it plays a considerable part in making us late-modern” (Leaning, 2009, pp. 158f.). These findings are also related to an increased attention towards potential media logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) or affordances (Hutchby, 2001) which are co-constituting practices of communication—as will be briefly mapped out in section 3.3.

Our hypersociality and accompanying increased sensitivity of how users communicate with specific (imagined) audiences in specific contexts has been emphasized in recent research (Abidin, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013b). The increasing importance of visual media in digital communication seems unquestioned, yet we rarely take a closer look at how visual communication is actually practised on a micro-level in decentralized, interpersonal communication on social media. How do users “audience” pictures? Do visual media allow for differentiated tonalities, cultural markers and insider jokes? How can we grasp visual media method(olog)ically?

#### 3.2. Pictures

Pictures which are shown and shared on social media can be conceptualised firstly as a visual expression and a record of the habitus of the individual who shared the picture (Bohnsack, 2008; Goffman, 1987). What Bourdieu states in his 1960s study on personal photography, holds true for the sharing of pictures on social media: “the most trivial photograph expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group” (Bourdieu et al., 1990, p. 6). Secondly, one authenticates a specific picture as being relevant through its being shared on an account on a specific platform with a specific audience and the picture then becomes a site of visual communication between at least two users.

Pictures and especially personal photos depict and display taste, aesthetics and embodied performances (Goffman, 1987; Müller, 2011) as well as sensory, atmospheric and affective elements (Degen, Melhuish, &

Rose, 2017; Grace, 2014; Hjorth & Lim, 2012). With Goffman, pictures can be understood as condensed performances of practices that otherwise might be fleeting and hard to grasp/collect: “The rendition of structurally important social arrangements and ultimate beliefs which ceremony fleetingly provides the senses, still photography can further condense” (Goffman, 1987, p. 10), therefore “pictorial artifacts allow for a combination of ritual and relic” (Goffman, 1987)—like all bit-based data, digital pictures shared on social media are documents and elements of interactions, performances, and rituals. The analysis of pictures specifically aims to reconstruct the meaning conveyed *visually and aesthetically*, for example, through composition, perspective, scenic choreography, colours, contrast etc. The *logics* of visual media have to be taken into account—just as discursive and linguistic logics, and standards of communication are taken into account when analysing text (Przyborski & Slunecko, 2012).

Yet a single picture can only show a specific aspect of a habitus or lifeworld, namely the part of the self that has been allowed to be shown and shared on that specific platform with that specific audience, in that specific context, at that specific time. Moreover, the interpretation of a single picture may find multiple and ambiguous layers of meaning which exist in parallel (Imdahl, 1994; Przyborski, 2017),<sup>3</sup> as we will see in the exemplary interpretations. Sharing pictures on social media can have manifold meanings and contexts, and has to be understood as a field full of continuities and changes: Picture sharing has always been a means of collaborative meaning-making and “doing sociality” (Keightley & Pickering, 2014; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011) yet through social media modes of individual sharing have become more common than sharing within the family. Moreover, pictures may become conversational, ephemeral communicative elements (Van Dijck, 2007; Villi, 2015) especially in applications such as WhatsApp or Snapchat.

Therefore, understanding how sharing practices are entangled with social lifeworlds and technical affordances means on the one hand, to *think big*—by adding additional data with interviews and/or ethnographic for a holistic understanding of the context and lifeworld; and on the other hand, to *think small*—by going in depth; analysing what is already there, and exploring the entanglements that are inscribed in small pieces of data. Therefore, close readings and fine-grained analyses of multi-modal data can be revealing and helpful to understand how we communicate visually online.

If we understand shared pictures as elements of communication, the underlying method(olog)ical questions are first: how exactly does this communication take place, and secondly, how does the media environment where a picture is shared become relevant? While visual communication has always been mediated, from cave

paintings to polaroids, the entanglement of (visual) practices with hardware and software has increased the complexity of the mediation. Therefore the next section will take a brief look at the relevance of platform defaults and interfaces.

### 3.3. Platforms

In Media and Communication Studies the awareness of algorithm, code, and software as being constitutive elements of media practices has increased in recent years (Bucher & Helmond, in press; Gillespie, 2013; Hutchby, 2014), in line with a broader “new materialism” in social and cultural research (Barad, 2003; Brown, 2010; Latour, 1991). How does a digital, networked media environment and its social media logic (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) or networked media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) affect media practices, communities, economies and societies? How can the material and technical structures we act upon and interact with be conceptually and empirically integrated (Latour, 1991; Zillien, 2008)?<sup>4</sup> Researchers try to overcome techno-deterministic understandings of media practices (Hutchby, 2001; Klinger & Svensson, 2015) yet there is no common ground regarding exactly how technical features and characteristics should be theoretically and empirically integrated; furthermore methodical approaches are scarce—with some exceptions (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015).

For the framework, which is interested in visual communicative practices on a small-scale micro level, I propose to follow these approaches and to integrate material specifics of platforms in the analysis. An analysis of affordances of apps or platforms can carve out the “material substratum which underpins the very possibility of different courses of action in relation to an artefact” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 450). While affordances are defined not as being deterministic or relativistic, but as relational (Hutchby, 2001), underlying patterns of how platforms connect, moderate, select etc. might be analytically reconstructed. Affordances become visible for the researcher mainly through the interface but also through default settings (Van Dijck, 2013a).

Therefore, an analysis of these elements, defaults and interfaces of platforms will be conducted as the third element of the framework, following approaches such as that of Light et al. (2016) and McVeigh-Schultz & Baym (2015); again there will be two steps of analysis: description (what?) and interpretation (how?).

## 4. Introducing the Framework

Building on the theoretical concepts and method(olog)ical arguments that have been introduced in the previous

<sup>3</sup> The conceptual idea of multiple layers of meaning which exist at the same time, but are activated in different ways by different audiences, goes beyond Hall’s idea of transformation of meaning, as elaborated by Przyborski (2017, p. 76).

<sup>4</sup> Praxeological approaches as well have always understood both (human) bodies and (non-human) things as active participants in social practices (Hörnig & Reuter, 2004; Latour, 1991; Reckwitz, 2002; R. Schmidt, 2012).

two sections, this section outlines a framework for analysing visual communication on social media from a praxeological perspective.

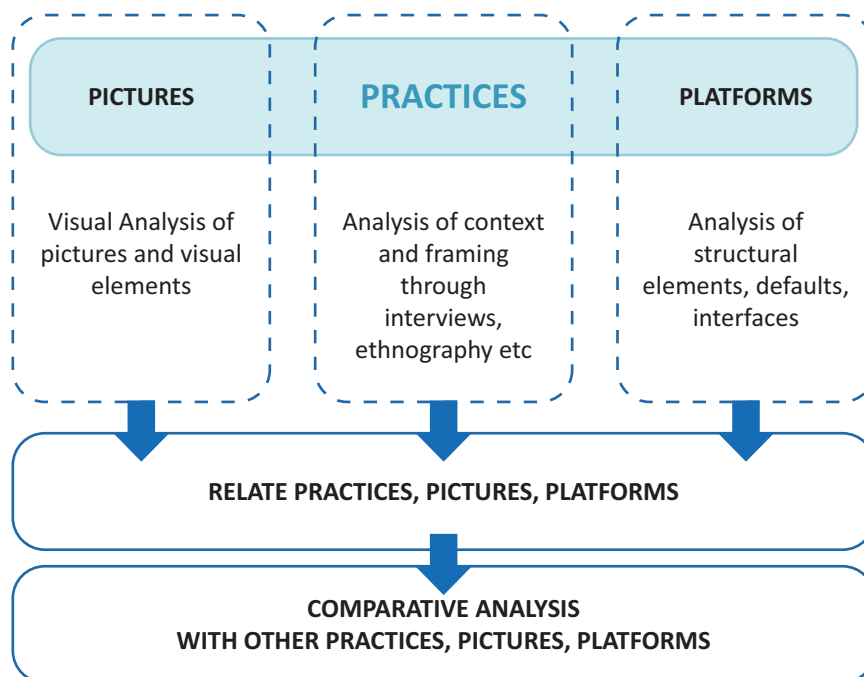
It was originally developed within the logic of the Documentary Method, a qualitative, praxeological approach (Bohnsack, 2008, 2014; Przyborski, 2017), but it is compatible with any kind of qualitative, interpretive approach which differentiates two levels of meaning (explicit and implicit meaning) and relates them in a systematic manner: *What* is said or visible is separated from *how* this content is actually conveyed within language (e.g. transcripts of interviews), practice (e.g. observation notes), or pictures (e.g. screenshots). Through reconstructing the *how*, the documentary method aims to reconstruct habitual, implicit patterns of practice, which are understood as a tacit knowledge, embedded in everyday practices of action and perception (Bourdieu, 1972). These two steps of analysis (what? & how?) are conducted on each of the three levels—practices, pictures and platforms.

This approach enables the analysis of patterns and habits that go beyond intentional, instrumental-rational action without claiming any *a-priori*-knowledge of these structures. The in-depth analysis aims to understand habitual patterns of picture sharing and sense-making within networked media environments. Through close reading and analysis of the collected material, implicit patterns can be reconstructed.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the conceptual idea of the framework: Visual communication on and in social media are *practices* with *pictures* on *platforms*. While of course all three elements are entangled in practice (Barad, 2003, 2007), they are analytically dissected to uncover the respective characteristics of the available data.

- Practices are the underlying methodological concept and the main object of research—they are analysed through interviews, ethnographic accounts but also through comments which refer to the pictures shared on social media.
- These pictures are understood as visual expressions and documents of habitus, as well as elements of communication practices. While screenshots, in a broader sense, are pictures, they also contain multimodal data that allows us to analyse not just practices of collaborative-meaning making but also the platforms themselves.
- The platforms’ interfaces, defaults and affordances can be accessed through screenshots and walk-throughs (Light et al., 2016) but the analysis can also be extended to economic, algorithmic and other factors.

The framework proposes the analysis of these three layers as a flexible and adaptable research strategy (Hine, 2015; Hirschauer, 2008; Markham, 2013), not as a standardized model or process. Therefore the order and emphasis should, of course, be systematically adapted and related to the research question. The framework pushes forward an analytical dissection of the three layers as the first step. However, following this, it is crucial to relate the findings back to each other and to analyse how these layers constitute, push, and facilitate each other—or not, as the case may be. As the final step, a comparative analysis with other practices, pictures and/or platforms is highly recommended to carve out and situate the respective specificities, similarities and differences. Concepts of media environment or polymedia can be particularly



**Figure 1.** Framework for analysing visual communication on social media.

helpful and inspiring at this stage (Gershon, 2010; Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017; Madianou & Miller, 2012).

Regarding the examples in this article, collection, interpretation and analysis are led by the research question outlined in the introduction: How does collaborative meaning-making of visual media take place on social media platforms?

#### 4.1. Data Collection, Interpretation and Comparative Analysis

For this contribution, screenshots are introduced as a simple form of *data collection* to understand collaborative meaning-making practices in social media contexts. Screenshots not only include the shared picture but also the corresponding framing through the inclusion of captions, likes, comments, and moreover, they clearly show the interface within which the picture was shared. Screenshots contain and show communicative practices and therefore give access to a detailed understanding of mediated and multimodal communication. They can be ideal starting points or support data to understand visual communication on social media. However, as already pointed out above, they should always be supported by additional data. Like most qualitative data, a screenshot is a snapshot of a specific time and event; to understand change and continuities in visual practices, additional data or longitudinal studies of practices via screenshots are needed—depending on the research aim and question. Yet the framework is not only suitable for the analysis of screenshots, but any form of multimodal data collected online which is interested in visual communication in or on social media. In any case, informed consent and ethical agreement with the participants about the use of all data is critical (Markham & Buchanan, 2015).

The *exemplary interpretations* will start with a visual analysis of the *picture*, following an iconographic-

iconologic approach (Bohnsack, 2008): the pictures were first described (iconographically) and then interpreted (iconologically), yet in the examples below these two steps are already condensed. Based on screenshots, the communicative elements which directly refer to the picture are identified and interpreted as discursive *practices* of collaborative meaning-making (Thiel-Stern, 2012). Finally, the default settings and interface structure (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013a) of the respective *platforms* where the pictures were shared was also taken into account as constitutive elements which co-constitute practice and picture.

The interpretations of the three elements are then related to each other. Finally, it is possible to perform a comparative analysis with other pictorial practices such as those of other users on the same platform, or other pictures of the same user on another platform, etc.

### 5. Applying the Framework: Empirical Examples

The data of both participants was collected and analysed in my dissertation project (Schreiber, in press) and the screenshot of Anna has also previously been discussed (Schreiber & Kramer, 2016). All names and faces were anonymized and/or pixelated.

#### 5.1. Example “Anna”

I first interviewed Anna in early 2014 together with a friend of hers, she allowed me to follow her on Instagram and I saved this picture plus comments as it was the most recent picture that Anna had posted of herself at the time of the first interview. When I interviewed them again about one year later, she had already deleted it.

In the greytone picture of Figure 2, 13-year-old Anna is positioned in front of a light, greyish background and looks at the camera, respectively—the viewer. Her face and her torso are visible from the sternum upwards. Her

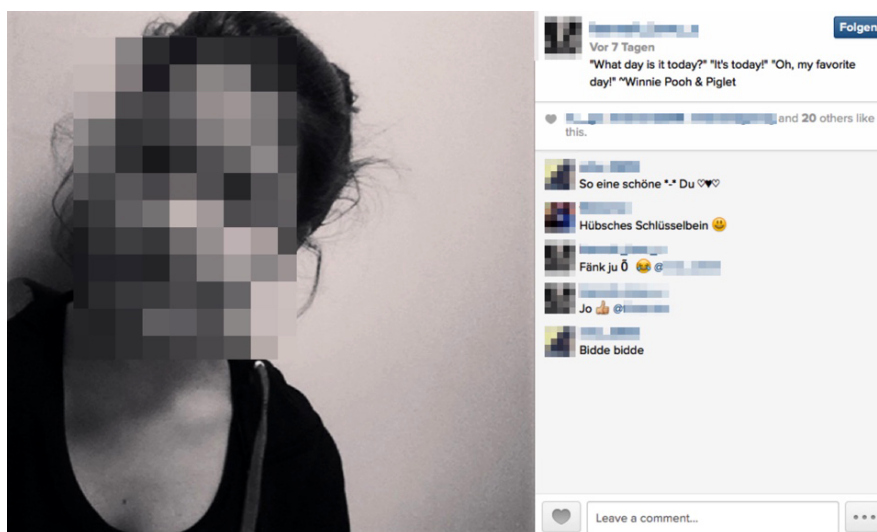


Figure 2. Screenshot from Instagram browser view.



hair is loosely held together on the back of her head, some strands of hair are loose, her lips are closed, her eyes open. Her head is slightly tilted to the right. She wears dark clothes, a top with a U-shaped neckline with the lowest point of the neckline on her sternum, where a conic shadow is visible. The neckline also touches the lower frame of the picture. The loose hair stresses a sporty, relaxed hairstyle which is underlined by the hoodie she is wearing. Yet the U-shaped, feminine and quite low neckline of the top she wears below the hoodie refers to a more grown-up, feminine style. The darkest parts of the picture, shirt and hoodie, frame on the one hand the inner contour of her body, the neckline and skin, and on the other hand the outer contour, her head and shoulders against the diffuse background.

Taking a look at the compositional structure of the picture (Figure 3), the girl takes up two-thirds of the picture while one third on the right remains empty. The figure seems to rise into the frame in a lopsided/tilted way from the left. Format, framing and central perspective highlight the tilt of her head and the frontal, direct gaze. It is not really a close-up (just the top of her forehead is not visible), yet not really a classic Renaissance-style portrait frame. Iconographically, the portrait seems to contain multiple or even contrary meanings also on other levels: her clothing is sporty yet feminine, we see a body in-between stages of development, namely a rather gender-neutral childhood and a gender binary female adolescence.

Anna's username is "Anna\_love\_u", an English phrase which basically is an expression of (not necessarily romantic) love towards an undefined Instagram audience "u", whoever sees this. Yet a grammatically correct sentence would be loveS. It seems that "love" here is a substitute for a heart-symbol, which is often used instead of the written "love", yet symbols cannot be part of Instagram usernames. The caption Anna added is an English quote from a popular meme or inspirational quote: "What day is it today?" "It's today" "Oh that's my favourite day", from Winnie Pooh & Piglet.

By using this quote as a caption for her picture, Anna authorises the meaning of the quote as an important framing element for the picture. It conveys a state of mind that refuses a time or calendar scheme as structurally important and also shows enthusiasm for living in the moment. The quote and the named protagonists refer to an infantile lifeworld and developmental stage, where anthropomorphic creatures wander around and speak. As a child, a different structure of weekdays and time-schedules are more relevant than for a grown-up professional life and "living in the moment" is possible in a different way.

Both commentators (see Table 1) refer to Anna's looks or appearance:

**Table 1.** English translation of German comments which are visible in Figure 2.

C1: Such a beauty \*-\* You

C2: Pretty collarbone ☺

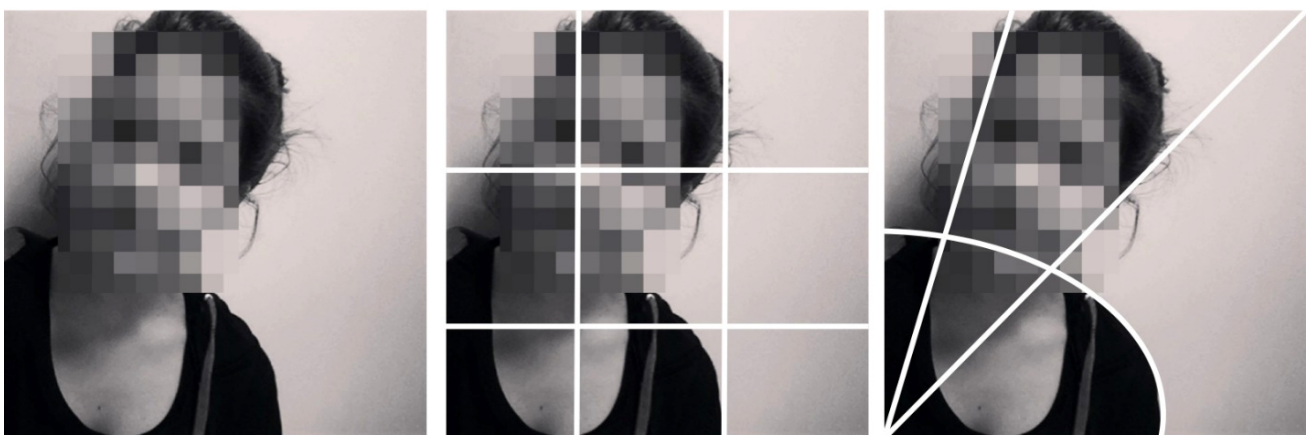
A: Thank you (lachsmiley) @C1

A: Yo (y) @C2

C1: Welcome welcome

While a comment on Instagram is not necessarily embedded in a reciprocal, conversational structure and followed by a reply or another comment, Annas replies to the comments about her picture, she thanks the commentators for the comments and addresses the comments directly to them by using the @username link (this default structure is further discussed in section 3.3). Anna's thanks and replies are framed by a rather ironic or trivializing tone.

The caption emphasizes and stresses the timelessness and placelessness that the picture already hints at. Posture, background and clothing do not point to a specific place or event, the figure seems rather ambiguous and in-between. Anna frames the diffuse visual element



**Figure 3.** Compositional structure picture "Anna".



with the quote and thereby enforces a specific layer of meaning, an ambiguity that is neither only positive nor negative, but part of her everyday life. Yet the comments do not really pick up this ambivalence and sponginess but rather focus on what the motif of the picture actually is: Anna, or even more so: Anna's body. The first comment refers to her appearance as "such a beauty" the second comment refers to her collarbone,<sup>5</sup> which is emphasized in the picture by the composition/neckline of the shirt. Both commentators, therefore, thematise the shown body and introduce categories of attractiveness as relevant frames for body pictures. In thanking them for the comments, Anna again validates this framing.

### 5.2. Example "Flora"

Again, I will start with the visual analysis of the picture, which is visible in the screenshot (Figure 4).

Flora and her female dog are outside in the woods, at daylight in autumn or spring. The dog is well groomed, Flora is focused on producing a picture. She is in her 70s, but also well "groomed" and youthful. She smiles and looks at the camera, her hair is a bit dishevelled and her skin wrinkled with some age spots. Her clothes are functional but also colourful and chic. Woman and dog are

on eye level and their bodies touch, the dog lies on a wooden panel, a bit behind Flora, she is sitting on something. The social situation the picture shows is a short break during a walk in the forest, nothing extraordinary like a holiday or a special occasion, rather a routine activity and the shared everyday—the woman and dog live together and spend their time and life together.

Compositionally, the woman and the dog are taking up a bit more than the lower half of the whole picture. Perspective and composition are merging in this picture, like in most selfies with two people or beings there is an x-shaped composition visible (see Figure 5), which emphasises the parallelity and equality of the pictured beings. They are on eyelevel in a practical and metaphorical sense, the dog is a bit more centred in the picture, but does not look at the viewer and is smaller than Flora, who leans backwards a little bit to fit into the picture with the dog.

In the picture, the closeness of the two is apparent; they are companions even though they are quite different. By emphasizing this togetherness, the picture also stresses that they are not alone. The dog is Flora's everyday companion and she places herself at eyelevel with him. This ambivalence of being together yet "only" with a dog, is visible in the picture.

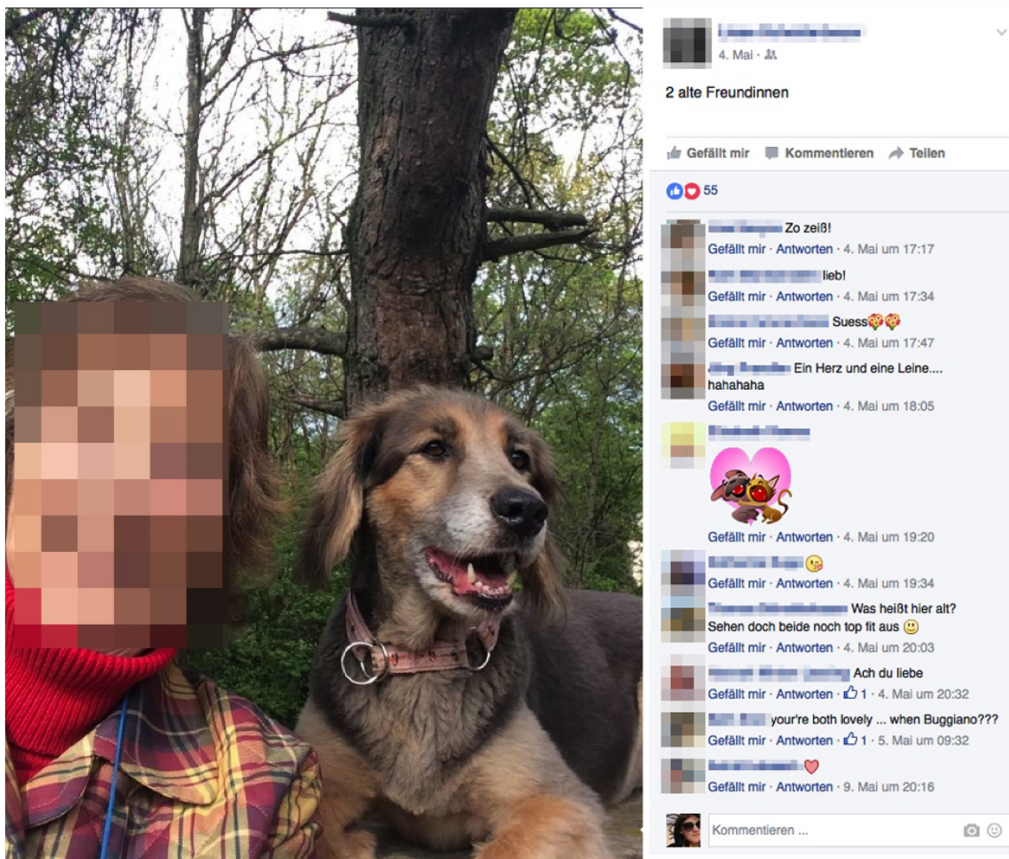


Figure 4. Screenshot of picture with caption and comments.

<sup>5</sup> As I know from the interview, Anna is very fond of collarbones, so it is quite probable that the commentator knows that too.



**Figure 5.** Compositional structure of picture, marked by author.

If we grasp the picture as the first expression in a communicative exchange, it shows a dissimilar yet equal couple, living their lives together. This first expression is framed by Flora through the caption, which further abstracts the relationship of the two pictured beings: “2 old friends” (German original: “2 alte Freundinnen”, “Freundinnen” being the female plural form of “friends”).

The way Flora frames the picture in her caption refers to an abstract motif, a general relationship, a state of being, what two old friends might look like. This caption invokes a rather distant perspective, a gaze from outside, an outer view. Ten comments were posted briefly after the upload (see Table 2). Some validated the pair in a loving way, some had a rather belittling tone to them.

Comment 5 is a visual comment: two animals who are hugging in a friendly manner (without eye contact or lips touching). This comment picks up aspects of the picture or the pictured, the embodied relationship in a comic animated way, the friendly closeness of the bodies and the furry animal.

Comment 7 refers to the topic of life age which Flora proposed, saying “both still looking topfit”, which implies the possibility of not being fit and being old anymore at some point, and “still” rather emphasizing that it could be different. The parallelity of Flora and the dog is validated with “both”, yet the comment sticks to the descriptive, distant outer view perspective, in formulating “both

look” and not “you look”. In contrast, commentators 8 and 9 address Flora or the couple directly and lovingly.

The equality of the beings which is visible in the picture is not validated by all commentators unanimously, for instance in comment 4: “A heart and a leash”. In German, “Ein Herz und eine Seele” is a German figurative expression for two people being very close to each other, the exact translation would be “A heart and a soul”, yet here the “soul” is substituted with “leash” as a metaphor for the dog. Therefore, it clearly thematises the inequality of a human owner and a dog who is leashed to his mistress. It implies that a dog might not really have a soul, but a leash and the human will always have more power. With the written expression of laughter (“hahaha”) the comment is framed with humour, yet also insecurity, irony, and maybe even provocation.

By and large, the pictured couple is validated as a couple, but the ambivalence in regard to age and parallelity that already shows in the picture continues in the comments.

**Table 2.** English translation of German comments which are visible in Figure 4.

C1: So sweet!
C2: lovely!
C3: Cute (flower flower)
C4: A heart and a leash .... hahahaha
C5: (Emoji—see screenshot)
C6: :-*
C7: What’s that supposed to mean, old? They are both still looking top fit.
C8: Alas you lovely
C9: you’re both lovely ... when Buggiano???
C10: <3

### 5.3. Platform Analysis

Based on screenshots and mappings of the upload processes, patterns of sharing cultures can be reconstructed.<sup>6</sup> Anna has shared her picture on Instagram, Flora hers on Facebook. Both platforms, Instagram and Facebook, have a similar basic structure: Users need an account to be part of the network and to follow the posts of others. User pages are structured chronologically, with the latest post on top. Facebook enforces a rather biographical narrative (Van Dijck, 2013b), while Instagram pushes forward a consistent aesthetic and networking through hashtags (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). While Facebook also remediates an album-structure regarding pictures (Walser & Neumann-Braun, 2013), Instagram enforces a logic of pictures as a “data stream” (Hochman, 2014). However, while on Instagram visual

<sup>6</sup> The platform analyses are elaborated in more detail in Schreiber (in press, 2017).

data is the main content of every post, on Facebook all kinds of data can be shared and also traces of other interactions with people or sites become visible (for example: Maria likes Anna's picture, Maria is interested in event X).

Regarding picture sharing, both platforms make pictures visible publicly or to all friends by default. Choosing a specific audience is not part of the default upload process in Instagram and Facebook (contrary to WhatsApp or Snapchat) and has to be done additionally. Following this logic, Villi differentiated between two modes of visual communication, *publishing* and *messaging*. The postings above are posted in semi-public "publishing" contexts, which may replicate earlier forms of presentation, such as "the act of placing the photograph on a pedestal in a crowded room....The others may or may not view the photograph, and if they do view it, they will not necessarily do so immediately" (Villi, 2015, p. 10). In contrast, visual messaging practices are rather reciprocal and often take place in real-time and within intimate spheres which are not easily accessible to researchers. Compared to apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat, Facebook's and Instagram's technical structures and interfaces push forward sharing practices aimed at a more loosely defined intimate audience.

#### 5.4. Comparative Analysis and Findings Regarding the Examples

In this section, the practices of collaborative meaning-making that have been reconstructed in the two examples will be compared and related to the interface structure of the platforms to answer the research question: how does collaborative meaning-making of visual media take place on social media platforms?

In both cases, the picture is a first (visual) statement in communicative interactions. Both pictures have been selected and authorised by Anna and Flora for their accounts. Both pictures convey layers of meaning that can be elaborated and further framed in visual or textual communication. Moreover, both pictures are selfies, a genre that is intrinsically linked to sharing and visibility politics of social media (Tiidenberg & Gómez-Cruz, 2015). While Anna and Flora are at very different stages in their lives, they both show and share their portraits and thereby themselves in the networked environments where they put them up for discussion. Anna's adolescent body and Flora's ageing body are collaboratively negotiated through comments and reactions such as likes and GIFs.

Platforms are co-constituting this practice and the emerging genre, because they afford the technical possibilities of sharing, liking and commenting. They push forward visual communication as "visual chat" (Gómez-Cruz & Thornham, 2015, p. 6) and afford a variety of possibilities for commenting, such as through emojis. Yet interaction is not only promoted on the technical but also on the visual level: The portrait as an iconographic genre offers the picture of a face as *inter-face* to the viewer, enabling a possibility to communicate with the portrait

as a placeholder for the pictured person (Belting, 2013, p. 136). As the comments in the examples show, different interpretations and references may exist alongside each other. Likes and comments are well-rehearsed elements in both platforms, they give users the ability to show that they have seen the picture and to acknowledge a mediated presence in a specific social media context, no matter where they are and when they see the picture; these abilities were made use of in both cases.

Regarding the platforms, both Facebook and Instagram quickly expanded and refined the possibilities of liking and commenting since the original collection of the discussed examples in 2014 and 2015: Facebook added more possibilities to react to postings besides the thumb-up like-symbol, both platforms implemented a forum-like structure that made it possible to comment on comments, the range of emojis, stickers, and reaction gifs grew, and linking other users in comments became easily possible. These technical developments indicate that collaborative meaning-making is a key practice of (visual) communication, how such collaborative meaning-making is enhanced by the design and logic of social media should be investigated further.

## 6. Conclusions

The dissection of three levels of analyses has been helpful to make the complex interrelations of visual communication and social media more transparent, easier to reconstruct and analyse. Visual conventions, aesthetics, interfaces and defaults are inscribed in, and entangled with, practices of collaborative meaning-making in our everyday lives. A picture shared on social media is a first visual step within a multimodal conversation or interaction, an initial proposition of certain layers of meaning, which is further negotiated, framed and elaborated on by subsequent communicative expressions. These expressions can have many forms, they might be linguistic, visual or multimodal. These expressions could then be affirmative, oppositional, sceptical etc. in relation to the initial visual proposition.

By commenting on a picture, users participate in a process of collaborative meaning-making of and around the picture. The underlying chronological structure of Facebook's timeline and Instagram's feed or account allows users to show change and development but also to curate their account, for example by deleting pictures that do not "fit" anymore. Platforms clearly make these practices more accessible and potentially more reflexive, they stimulate continuous status updates and put forth the processuality of doing identity and sociality as a dynamic practice rather than a fixed entity—a conclusion others have also arrived at (Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Marwick, 2013; Meikle, 2016; Whitlock & Poletti, 2008).

However, this contribution (and this thematic issue) is specifically interested in the *visual dimension* of this transformation. What might be specific to meaning-making regarding *visual* communication on social media?



Firstly, comments mainly refer to visible bodies and aesthetics. While this might seem mundane, it has to be recognised that visual media are especially adequate/fit to show embodied, aesthetic and affective meanings which might be hard to put into words and text (Bal, 2003; Rose, 2014). This is also clearly visible in the development of reaction GIFs,<sup>7</sup> which seem to endlessly extend and culturally refine the repertoire of visual emotional expressions that emojis have offered. Visual social media reminds us time and again that facial and embodied expressions remain crucial as “social cues” (Baym, 2015) in digital, networked communication; they seem to have pushed forward a re-embodiment, a return of flesh and bone to social media.

Secondly, photographic pictures, and probably visual media in general, seem to be ideal for showing ambiguous, multiple or disputed layers of meaning, as also identities can be rather ambiguous and multiple (Goffman, 1959; Marwick, 2013). One can be child and woman at the same time, like Anna—or be alone and not alone at the same time, like Flora. Unlike text, which is a sequential medium, pictures convey meaning in a simultaneous manner and therefore allow us to show different layers and aesthetics at the same time.

The proposed framework is primarily suitable for qualitative, in-depth case studies where contextual information regarding the pictures and sharing practices is available. Moreover, a screenshot is a snapshot in time, and for research investigating individual dynamic developments and changes, longitudinal analyses would be pivotal. Also, the framework would have to be adapted to accommodate a larger corpus of data. The analysis of static, photographic pictures can be grounded in a considerable corpus of existing (methodologic) scholarship; however, formats such as reaction GIFs, memes, stories etc., which are quite new developments also challenge visual methods further and should be investigated.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Digital-Networked Images as Personal Acts of Political Expression: New Categories for Meaning Formation

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### Abstract

This article examines the growing use of digital-networked images, specifically online self-portraits or “selfies”, as deliberate and personal acts of political expression and the ways in which meaning evolves and expands from their presence on the Internet. To understand the role of digital-networked images as a site for engaging in a personal and connective “visual” action that leads to formation of transient communities, the author analyzes the nude self-portrait of the young Egyptian woman Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, which during the Egyptian uprisings in 2011 drew attention across social media. As an object of analysis this image is a prime example of the use of digital-networked images in temporally intentional distribution, and as an instance of political enactment unique to this era. This article also explains the concept of participatory narratives as an ongoing process of meaning formation in the digital-networked image, shaped by the fluidity of the multiple and immediate textual narratives, visual derivatives, re-appropriation, and remixes contributed by other interested viewers. The online circulation of digital-networked images in fact culminates in a flow of ever-changing and overarching narratives, broadening the contextual scope around which images are traditionally viewed.

### Keywords

Arab Spring; feminist art; online images; political expression; self-portrait; selfies; social media; visual communication

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The profusion of online images disseminated by mobile communication devices onto social media, and particularly in near-immediate response to social, cultural, or political events is indicative of a contemporary phenomenon in which “digital-networked images” have become deliberate, individual acts of political identity where post-state expression of ideological commitment is enacted (Kasra, 2017). Made or captured primarily by non-professionals for social media distribution through means of participatory communication, digital-networked images increasingly function as a new venue for political advocacy and engagement. The accessibil-

ity, affordability, and immediacy of expression brought about by new technology continuously allow networked, global citizens to participate independently in civic discourse without the structure, affiliation, or constraint associated with traditional political agency. Indeed, image-based activism via snapshots, avatars, and selfies not only has the power to bend the rules that have historically defined and determined a political organization’s purpose or direction, but to also construct new collective, political, and protest identities on social media (Gerbaudo, 2015). “Image activists” in fact sometimes participate in civic engagement independent even of others who share their ideological point of view but who may disagree with the style of expression.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the past decade, social media users have increasingly used images, memes, avatars and selfies to mobilize, organize and participate in globalized politics (Kraidy, 2016; Kuntsman, 2016; Mottahedeh, 2015; Van Zoonen, Vis, & Mihelj, 2010) or construct new collective identities (Gerbaudo, 2015).

Although the impact and visibility of these images is sometimes fleeting and short-lived, as they may be forgotten and submerged in the cacophony of newly uploaded photographs and videos or follow-on news stories, by circulating across social media digital-networked images are increasingly effective in provoking action and influencing viewers' political judgment in empowering new ways. Activist-images are also just as likely to linger perpetually, as they are shared and re-shared in innumerable spaces, stored on accessible servers, and reposted by users who can remix and/or repurpose them at any point for their own aims. As cultural objects infused with agency, these images represent a wholly new era of political expression, and they are saturated with moral, ethical and geo-political nuances and force.

To better understand the role of digital-networked images as a site for engaging in a personal 'visual' action, this article analyzes a nude self-portraiture, captured and disseminated online by a young Egyptian woman Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, which during the Egyptian uprisings in 2011 drew profound attention across social media in part because of the nudity it displayed. As an artifact of the visual activism phenomenon, Elmahdy's self-portrait is a prime example of the use of digital-networked images in temporally intentional distribution, and as an instance of political enactment unique to 21st century. Studying the image also furthers the current scholarship on political implications of selfies and their impact on notions of power, citizenship, democracy, and protest among others. Even though Elmahdy's self-portrait was not captured by a smart phone camera held at arm's length or pointed at a mirror, an attribute commonly detected in a selfie image, her image is typical of a contemporary selfie image. A selfie is primarily a networked self-portrait taken to be disseminated across the Web and social media (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015). Similarly, Elmahdy took the image of herself for the sole purpose of uploading it on to her blog page and sharing it online.

The method of analysis used here to discuss the implications of social media image activism is twofold: first, it applies semiotic analysis using Barthes' (1980) theoretical concept of the rhetoric of the image which he posits contain three layers of a meaning: *linguistic*, *denoted*, and *connoted*. Examining Elmahdy's visual political expression from a multidisciplinary perspective necessarily leads to inquiries about the meaning of the digital-networked image and its reliance on the multiple and immediate textual narratives and visual derivatives that form and circulate in response to it, specifically since they exist outside the image-makers' original intention and control. Most importantly, in their circulation across the Web, derivatives, appropriations and remixes further transform the narrative and meaning of the original image away from the original intent of the image-maker. Because of the dynamic environment in which they func-

tion, this analysis of selfie-derived digital activism and its associative texts hereafter posits *participatory narrative* as a new category of meaning formation in research about the political use of digital-networked images.<sup>2</sup> Within online communities, *participatory narratives* arise from evolving conversations that inspires responses that may likewise be contingent upon other mediated, citizen-produced visual byproducts surrounding an image. In short, participatory narratives reflect a dialectic relationship between individuals and digital technology that takes expression across social media.

Given this dialectic environment, this study further imposes sociopolitical analysis using Bennett & Segerberg's (2012) theory of connective action for understanding personalized politics in the 21st century and Gerbaudo's (2014, 2015) framework on how individualized forms of politics are in fact manifestations of new forms of collective identities in the contemporary web. Digital-networked images such as Elmahdy's reveal their capacity to serve as a popular easy-to-personalize action frame through which other participants are then able to channel their own personal stories, interpretations, and histories as part of various collective identities. In effect, interconnected online citizens, or netizens, participate politically by creatively producing, mixing, re-appropriating, and even circulating their own original creations, imbuing them with a particular, personal aesthetic, leading to construction of a collective *wenness*. In doing so, whether purposely or indirectly, they fundamentally alter the framework for political protesting (Gerbaudo, 2015), which has historically been conceived as a centralized, one-to-many or few-to-many on the ground act using a shared and singular approach (Melucci, Keane, & Mier, 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

## 2. Analytical Perspectives on Digital-Networked Images as Personal, Political Action

Using personal digital-networked images to express sociopolitical opinions conveys a different kind of personal presence operating within political discourse than one achieved through textual forms of online communication or, for that matter, through the collective action strategies designed by any political organization. Unlike in the past, when comparatively few individuals with access to the expensive technologies of image making could engage in this powerful form of expression, the increasing ubiquity of mobile and affordable digital cameras, their vastly improved design in the last decade, and the immediacy of social media connecting political geographies and borders allows ordinary citizens around the globe to instantly announce their support or disenchantment with ruling parties or public policy. Digital-networked images have the potential to disrupt even state-imposed political processes through this creative form of visual

<sup>2</sup> The phrase *participatory narrative* alludes to Jenkin's (2009) phrase "participatory culture" from the early days of the Internet whereby he brought attention to the participatory qualities of digital media that encouraged communities to creatively and actively interact, collaborate and participate in production of culture and promoted civic engagement.

expression (Gerbaudo, 2015; Kraidy, 2016; Mottahedeh, 2015; Van Zoonen et al., 2010).

In *Representing the Unrepresentable*, her seminal study of political identity in Iranian cinema, Mottahedeh (2008) justifies her use of Foucault's archeological method as a means to study the reciprocal and ahistorical link between visual texts and political identity. Mottahedeh reasserts Foucault's focus upon "transformations in their specificity" (p. 118) in order to account for discontinuity in the evolution of an idea—or in this discussion, the life of a digital-networked image—this approach also captures the phenomenon of specific, individual intellects expressing political agency in what I deem a post-state sphere using the technology of the digital image. Mottahedeh explains that it is in the moment of confrontation between individual intellect and state intent that transformation, reorganization and reconstitution of meaning production takes place (p. 120). Upending systems of power and knowledge, activist-inspired selfies resituate political power, knowledge and information distribution to within the individual. Reimagining cultural image-artifacts in this way "is a task with global consequences" (p. 120) in that it concomitantly alters our understanding of institutions and technologies themselves.

As professional photographers will attest, selfies also disrupt previous paradigms within the disciplines that frame their cultural acceptance. For both elected officials and disciplinary practitioners, therefore, selfies beg the question "where is this decentering of power taking us and how far?" to which none of us quite know the answer. Nevertheless, in their potent ability to draw public attention away from state or conventional narratives and onto expressions by individuals who are unrepresented, misrepresented and marginalized, digital-networked images of the sort examined here afford power over hegemonic conventions.

Prior to the era of ubiquitous digital communication, the points of entry into protest spaces were primarily facilitated by the organized groups who directed citizens' participation and mobilization within well-defined action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 770). The focus of these group-oriented action frames was on building a single collective identity or "the shared definition of a group that derives from its members' common interests, experiences and solidarity" (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 105). A good example of a collective action frame is street protesters showing solidarity with a cause by marching shoulder-to-shoulder, wearing identically-designed outfits, or carrying posters and placards that the organizations provided for them. By creating a shared sense of identity and "we-ness", collective agents were traditionally organized towards collective action.

The present age of personal, networked communication ushers in a new paradigm for sociopolitical organization centered not on forming a single shared identity but instead on individuals and temporary personalized actions and communication methods (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Affirming the process of individualiza-

tion in networked societies, Castells (2004) states that the frames of action in the new context are shaped and reshaped according to the values and needs of individual political actors and "the need and desire for sharing and co-experiencing" (p. 223). Similarly, using the term "connective action" Bennett and Segerberg (2012) examine the impact of the Internet and social media communication technologies on recent sociopolitical movements to argue that citizens' engagement with this emerging form of political action "is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression than through common group or ideological identification" (p. 744). Connective action, according to the authors, enables participants to contribute to a social movement by spreading their content to intra- and interpersonal networks on social media.

Connective action is a useful concept for grasping the role of citizen-produced digital-networked images in sociopolitical movements. Offering an alternative visual model for organization, mobilization, and coordination of participation in the 21st century, the images express their contributors' identities, personalities, and narratives and serve as personalized, visual means of communication. But the strong sense of solidarity and collective we-ness that forms among and between digital activists, particularly in relation or response to selfies and other digital-networked images, which take on a life of their own, reveals that *connective action* is not sufficient to fully describe contemporary social media movements. As such, Gerbaudo (2015) argues that the social media era ushers in an emergent form of collective identification whereby image rallies and avatar protests, which he refers to as "memetic signifiers", are inherently different from traditional protest and a unified collective identity (p. 928). Enabled by connective actions and practices, Gerbaudo maintains, the networked media bring fragmented online communications and interactions together that form collective identities and highly personalized and transient communities (p. 920). In essence, while digital-networked images allow for self-expression and personalization of protest activity, they lead to new ways of experiencing and constructing collectiveness and group solidarity. These images support the "individuals-in-the-group" characteristic of social media protesting as proposed by Milan (2015) wherein the author argues that in the Internet age "the 'collective' is experienced through the 'individual' and the group is the means of collective action, rather than its end" (p. 888).

Nevertheless, the frameworks of connective and collective action do not explain the reasons why among a large pool of digital-networked images only a select number become instrumental in shifting the political tide, even if briefly. Nor does it explain the political implications of these personalized acts of expression circulating on social media. Is it the content of the image that directly or indirectly alters its sociopolitical impact, or the mode of dissemination the image-maker employs? That is, if a digital-networked image is deployed to announce



one's political beliefs how does it construct meaning such that when it is disseminated it generates new participatory narratives, and to what end?

### 3. Digital-Networked Image and Formation of Meaning

A semiotic analysis of emerging, visual modes of civic engagement is useful in understanding how meaning is communicated in digital-networked images and to what extent they function socio-politically. Within, among and between images, Barthes' (1980) taxonomy for understanding meaning construction offers a tool for studying digital-networked images that are specifically designed to be politically charged. According to Barthes, the three different layers of messages mediated through an image are the denoted or literal message, the connoted or symbolic message, and the linguistic message. He describes the denoted message as literal and straightforward, specifically the representation of a visible object in a defined temporal and physical setting. The connoted message is considered symbolic, a representation of the representation, as it were. Furthermore, the meaning of the connoted message, Barthes (1979) argues, is drawn from "the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it" (p. 197). The reading of a photograph is thus solely contingent and dependent on the individual viewing it and the socio-cultural frame through which one decodes its message (p. 206).

Consequently, an image can and must be interpreted in variety of ways simply because connoted signifiers are not created and understood through a single set of historical, social, or cultural codes. Pointing to the plurality and variability of readings among image viewers, Barthes (1980) writes, "The variation in readings is not, however, anarchic; it depends on the different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image, and these can be classified and brought into a typology" (p. 280). I propose that a typology of politicized digital-networked images is a necessary foundation for predicting the trajectory of future political agency, which is clearly changing in disruptively innovative ways. The conventions and codes that an image-maker uses to embed connotations could vary significantly from those the viewer will use to decode the message. Viewers, according to Barthes, interpret the meaning of the images based on their own experiences and their contextual points of view. Any reading of an image therefore varies according to the individual viewing it and the context in which it appears, and each with its own potential, and perhaps immeasurable, force. That force of persuasion embedded within digital-networked images evolves, I would argue, from an inherent agreement between image-makers and their imagined and real viewers about civic autonomy.

Lastly, Barthes defines a linguistic message as a verbal signifier that is provided for better understanding of pictures, for example a caption alongside an image. He argues that while it is within the interrelation of all types

of messages that meaning is constructed, it is an image's accompanying text that guides the viewer to a particular interpretation of the photograph. Further, Barthes suggests that images are *polysemous*; that is, they contain multiple layers of meaning and can be interpreted in many ways (p. 274). The linguistic message controls the meaning in otherwise polysemous images, directing them towards a chosen meaning. The text and image therefore can never be viewed as separate from one another; only together do they communicate meaning.

Barthes analysis helps us to explore the process of meaning formation in digital-networked images in the context of political expression. But while a photograph's meaning has historically been contingent on the intentions of the person who created it and the context under which it was received, the pairing of the medium of photography with instantaneous social media has enabled an even more complex system of meaning in digital-networked images. This duo directly impacts their sociopolitical implications of photographs, offers far greater fluidity in meaning creation, and argues for an expansion of Barthes' taxonomy. To that end, the prolific invention of meaning stemming from digital-networked images—*dialogic imagery*—birthed by autonomous intellects and delivered by ever-expanding technology, has the potential to challenge political control and hegemony.

The online circulation of digital-networked images not only empowers citizens to visually broadcast their political stance beyond geographic and state boundaries, it also enlivens the contextual frame within which a post-state visual expression may be viewed and interpreted. While the images may be randomly sandwiched between other completely unrelated images as an end-user clicks through offerings on the Web, they do so from an informed cultural perspective, and this guides the reading of each image they encounter. That is to say, the context of the image's viewing is carried within the viewer, and this enables even greater freedom of thought and engagement for individuals on both ends of the image. Likewise, the image itself is imbued with political meaning through its semiotic composition and contextual frame. Image-maker, image, and image viewer all exist in a vastly expanded frame of reference, and this defines a new direction for research in communication and political science, among other disciplines.

Moreover, the easy access to image-making tools and image-sharing platforms, and, importantly, the instantaneous link between these technologies, births continuous and overarching flows of reciprocal narratives and visual derivatives, and their cascading participatory effect further influences the intent, meaning and consequent impact of digital-networked images upon political scenes. So where in earlier times the image taker was a static, privileged entity discriminately producing and sharing an image that could then be the focus of far more localized interpretation (as in print publication), a digital-networked image functions indiscriminately in planetary

swirls of reading and rereading, each time with uncontrolled and decentered interpretative power.

Understanding this phenomenon is far more complex than any single image could elucidate; however, selected, notable examples provide a focus for establishing a method to study this emerging visual-political phenomenon. In this article, I interpret digital-networked images captured and created by Middle Eastern women protestors during the Arab Spring and discuss their political meaning and implications. Because these images represent women's protests against patriarchal and sociopolitical repression, they allow us to examine artifacts of autonomous agency within this political context. Further, they offer a site for study of Web-based feminist expression and political intervention that leads to digital collectivism.

#### 4. The Selfie of Aliaa Magda Elmahdy

The 2011 self-published self-portrait, selfie, of Aliaa Elmahdy, a young Egyptian woman, presents an opportunity to analyze the meaning and impact of digital-networked images that are intended to partake in civic movements or express political dissent (Figure 1). Elmahdy's nude selfie incorporates artistic and personal forms of 21st century political action in response to the ongoing repression, misogyny, and censorship targeting women in Egypt. Since she posted the image to her newly



**Figure 1.** Aliaa Magda Elmahdy nude self-portrait (selfie) published on her blog "A Rebel's Diary", in 2011.

launched blog, "A Rebel's Diary", on October 23, 2011, Elmahdy's image has drawn attention across social media platforms and brought over 9 million visitors to her site. On November 17, 2011, *ABC News* reported that the post received 1.7 million hits since the day it was published, and according to a *CNN* report, the number of Elmahdy's *Twitter* followers increased in size from a few hundred to more than 14,000 (Fadel Fahmy, 2011).

In the image, which Elmahdy published in black and white, she simply stands in front of the camera wearing only black stockings and a pair of red flat shoes, with a red flower adorning her hair. Resting her right foot on the nearby footstool and her hands casually against her thighs, she confidently looks straight in the camera. Captioning the image, she writes:

Put on trial the artists' models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hang-ups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression.

Elmahdy's public nudity appears to be a declaration of her rights as a female Egyptian citizen. As the accompanying text suggests, her depiction of nudity is an overt demand to end the existing sexism, repression, and violence against Egyptian women, particularly in view of the rising influence of the Islamist party in her country's politics.

Looking at Elmahdy's self-portrait, the denoted messages, or visible signifiers, are easily identifiable: a nude Middle-Eastern woman, her red hair flower, red flat shoes, the footstool, and a room that appears to be a bedroom space. These denoted messages literally translate to "a naked woman standing in a bedroom". While the nudity may raise curiosity in the viewers' mind, with its similarity to millions of other female nudes in the online space, Elmahdy's digital-networked image looks like a familiar non-coded, nude self-portrait. However, as Barthes affirms, no image can be purely denoted. The meaning of an image is extracted through connoted messages hidden within the photographic images. Image treatment or stylistic interventions of composition, lighting, coloring, and juxtaposition provide connoted layers of meaning.

Yet, upon closer reading amateurism becomes apparent in the photograph. The arrangement of the visual elements does not follow the conventions of professional photography in terms of composition, focus, lighting, or framing; the background's texture and lines are distracting and the cropping of the image is too tight, especially towards the bottom of the photograph. The on-camera flash has created a harsh, unnatural shadow contour around the body, which is another common feature of non-professional photographs.

Despite its amateur composition, Elmahdy's self-portrait is nevertheless calculated and planned. Specifically, her choice of red shoes and a red flower in her hair, deliberately juxtaposed against a monochromatic backdrop, and the irony implied in Elmahdy's non-erotic pose yet titillating floral stockings, stir curiosity. Elmahdy's careful use of red within the monochromatic scene heightens the impact of the image, separating it from other color self-portrait snapshots—and other sexualized pornographic images—found on the Web. The sparing use of red within the monochromatic tone also directs the viewer's gaze through the contours of Elmahdy's naked figure, drawing the eyes from the red flower to the red shoes and away from her exposed private areas in the center of the composition. As a result, the image emphasizes her censored and forgotten femininity, without being overtly sexual.

Even though the tight stockings suggest sexuality, and her nakedness implies vulnerability, Elmahdy's piercing gaze confronts the viewer with a sense of self-confidence that is very different from the self-effacing demeanor enforced upon Muslim women. On the contrary, Elmahdy is neither friendly nor inviting. Appearing unconcerned about her nakedness, which has now been seen repeatedly on the Web and will persist for an indeterminate time, Elmahdy's visage lacks any trace of emotion, whether happiness, coquetry, sadness, or even anger. In her nudity, she re-inscribes externally-imposed definitions of her own personhood against Arab and Islamic definitions of privacy, womanhood, modesty, and respectability by boldly refusing to hide any aspect of her sexuality and femininity.

### 5. Digital-Networked Image as Rebel's Diary

Taking the selfie against a wood-paneled wall that appears to be in a bedroom<sup>3</sup>—a familiar domestic domain—Elmahdy knowingly broadcasts her private body and private sphere publicly on social media. Posting the image on social media, she leaves the confines of the domestic space and goes outside, all by herself, to demand attention to her female existence and her neglected needs. Bearing in mind that in most Muslim countries women are assigned to the domestic sphere, and that women's presence in society is usually chaperoned by patriarchal guardianship (father, brother, or husband), Elmahdy's selfie represents an extreme act of transgression and rebellion or as Kraidy (2016) puts it a "radical mode of creative insurgency" (p. 161). Through the process of self-representation, she constructs a political subjectivity, reclaims control over her body, and breaks away from the social constraints and traditional Arab mores and customs about women's seclusion from the public. Not only did her choice to appear undressed in front of camera indicate female promiscuity in the Arab culture, but Elmahdy's red hair flower and tight lace stockings demonstrate rebellion even against the idea of female modesty.

<sup>3</sup> She later wrote on Twitter that she took the image at her parents' house.

But the meaning of Elmahdy's digital-networked image does not clearly reveal itself until the viewer pairs the image with its textual accompaniment or linguistic message. The written text, which functions in the form of caption, username, and blog name, elucidates and further contextualizes additional meaning, and provides a set of interpretative schemes to better understand the photograph. In stark contrast to her peaceful pose and seemingly indifferent gaze, Elmahdy's written text is violent and confrontational. It sets out a sense of anger and destruction that is not visible in the image. Even though the selfie conveys her revolt to reclaim her femininity within a passive pose, her near-manifesto caption is filled with active verbs that shame the reader for the injustice, humiliation, negligence, and ignorance imposed upon Egyptian women. Writing, "put on trial the artists' models...hide the books...destroy the nude statues of antiquity...burn your bodies" she demands an end to the misogyny that she and other Egyptian women have endured for centuries. By including a verbal caption, Elmahdy forthrightly asserts how she wants her body to be read by the unending, global and reactionary audience she clearly imagined and predicted.

Elmahdy's aesthetic choices, the accompanying text, and her use of the Web as a medium of dissemination indicate a purposeful visual and political construction, blurring the line between photography and political insurgency. In that regard, Elmahdy's conceptual approach and execution closely resemble the style and conventions of several contemporary feminist artists who embraced female nudity and the female body as a subject of continuous self-exploration. These similarities invoke another layer of political meaning into Elmahdy's deceptively personal selfie. Specifically, political self-portraiture has been explored creatively by feminist artist Hannah Wilke, who, through a series of nude self-portrait still images and videos, defined and redefined womanhood outside of the social norm established by the art world in particular and by mass media generally. Wilke frequently presented her own fully- or partially-naked body, in front of the camera using her own images in creative political expression.

For example, in her provocative photo series *Intra-Venus*, Wilke (1992) confronts the viewer with a forbidden subject: her nude female body while undergoing chemotherapy as she battles lymphoma drawing attention to the political implications of cancer and of women's experience of it. In one of the self-portraits, she stands against a white wall naked and facing the camera. Wilke's body appears indisposed, vulnerable, and weak, but her pose conveys conviction and energy. Posing like a high fashion model, she places one hand on her hip and the other on her stomach, and bends her right knee in—a pose used in marketing and modeling to make the hips appear slimmer. She directs her gaze towards the camera, she presents the viewer an unseen state of the feminine body; instead of high heels, she's in white house

slippers. With the simple composition and the flash illumination reflected on Wilke's body, the photograph first appears candid, transparently denoting cancer and approaching death.

Wilke's photographs present layers of meaning and the bold image of a body ravaged by cancer is not only denotative, but also connotes a political statement left for the reader to impose upon it. Wilke's boldly nude artistry is both distant enough from viewers to keep her safe from harm and at the same time penetratingly disruptive for viewers because it provokes cultural norms revealing a contradictory view of the feminine body, one that challenges mainstream capitalistic ideals of femininity, feminine beauty, and youth in the Western culture. Wilke's photograph is not a snapshot capturing an instant and candid moment but a personal-is-political statement rendered in photography. This may be why it became the method used by Aliaa Magda Elmahdy. In like manner, by posing nude in front of the camera Elmahdy unveils female sexuality that's been tangled with repressive social codes of modesty and morals. She uses her unclothed body to reveal the censored sexuality and suppressed voices of Egyptian women she strives to reclaim.

Another photograph from the early feminist art movement resembling Elmahdy's is the infamous self-portrait of Lynda Benglis, which appeared as an ad page in the November, 1974, issue of *Artforum*. Benglis spent \$3,000 to buy the ad space—a significant amount for the time—to advertise for her upcoming exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City. In the ad, she poses naked holding a latex dildo in her right hand to symbolically represent the power associated with masculinity (Ratcliff, n.d.). By publishing an image of herself as a phallic woman in a reputable and popular art magazine, Benglis mocks the male domination and overrepresentation in the art world and rebels against underrepresentation of women. Like Benglis, Elmahdy breaks the rules by inserting herself in a male-dominated public discourse.

## 6. Vulgarity as Digital Artifact: Online Political Reactions

Nonetheless, even if Elmahdy could afford to buy an expensive ad space, she could never appear nude in any print or broadcasting media in the Middle East. The cultural and religious laws strictly prohibit Muslim women from appearing in public without the Islamic dress code and in parts of the region women are punished for not complying with the prescribed dress code. As an Egyptian woman with unconventional ideas, Elmahdy successfully defies public restrictions by using the Internet as her method of communication. Publishing her selfie online granted her access to an audience much larger than the number of subscribers to any magazine or local TV

station. Unlike Benglis, whose audience was limited to *Artforum* subscribers, or Wilke, whose work was seldom widely published outside the limited spaces of galleries and museums and hence generally remained within the small circle of art enthusiasts, Elmahdy's image reached Internet users around the world and her story was covered by major news media outlets. Thus, through online circulation, Elmahdy's work became more widely known among the general public than the other acclaimed artworks. The distribution of her digital-networked image transformed an act of political insurgency into an iconoclasm, a post-state personalized political artifact that enabled Elmahdy to participate in social uprising on a global level, without physically protesting on the street or putting herself in danger for appearing nude on a public street.

This perhaps contributes to why Elmahdy's online declaration of political position was subjected her to risks or adverse reaction. Indeed, the backlash against the online circulation of Elmahdy's photograph was such that even secular, liberal opposition groups immediately and publicly rejected any affiliation with Elmahdy, fearing that her radical behavior could potentially damage their reputation and popularity among Egyptian voters in the upcoming parliamentary election. On *Twitter*, Egyptian liberals expressed concerns that the conservative Islamists would blame the party for Elmahdy's action: "They're gonna throw it all on liberals and seculars [sic]" (AliHgrs, 2011).

With the image circulating the Web and on the media, the Egyptian opposition felt the need to immediately disavow any connection to Elmahdy, especially since she described herself as a secular, liberal feminist Egyptian on her blog. On November 17, 2011, the *New York Times* reported that in an interview with the Pan-Arab news channel *Al Arabiya*, Tarek al-Kholi, the spokesperson for the liberal activist group "April 6th Youth Movement" denied that Elmahdy was ever a member of the group, saying, "the movement does not have any members who engage in such behavior" (Stack & Kirkpatricknov, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

An Egyptian political group to publicly renouncing an unknown feminist blogger<sup>5</sup> reveals that by releasing the unconventional digital-networked image on social media, Elmahdy posed a threat to the opposition group's collective identity as well as political control of her female identity. Instead of adhering to the organization's action frameworks, she independently and deliberately constructed her own political identity and inhabited the globalized political space in a radically individualist way. What's more, the Egyptian opposition wasn't the only group denouncing Elmahdy's nude selfie. Many other viewers from across the Arab world also equated the self-portrait with impropriety and even pornography. For instance, labeling the selfie

<sup>4</sup> "April 6th Youth Movement" was a major player in the revolt that unseated Egypt's President Mubarak and a group in which, according to several media outlets, Elmahdy claimed membership (Stack & Kirkpatricknov, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> This level of attention is astonishing considering that Elmahdy wasn't an established blogger in the otherwise highly active Egyptian blogosphere. In fact, she had only published one other post prior to the October 23 entry, compiled on September 25, 2011.



as obscene and appalling, a *Twitter* user who describes himself as an evolving orthodox Muslim and the founder of <http://MuslimMatters.org> denounced and ridiculed Elmahdy by tweeting, “#NudePhotoRevolutionary or #NudePhotoDevaluationary? Egyptians rose to get rid of Mubarak, not to open a local chapter of Play(Arab)boy” (Ahmad, 2011). Another *Twitter* user reflected on Elmahdy’s image by calling it “a disgrace to Egyptian women” (Maryam, 2011). Aside from attacking Elmahdy’s character, many users dismissed her image as a political act and questioned its sociopolitical impact, writing comments such as “stripping down for a ‘cause’ is absolute bull shit” (Noorhan, 2011).

The dismissing tweets manifest that by situating a woman’s private moment within Egypt’s public discourse and by disseminating it publicly and globally, Elmahdy’s nude selfie committed a violation of the codes of conduct that women, even women outside of Egypt, are subject to. By claiming her own body and using it as a way to highlight cultural conventions that suffocated the rights of women and perpetuated chauvinism, she committed unforgivable or useless wrongdoing in the eyes of some of the viewers. In other words, she “acted like a woman unbridled by male authority” (Kraidy, 2016, p. 166). Elmahdy’s selfie was an act of public transgression against patriarchal jurisdiction, even within the leftist political organization. With the combination of the connoted, denoted, and linguistic messages authenticating her gender, Egyptian background, and audacious self-assertion, Elmahdy selfie and manifesto disrupted the cultural expectations of how women, even liberal women, must behave. They evoked “an explosive mix of sexuality, politics, identity, and violence” through which she “came to represent Egypt, or to be more precise an anti-Egypt” (Kraidy, 2016, p. 167). As a result, her image of unfamiliar, non-submissive, and unruly Egyptian woman represented a challenge to culturally-normative gender and sexuality categories inside and outside Egypt.

The negative reaction to Elmahdy’s self-portrait is reminiscent of the reaction Benglis received after her ad was published in *Artforum*. After its release, several *Artforum* associate editors announced their dismay about Benglis’s “vulgar” actions by publishing a letter to *Artforum*’s editor in chief, and many feminist advocates spoke publicly against the work calling it offensive and a perpetuation of female objectification and male gaze (Poundstone, 2011). Considering the sheer amount of female nudity that fills the pages of magazines and walls of art galleries and museums, not to mention the praise those works receive for their artistic merit, the criticism against Benglis and Elmahdy is paradoxical. It indicates misunderstanding and rejection of both the visual, artistic display of the female body by women artists and the inherent autonomy of their political expression: Whereas naked female bodies in high art are culturally registered as forms of aesthetic experience, these nude

self-designed acts in popular culture are identified as profane and obscene.

In her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, Lynda Nead (1992) argues that the cultural distinction in responding to female nudity is based on the type of cultural consumption, less dependent upon the content of the image than on how, where, and in what context the image is seen and who has access to it (p. 86). She adds, “Within the gallery, the female body is displayed as a symbol of legitimate public culture; within the adult bookstore, its display becomes a sign of the covert and irregular aspects of cultural consumption” (p. 101). Whereas venues such as adult bookstores or video rooms provide a space that encourages and elicits physical reactions to the image, the gallery provides a public, contemplative, and controlled physical environment for consumption of nudity under the context of high art. Nead therefore separates the depiction of female nude in art and pornography in terms of quality, ownership, and access.

An important point to be drawn from Nead’s analysis is that once removed from the protected realm of art, or from the thinking space of art galleries and museums, the image of the female nude is commonly viewed by society as a visual manifestation of promiscuity and moral corruption, subjected to derogatory labels such as indecent, shameful, and pornographic. Such inconsistency in interpreting and responding to the human female form, particularly when it is self-presented, explains the negative reaction to the published images of Benglis and Elmahdy, by those who would condemn such expression as immoral, indecent, and even unartistic.<sup>6</sup>

While online forums, tweets, and comments mostly consisted of opposing views against Elmahdy, she did receive some level of support from individuals and groups who viewed the image as an empowering act of resistance against patriarchal control. For instance, a Kuwaiti *Twitter* user (Alshamri, 2011) applauded Elmahdy for breaking social taboos and reclaiming femininity and the female body as a human subject instead of a shameful sexual object that needs to be censored. In general, depending on the viewers’ beliefs about female public nudity and their definition of the word revolution, corresponding comments demonstrated diverse and contradictory opinions.

## 7. Polysemous Digital-Networked Images: Interpreting the Interpreter

The conflicting reactions to Elmahdy’s selfie stem from the image’s polysemous nature, its capacity for multiple meanings. Considering that interpreting connoted messages is dependent upon the contextual, historical, and social convictions the viewer applies in viewing the image (Barthes, 1979, p. 206), by bringing varying degrees of knowledge, experience, and history, Elmahdy’s local

<sup>6</sup> For instance on November 12, 2011, Amr Abed @Anoutsider wrote “@TheMiinz i totally agree with everything you said! there is nothing artistic about it and it’s kinda offensive tbh #NudePhotoRevolutionary”.



and global viewers each had a distinct reading of the image, independent of Elmahdy's own sociopolitical vision as expressed even in her accompanying caption.

When it comes to digital-networked images, the relationship between the text and the image is, in fact, complex, and it influences the process of meaning formation immensely. More importantly, the emerging dynamic between the text and digital-networked images further complicates the Barthesian framework for the linguistic message and its two functions: *anchorage* and *relay*. Barthes (1980) describes anchorage as "the most common function of the linguistic message", textual information provided by the image-maker that directs the viewer toward a particular reading of the image (p. 275). Relay, on the other hand, works alongside the image, expanding on the meaning of the image to something other than could be understood from the image alone. In relay, text and image "stand in a complementary relationship" and meaning is created through the interrelation between the image and text and text and image (p. 275). Elmahdy's manifesto functions as relay, advancing the image and supplying information that is not found within it. Upon reading the text, the viewer realizes Elmahdy's motives, her Egyptian background, and her demands as an Egyptian woman within the civic uprisings in the country.

A relay functions somewhat differently in interpretations of digital-networked images disseminated in social media, however. Due to the nature of networked communications, images generally disseminate around the Web in the form of online comments, blog posts, or micro-reports embedded as links alongside personal notes or comments about the content. These additional layers of accompanying text amplify the function of relay as a gateway to the image content by inscribing viewers' interpretation on the image as well. (Even though many sites, including *Twitter*, now have the capacity to directly embed images, sharing images as text-based hyperlinks remains a common practice—especially since link-sharing across platforms is still widespread). The additional circulation of textual information further complicates the meaning of the image, resulting in partiality and preconceptions about the content depicted (Kasra, Shen, & O'Brien, 2016). The endless, perhaps immeasurable, circulation of information on the Web not only makes the image available to those who come from different backgrounds, speak different languages, and are therefore accustomed to different cultures and ideologies, it also performs as the focal point for an evolving participatory narrative.

Depending on the viewers' beliefs about female public nudity and their definition of the word revolution, corresponding comments on Twitter demonstrate diverse and contradictory opinions in support or condemnation

of Elmahdy's selfie. The meaning of Elmahdy's image was therefore equally dependent on the multiple and immediate comments that circulated on the Web in response to it then and ever afterward.

For example, the story about the self-portrait first broke on *Twitter* by a popular Egyptian human rights activist and blogger, Ahmed Awadalla, who had close to 10,000 followers.<sup>7</sup> Cautious about revealing Elmahdy's identity, and fearing for her safety, Awadalla did not share a link to the blog post and the original image, nor did he identify Elmahdy's *Twitter* username. Instead he wrote, "A feminist #Jan25 revolutionary posted her nude photo on the Internet to express her freedom" (Awadalla, 2011a). His careful choice of terms such as *feminist*, *revolutionary*, *express*, and *freedom*, defined a context through which his *Twitter* followers preemptively interpreted Elmahdy's activism prior to witnessing the image. Awadalla's description could have influenced viewers' reading and helped to frame their response to it.

As follow up, Awadalla later posted on *Twitter*: "So to sum up, some see #NudePhotoRevolutionary as progressive & brave, others see Harem, 3eeb [sic] & harms revolutionaries image! Any comments?" (Awadalla, 2011b). Doing so, Awadalla additionally framed Elmahdy's selfie in a way that viewers were invited to comment on her personal act—her decision to appear naked in front of the camera—without having to witness the image itself. Even the *Twitter* hashtag #NudePhotoRevolutionary, which Awadalla created to direct the forthcoming traffic in response to the photograph, provoked controversial reactions among the viewers due to the pairing of the words "nude" and "revolutionary".<sup>8</sup>

## 8. Derivatives, Re-Appropriations and the Political Force of Participatory Narratives

Digital-networked images cultivate autonomous and personalized approaches to citizen participation and enable viewers to shape and reshape the meaning of these visual actions by embedding their own stories, viewpoints, values, and histories into the subsequent narratives. The meaning of the digital-networked image thus becomes tightly related to its derivatives and re-appropriations that expand the scope of its sociopolitical reach globally and exponentially. The emergence of the digital-networked image thereby sets forth the *participatory narrative* as a new and additional category of meaning expansive of the Barthesian semiotic model put forward in "The Rhetoric of the Image" (linguistic, connoted, and denoted) (1980). This kind of poststructuralist participatory narrative conveys the evolving textual narratives and visual derivatives that social media dwellers disseminate in response to a digital-networked image. The meaning of the 21st century image is therefore not only depen-

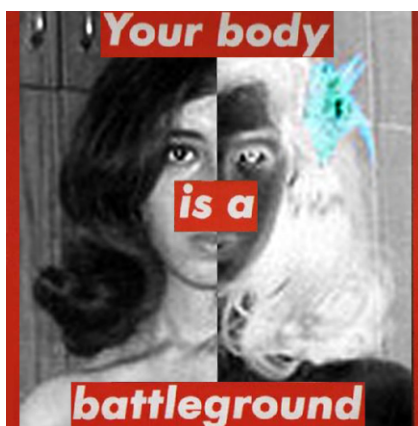
<sup>7</sup> Writing mostly about issues surrounding human rights, gender, health, and sexuality, on his blog space "Rebel with a Cause", Awadalla describes his writings as "an attempt to explore not-so-often-discussed taboo issues in Egypt".

<sup>8</sup> Twitter hashtags allow users to form communities of people interested in the same topic by making it easier for them to find and share related information.

dent upon what the content depicts (its indexicality) or the indexation it provides. Rather, it arises from, or is contingent upon, the evolving social construction it inspires for as long as the image exists and is distributed.

Elmahdy's selfie offered as an easy-to-personalize connective action that other participants replicated, appropriated, or adapted when voicing their own opinions. With easier access to image-making and image-sharing technologies, viewers responded to the message conveyed in her nude selfie by creating corresponding remixed visual content ranging from selfies to other visual meaning-laden derivatives. Functioning as an ever-changing unifying symbol, Elmahdy's nude selfie generated a sense of collective identity among many participants. Using the topical hashtag #NudePhotoRevolutionary on *Twitter* and *Instagram*, or submitting their images to Elmahdy's *Facebook* page, supporters co-create and perpetuate the discourse by building upon and advancing the meaning of the nude selfie and its associated narratives. (Elmahdy began showcasing these images on her blog and in her *Facebook* album and titled them "Nude Art"). For instance, a contributor remixed a close-up of Elmahdy's face upon the historical photo-based work of the established feminist artist Barbara Kruger (1989). The remixed composition reminds the viewer that women's social struggle against power, patriarchy, and male control has been an ongoing battle. Kruger created the original artwork for a 1989 march in Washington, DC, in support of women's reproductive rights and particularly their right to abortion.

Kruger's work depicts a black and white imagery of a woman's face vertically split in two halves, combined with bold, red blocks of text running across the composition. Dividing the image into two parts, she keeps the right half in positive while she inverts the other half into a negative image. The play with positive and negative spaces is to bring attention to the binary oppositions



**Figure 2.** Composition submitted to Elmahdy's blog "A Rebel's Diary" by online supporters who remixed a close-up of Elmahdy's face upon the historical photo-based work of the established artist Barbara Kruger (2011).

around concepts such as good/bad, whore/Madonna, private/public existing and operating in society. By writing the phrase "Your Body is a Battleground" in bold red font across the black and white composition, Kruger speaks about women's constant struggle over their social rights, and men's ongoing control over women's bodies and reproductive rights as a way to sustain patriarchy. Cleverly, the remix version replaces the female portrait Kruger used in the original composition with that of Elmahdy while keeping the other parts intact (Figure 2). In many ways the remix demonstrates how women's issues are universal and not limited to certain regions or a certain period, and by doing so expands on the message conveyed by Elmahdy's image alone.

Other contributors reenacted Elmahdy's self-portrait to show solidarity and to re-contextualize the image within their own social, political, and cultural circumstances. Participants in these visual campaigns intertwined Elmahdy's rebellious approach into their own unique statements. Enacting the scene, they retold the story of oppression based on their personal experience. For example, Israeli activist Or Tepler created a *Facebook* event inviting women, regardless of their religion or sexual orientation, to show their solidarity "in a non-violent and legitimate way" to a woman "who is just like us— young, ambitious, full of dreams and evidently has a developed sense of humor" (Kais, 2011). Dozens of women responded to Tepler's call by posing nude in a group image, holding signs that read, "Love without Limits", and "Homage to Aliaa Elmahdy. Sisters in Israel". The digital-networked image was later covered by news media reports around the world (Figure 3).

Similarly, to honor Elmahdy and in celebration of International Women's Day, Iranian-born secular-feminist and activist Maryam Namazie (2011) published her "Nude Photo Revolutionaries Calendar" (Figure 4). Like Tepler, Namazie (2011) launched an online image-based protest in solidarity with Elmahdy inviting women from around the world to post nude self-portraits on *Twitter* under the hashtag #NudePhotoRevolutionary. The accumulation of these images indicates that Elmahdy's personalized political action resonated with others with shared ideology even outside Egypt, and inspired other women to individualize her political act using imagery as a way to come together and transmit their own message.

The user-generated content responding to Elmahdy's digital-networked image varied in style and approach; their own dissemination of it on social media broadened its reach, as well. Gradually, Elmahdy's selfie began functioning less as a symbol of an Egyptian woman on a personal quest to free herself from social constraints, and more as part of an ongoing and overarching narrative compiled of the viewers' own stories, experiences, opinions, and participatory media content.

While supporters used participatory visual derivatives to endorse Elmahdy for raising awareness against misogynistic censorship, viewers with opposing viewpoints also used digital-networked images to scoff at



Figure 3. Israeli women posing nude “Love without Limits” and “Homage to Aliaa Elmahdy Sisters in Israel” (2011).

her and divert her message. In effect, they used the same participatory tool and approach the supporters used to endorse Elmahdy in order to mock and reject her.

For instance, in late November, 2011, reports surfaced around the Web that Elmahdy has been beaten in Cairo’s Tahrir Square where demonstrators had been rallying against the Egyptian regime for months. The reports even referred to a *YouTube* video clip that showed a young female protester being pushed and beaten by an angry crowd (Taghyer, 2011) (Figure 5). Despite the fact that the video never showed a close up of the mistreated woman, and therefore made it impossible to identify her as Elmahdy, the false report scattered around the Web very quickly (Mezzofiore, 2011). Even after Elmahdy announced in an interview that she was actually in hiding and was not in Tahrir Square during that incident, the rumor kept circulating, generating especially furious reactions (CyberDissidents, 2011).

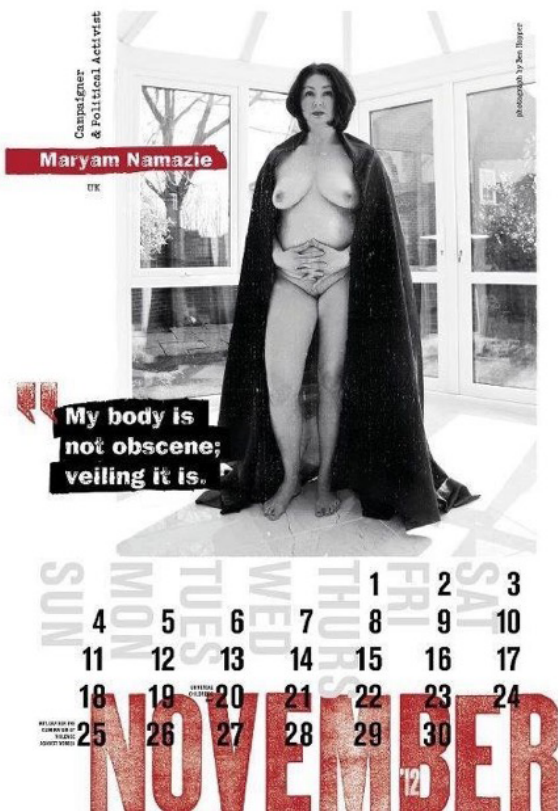


Figure 4. Secular-Feminist Maryam Namazie in her “Nude Photo Revolutionaries Calendar” published in support of Elmahdy (2011).



Figure 5. A falsely attributed image that appears to depict a deceased woman bearing a resemblance to Aliaa Elmahdy. False rumors about Elmahdy’s death continued to spread online supported in part by this image, December, 2011. Source: Unknown.



In a different incident in December, 2011, two soon-to-be disputed images of Elmahdy surfaced on *Twitter*. They both depicted a medium shot of a woman from the chest up lying on a hospital stretcher with her mouth and neck covered in blood. While the woman in the picture bore a resemblance to Elmahdy, the low quality of the images and the blood on the woman's face made it impossible to identify her. Nonetheless the two images continued to spread online with captions and comments such as "Aliaa Elmahdy dead" or "Aliaa Elmahdy killed", creating passionate debates among those who either believed she deserved death for inciting indecency and insulting Islam, and those who used the pictures to condemn the Egyptian government and Islamic practices.<sup>9</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

Analyzing Elmahdy's 2011 politically-infused selfie reveals a new means through which underrepresented minorities may find a voice on a global scale, and in spite of repressive state laws and sovereign jurisdictions. Elmahdy's self-possession and image-based, defiant self-expression starkly highlights the autonomous and participatory nature of the digital-network image and its role in perpetuating activism. It also reveals the means by which the digital-networked image inspires endless permutations of new image expressions and re-appropriations in the viewers.

The use of digital-networked imagery enabled Elmahdy and her supporters to raise their political voice amidst heated turmoil in Egypt. Their image-based political action challenged their national identity and constituted a great threat to patriarchal jurisdiction. Whether Elmahdy knowingly established her non-state political agency using a selfie or whether she expected such level of support or backlash against her photographic action will forever remain unknown. What's certain, however, is that the digital-networked image that the world witnessed in the fall of 2011 neither corresponds with the stereotyped depictions of Egyptian women by the Western media, nor fits the model of the ideal woman promoted by the Arab world. The woman represented in that digital-networked image was anything but closeted, silent, subordinate or submissive, and her appearance and determination appeared to be far from the Islamic ideal of female identity. Digital-networked images enabled Elmahdy, and later her global supporters, to unfold a new era of feminine identity and political participation in the Arab world, providing them with a means of resistance against well-established cultural and social inequalities. Albeit like most social media movements this resistance was transient and infused with consequences and risks. In fact, facing death threats from Islamist extremists for disgracing Islam and Muslims, Elmahdy eventually was forced to flee Egypt and live in exile (Würger, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See discussion "Aliaa Magda Elmahdy being beaten in Egypt" on Global Secular Humanist Movement (2011) *Facebook* page: <https://www.facebook.com/GSHMP/posts/198615276888397>

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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#### About the Author



**Mona Kasra** is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media Design at the University of Virginia (UVa). A trans-disciplinary scholar and a creative practitioner, she applies an interdisciplinary framework combining semiotics, visual studies, media theory, and cultural studies to examine the power and impact of online images upon cross-cultural and cross-political life in the networked age. In her work, she also employs, explores, and experiments with existing and emerging media in the context of art making, storytelling and installation. Mona has exhibited work in numerous gallery and online exhibitions and has programmed, curated, and served as a juror for several film festivals and art exhibitions. In 2016, she served as Conference Chair at ACM SIGGRAPH, undertaking an engaged role in the strategic planning, leading, and managing of the world's largest, most influential annual conference on the theory and practice of computer graphics and interactive techniques.

Article

## “I Set the Camera on the Handle of My Dresser”: Re-Matter-ializing Social Media Visual Methods through a Case Study of Selfies

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### Abstract

This article is a confession about research trouble and the start of a narrative of research rectification. I begin this article with a review of new materialist theory and methods broadly and specifically those that contribute insight into interviews and photo elicitation such as *intra*-views and posthuman visual methods. I then detail the research methodology I used for an empirical study conducted last year to look at what young women experience while taking selfies, or images of their face and body to be shared on social media. After this fairly procedural account, I return to my messy research notes and video recordings, and—rather than reread—I re-trace and re-matter-ialize one specific interview with one young woman using new materialist methods (intra-views and reading images horizontally) to reveal data that would otherwise not have been evidenced via my original humanist methods. Re-matter-ializing describes my process as a researcher re-visiting not only the discursive moments, but the *affective encounters* and the *matter* of the research assemblage; meaning I move beyond the spoken data to look at how the material-discursive-affective assemblage or arrangement of the interview room, technologies of data recording, props in the room, and embodied interactions of the participants were entangled in and vital agents in the production of data. In conclusion I detail the benefits of a posthuman re-tracing: 1) an attentiveness to the complex human and non-human agents in a research assemblage, 2) a *response-ability* or ethical duty of researchers to not reduce the complexity of the phenomena they study, 3) the importance of affect in the research encounter especially in visual methods, and, 4) a questioning of the implicit assumption that—of all steps in a research program—methodology is the least malleable.

### Keywords

intra-view; new materialism; photo elicitation; posthumanism; social media

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

I mostly take selfies for my boyfriend. I always take them in the same place in the privacy of my room. I set up the camera on a handle of my dresser that is just at the right angle like eye-level so it would be as if we were facing each other if we were together. (Kelly)

This quote is borrowed from one of four phenomenological interviews I conducted this past year with a group of young women who are self-described “avid selfie takers”

meaning they take and share, per week via social media, at least three photos that reveal, to some degree, their body whether it is their face, a portion of their face, a portion of their body, or their whole body.

When I conducted this research I chose phenomenological interviews combined with photo elicitation, as I wanted to have the young women describe the embodied feelings and senses in and through the moment of taking these images. For two different papers I used a posthumanist framework of analysis often focusing on the work of Karen Barad. The methods functioned as a

mode to get to the close lived experience of the young women *in* the phenomenon, but then when I began to reflect more broadly on my observational data and what was going on in the interview room, the humanist tradition of phenomenology revealed limitations. By marking the intimate embodied voice of the participant the exclusive unit of analysis, the method focused too heavily on language as data source. Phenomenology did permit me to think of my participants as intersubjective and relational with the world, however, the method continued to restrict and contract my data to narrative. Reflecting on Kelly's quote above in her own selfie-taking practice, and then reflecting on what I saw repeatedly in the interview room, I noticed that when the young women took their selfies, the shape and size of the interview room, the available props, the lighting, the technologies of self imaging, the technologies of data recording, the cellphones and available filters, and even the affective presence of me as the researcher in the room were all at once productive data *and* productive *of* data in the moment of research. Just as qualitative research describes interview data as both the analysis of discourse *and* its own discursive moment, what I saw was that visual research can be also both about matter and *mattering*—or considering the impact of the materiality of the research assemblage in the production of knowledge.

Upon this realization, I honestly recall thinking: "If only I'd just adopted a post-structural framework then I could focus more on coding and thematically grouping themes through words. If I'd done that, then this paper would be sooooo much easier to write!" But I didn't. And I'm glad I didn't. Thank goodness for pilots. This article is a confession about research troubles, an encouragement to sit with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), and the start of a narrative of research rectification.

I begin this article with a review of new materialist methods related to, and emerging from, the classic qualitative methods of interviews and photo elicitation: *intra*-views and posthuman visual methods.

I then detail the research methodology I used for my original study last year. After this fairly procedural account, I return to my original messy research notes, video recordings, and photos to provide a new materialist *re-tracing* (Mazzei & McCoy, 2010) of my research, which permits us to see what could not be seen with phenomenological methods strictly, and also to reflect on moments of possibility and change in my future plans for this project. I pull back and revisit my research at the level and unit of the *research assemblage* (Fox & Allred, 2014), where I'm not looking at any one specific entity but I'm looking at the *intra-action* (Barad, 2007) or entanglement of all the research entities (e.g. participants, research methodology, recording tools, data, researcher). In doing this, I am permitted to focus on, not only the discursive moments, but also, more inclusively, the material-discursive *and* affective data at work in the research assemblage. What becomes data sources, then are: the recorded words and images (discursive forces),

the visual recording devices, cellphone camera, imaging filters, and lighting and the design of the room (material forces), and the affective and felt forces traded and exchanged both between me, the participants, and the non-human material elements, and which also viscerally connect outside and beyond the specific research moment. In other words, I *re-matter-ialize* one specific interview, to show the "coming together of multiple forces in momentary alignment" (Kuntz & Presnall, 2012, p. 740) and also to reveal data that would otherwise not have been evidenced with my original humanist methods. Paraphrasing Karen Barad, I include other forms of matter and thus make more things *matter* (Barad, 2007) in visual research of mobile-networked visual phenomena. Following Mazzei and McCoy (2010), I suggest that such a process of *re-tracing* encourages me as a researcher (and could encourage others) to reflect on: our situated practices, the forces of material habit in research inquiry, as well as the more expansive map of possibilities, issues, failures, and successes of a given method in practice.

## 2. Literature Review

The material or ontological turn has many names and forms: posthumanism, new materialism the post-qualitative turn. Earlier mentions of posthumanism persist in the writings of gender and technology theorists like Katherine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman*, 2010), and Donna Haraway's ironic *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), and decolonizing theorists have argued that posthuman philosophies have existed as a core component of Indigenous knowledge for millennia (Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016). At the heart of posthumanism is a rethinking of anthropocentrism—or the Renaissance celebration and reification of the liberal human subject. Instead, as Juanita Sundberg explains, posthumanism as a diverse set of Anglo-European ideas, "refuses to treat the human as 1) ontologically given, [and] not the only actor of consequence, and 2) disembodied and autonomous, separate from the world of nature and animality" (Sundberg, 2014, p. 34). New Materialism, which often draws on the works of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Bruno Latour, and Karen Barad, offers several common objectives: challenge the desire to seek cause and effect relationships within qualitative methods, challenge the dominance of representationalism in humanist theory and practice (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012), reject the Cartesian divide between mind and body (Barad, 2007), critique the linguistic turn's dominant emphasis on language at the expense of materiality (Barad, 2007) that could lead to "narrative seduction" (Chambers, 1984), reject positivism's tendency to simplify and generalize and critique the researcher's presumed-to-be removed position from their object of study and the research event itself (Barad, 2007).

In exchange or these themes, and when we look specifically at new materialist methods, theorists emphasize: the importance of discourse, matter, *and* affect in

research methods. Rejecting reduction and simplificty, posthuman methods prefer more complex units of analysis like for Deleuze and Guattari the *assemblage*, and for Karen Barad, the *phenomenon* because these terms avoid *a priori* differentiation and delineation. Posthuman research begins with the multifaceted entanglement of material and discursive and affective forces in a given moment. The entity then, for instance the word or the image, does not pre-exist *a priori* its entanglement, rather it *emerges* from its entanglements through processes of naming and differentiating (Deleuze & Guattari, 2014) or acts of agential cutting (Barad, 2007), which snip the complex tendrils of entanglement. It is through what Barad (2007) calls, these *intra-actions—becoming through not interacting among*—that objects and concepts are defined and constantly redefined *out of* their more naturally implicit entanglement within their material, discursive, and affective surroundings. This may include a coming together of bodies, space, place, technology, and non-human actors like objects (Latour, 2000; Salk, Latour, & Woolgar, 2013).

### 3. General Notes on a New Materialist Research Approach

According to Deleuze and Guattari (2014), research is a machine “that links elements together to do things” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2014, p. 4). The machine operates via a combination of disciplinary logics, situated reasoning, and genealogies of *ways of thinking*. In assessing any research initiative then, a singular linguistic unit of analysis from any one discursive moment in the process does not suffice. Instead posthuman methods attend to the *research assemblage*, or the heterogenous constellation comprising the “events to be researched, research tools such as questionnaires, interview schedules or other apparatus; recording and analysis technologies, computer software and hardware, theoretical frameworks and hypotheses, research literature and findings from previous studies, and of course researchers (Fox & Alldred, 2014, p. 404). When we open the research assemblage to this unit, what is included is not only the individual bodies and specific units of language produced, but also the material arrangement of tools and setting (e.g. location, recording devices, and apparatuses), and also the impact of affect, feeling and sensation and the movement of affect within the phenomenon. When I use the term affect I know I enter into sticky territory because, if we believe Melissa Gregg and Gregg Seigworth (2010), affect is a term that “has no one single or generalizable theory” (p. 3). We can define affect to a degree by a process of elimination: whereas the discursive turn focused primarily on words traded in the research assemblage, and the material turn is interested in how matter, be it research apparatuses, tools, recording devices and other technologies influence the research assemblage, affect trades in the realm of “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces

insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1) As such, and according to new materialist research, researchers should trace “affective economies that territorialize and de-territorialize the capacities of bodies, collectivities, and other relations within an assemblage” (p. 409). In other words what forces beyond the material and discursive flow and fluctuate in ways that enable or disable action within a research assemblage? In sum, then, when I explore and re-matter-ialize the research assemblage of the interviews I did last year, I revisit not just the recorded textual and visual data, but also the material environment of the interview setting, the discursive forces entangled therein, and the affective potencies that shape the empirical moment.

In the next section I introduce three specific new materialist methods that I layer on to the original research data to reveal material and affective data that otherwise would not have been evidenced with my original humanist research methods: posthuman *re-tracing*, the *intra-view* and reading images horizontally.

### 4. Re-Tracing the Interview

What I’m doing in this article is a process of posthumanist *re-tracing*. I’m confessing to a moment of research uncertainty and opening myself up to, curiosity, creativity, and recification. In most posthuman methods, uncertainty guides the research process. Hillevi Lenz Taguchi discusses the notion of nomadic thinking and methods where researchers are encouraged to not root their ideas, methods, frameworks so deeply that they fail to look at the world around them from new perspectives. Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) encourage researchers to remain nomadic or mobile, and to be pushed and pulled in different directions by the research but then to also be attentive and to make visible in their writing and publishing these affective forces upon their thinking.

When certainty guides a research program, then what emerges, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are *tracings*. Deleuze and Guattari use the term *map* to represent the natural complexity of the research assemblage. *Tracings* are the habitual normative marks of knowledge that emerge upon the naturally more expansive *map*, and *tracings* are often re-traced because of material and discursive habits of both knowledge production and research methodology practices. The *world* as examined and described by confident and certain researchers tends to trace and retrace the same lines in research assemblages as previous research before it even when new emergent data reveals itself. Tracings disregard difference and disjunction focusing more on repetition and commonality. Tracings reify theory and method above empirical cracks and fissures. *Ways of thinking, ways of*

*seeing*, and *habits of practice* encourage the researcher to arrange tools, analyze data, and write up results in predictable ways. In order to avoid research tracings, Mazzei and McCoy (2010) suggest, “that the tracing is put back on the map” (p. 505). What Mazzei and McCoy mean by this is that if *mapping* is the complete and implicit complexity of the research assemblage, and a *tracing* is a routing of an ossified research program, then by layering the tracing on the map, we can see the alignments and disjunctions between complexity and simplification between what is experienced in the moment and what is desired and/or habitual by the researcher and their research program. We see “impasses, blockages, incipient taproots, or points of structuration” (p. 507). By making visible our research tracings on maps, we take a step back as researchers and reveal the nuances and manufactured nature of our own research attempts. We reflect on our phenomenological experience, or material choices, our discursive influences, and our affectively-motivated movements in the research assemblage in order to make visible the more expansive map of possibilities, issues, failures, and successes of a given method in practice. Thus the trace is placed back on the map, the method is checked against the situated moment, and the research method does not become reified when perhaps the phenomenon under study grows beyond the methodology’s capacities. It is my hope that my process of re-tracing stands out as an effort to remain uncertain and “to interrupt knowledge production that maps easily onto taken-for-granted regimes of meaning” (Lather, 2007, p. 85).

### 5. From Interview to Posthuman Intra-View

The emphasis within qualitative interviews on coding (and more recently processing through digital analysis software) has both removed the words from the body of the participant, and the researcher from the ears and voice of the subject they are studying. Denzin (2010) goes so far as to suggest that the interview transcript acts as a mechanism of control that inscribes tacitly a representational epistemology or a focus on the surface or words and not the deeper meaning embodied by the subject at the moment of speaking. The intra-view attempts to contribute to the well known, and continuing debates concerning the reification of data via recorded words or transcripts, to flesh out the material, discursive and affective complexity of the topic under study, while also attending to the material, discursive, and affective moment of the interview itself and how these factors could impact the data produced in the interview moment.

Whereas inter-views (*inter* meaning between) see the method as a creation of meaning between two distinct entities (participant and interviewer) via the medium of representational words, the intra-view, a new materialist rethinking of the inter-view, replaces the prefix *inter-* with *intra-* meaning “within”. In the intra-view, meaning is not a production of words between

two bounded participants, but rather, the intra-view is a deep and holistic coming together of multiple bodies and material-discursive-affective forces. The bodies of the participants which have resulted from their own distinct entanglements, genealogies, and histories, come together, in a specific research environment, via specific genealogically enshrined research methods guided by rooted epistemologies and ontologies, to intra-actively create a novel entanglement and *research becoming*. Kuntz and Presnall (2012) enumerate several tactics to intra-viewing: moving from script to sound, attending to embodied vibrations, and seeking out metaphors.

A move from *script to sound* occurs where the researcher attends to, not only the spoken words but also, the pauses, tones, inflections, glitches and mistakes in conversation. These markers highlight the affective, felt, and emotional moments in the encounter. Listening to the spaces in between attends to the affect behind and flowing through the discursive moment.

Intra-viewing also attends to what are called the *embodied vibrations* which mark where and when the body withdraws from conversation, or the text become distant and less intimate or equally proximate and increasingly intimate. These subtle changes also mark the affective proximity and distance of the researcher to the interviewee. In terms of working with visual data and photo elicitation, embodied vibrations can also mark the affective significance of a participant in relation to the non-human elements in the research assemblage like the interview room, recording tools, or prompting tools like photos for photo elicitation. For instance, I’ve tended to, in my own work with photo elicitation, treat certain photos with more care when, for instance, I see a participant cringe or hold tenuously or carefully an image. Not all images hold the same degree of affective significance as others and researchers need to learn to read the *embodied vibrations* that give insight into the significance of one image over another. Posthuman methods encourage researchers to be attentive to the embodied vibrations that arise between participants and the material components of the research assemblage.

Finally, intra-views also attend to the *use of metaphors* to describe experience which Neisser (2003) argues are creative spaces. Metaphors are phenomenological in nature and are moments where participants push the limits and habits of language to bring the medium of words closer to the lived and embodied and thus affective experience of a moment. Attending to the affective strength of words in an intra-view is key to attending to both the affective and discursive data in a research assemblage.

### 6. From Visual Methods to Diffractive Readings

Karen Hultman and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010) have arguably made the most significant contributions not only to new materialism in educational research but also to new materialist influenced visual methods. In the next



section I examine their methods of: 1) reading images horizontally and 2) Deleuzian difference.

Reading images horizontally challenges liberal humanist *habits of seeing*. Whereas we tend to focus on the human subject in, say, a photo we are analyzing, thus looking at the photo anthropocentrically and vertically, or top down, from researcher, down to the image, Taguchi encourages a positioning of the researcher on the edge of the photo where, we could imagine, the eye peaks just over the surface of the film. From this position, we move away from our habit of focusing on the human in the image, and instead see the manifold elements of the image, the varying colors and shapes, and the relationship between the elements of the image instead of, automatically, their distinction from one another. Here we see with equal weight the human and non-human elements of the image: the subjects, but also their context and surroundings, the time of day, the location, and other. We read the image as a material-discursive-human-non-human entanglement. In my own work on social media, I've also described how peeking over the side of the image permits us to look at an image temporally as a snapshot of a material-discursive-affective moment in time and place, but also entangled with a material-discursive-affective past and possibly also with a material-discursive and affective future if, for instance we are talking about a socially mediated image that are often shared and find a new life online. The image then, turned and viewed sideways is a representation with material-discursive and affective tendrils that stretch and reach outward to an imagined future and are connected to an entangled past which can provide rich insight into the specific photographic moment.

In assessing the image from this vantage, Taguchi suggests we search for Deleuzian "forms of difference" instead of difference as conceived by the humanist tradition. As mentioned, under the humanist tradition, entities are presumed to be *a priori* separate. Difference, then, is a positioning of one entity against, in comparison, and often in distinction from another. This form of difference is what Deleuze and Guattari call *negative difference*. A Deleuzian conception of difference starts from the more complex unit of the assemblage wherein connection is the *a priori* state of affairs. Difference, then is when the affective forces that shaped the assemblage and tend to shape assemblages in predictable ways, are challenged and made anew in creative ways. Thus difference in a Deleuzian sense is "productive difference"—difference that marks change, creativity, play, agency and newness.

## 7. The Original Methodology

I began the data collection with an interest in what young women actually experience when they take selfies. What

are their thoughts and feelings while facing the camera, editing the images, and sharing the images online? My research questions then became: 1) how do you experience selfies? 2) what do you gain from creating selfies?

I developed a variation of photo elicitation (Harper, 2012; Knowles & Sweetman, 2004) and in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences, feelings, and beliefs of the participants (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1985). I was particularly interested in the feelings that emerged in the real-time moment of image production. Douglas Harper (2012) discusses something akin to *immediate photo-elicitation* where the temporal gap between the image being taken and the subject reflecting on the image is minimized so as to reflect freshly on the feelings and experiences associated with a given moment in time. I arranged the recording apparatus, which I'll detail below, in a manner that allowed me to explore these proximate moments of reflection (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1985).

## 8. Data Generation and Findings

Although I originally recruited and interviewed four young women,<sup>1</sup> this article will focus on the research data of only one participant, Jackie. In a private interview room, I set up a digital video recorder on a desk and flipped the view-screen outward so the participant could see herself on the screen. I provided different lighting options (fluorescent overhead lights, lamps, and tripod mounted photo lighting) because I'd learned from workshops with young women and casual conversations that lighting was a key factor in good selfies. I then gave each young woman up to 10 minutes to prepare the room and camera, as she desired.

I started by asking each young woman a series of questions from an interview guide<sup>2</sup> I had prepared that encouraged her to reflect on the phenomenon of taking selfies. These preliminary interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour each. I then asked the young women to take as many selfies as they wanted until they produced two images they felt were good enough to share on a social media platform. For the selfie-taking process, I asked each young woman to narrate freely and naturally her experience of taking, reviewing, editing and applying filters to her selfies (Hycner, 1985). Taking selfies is a discursively influenced practice<sup>3</sup> and as such, they are typically taken in private locations (Warfield, 2015). It was this discovery that made me want to do the interviews in the privacy of a self-contained room at my university. It was also this that made me remove myself from the interview room when the young women took photos of themselves. Thus, I was out of the room, speaking with and watching the young women through Google chat as well as taking observational notes as they produced what

<sup>1</sup> For my original pilot research design, I recruited a sample size of four (recommended by Groenewald, 2004, and Hycner, 1985) young female avid selfies takers defined as people who had been taking selfies for more than two years, and who also take more than three selfies per week, and are also aged 18–30.

<sup>2</sup> I provide some of the questions from the interview later in this article.

<sup>3</sup> The discursive treatment of selfies has been examined by several theorists including Anne Burns (2015), and Nancy Baym and Theresa Senft (2015).

I asked them to judge as good enough selfies for distribution to some social media platform<sup>4</sup> (Groenewald, 2004). Although Google chat was set up and I could see them, I turned my camera off so that I wasn't visible to them. I'd already adapted the material circumstances of my interview room based both of empirical data from some of my other empirical work.

### 9. Reflection on the Methodology via Posthumanism

As mentioned, posthuman methodologies enter into research from a position of uncertainty. Nothing is solid and the cracks and fissures in the research assemblage become the in-roads for new data collection, analysis and methodological adaptation. Instead of the mistakes, glitches and faults in the research are seen as marking simply the *habitual* boundaries and limitations of the research project, where "error becomes the limit" (Mazzei & McCoy, 2010, p. 505). Instead of a limit, I highlight those moments as potential starting points for *lines of flight*—positive difference from the normative repetition of research procedures. Posthuman research, drawing on Patti Lather's work, "must shift the debate away from tired epistemological contests toward an examination of how a discipline works toward creating new phenomena" (Lather, 2007, p. 140).

### 10. The Intra-Action of Jackie with Her Selfies

Each of the four young women who came into the room slipped into the space with different levels of comfort—sometimes quickly, sometimes awkwardly. For some of the participants the room didn't really matter...or I should say they seemed to be able to "master" the room, overcome its limitations quickly, as opposed to others. Jackie did not overcome the room easily. Her whole interview was a material, discursive, and affective battle with her surroundings.

Once Jackie enters the room, she immediately goes to work moving, adjusting, and arranging the lighting, chair, and background.<sup>5</sup>

J: "So I'm going to adjust the lighting because I don't want my face to look super bright" She works silently and takes a series of photos pausing for a minute after each one to look at the camera. In re-watching the interview, however, I tried to remain nomadic, avoid the habits of practice and seeing that humanist qualitative methods tacitly impose. Avoiding the occulocentrism of visual methods, I closed my eyes as the video played. I moved from script to sound and listened to the event: a chair moves, a synthetic shutter sound, a pause, a sigh, the light is relocated, the base sliding along the floor. No words or script was spoken, but the sounds indicated the rubbing together of body, space, technology, camera, and interview room. Were I to have limited my data to

the transcript of the video recording, I would have missed all this. Opening my data to sound revealed the entanglement of the materiality of the room, with Jackie's body, with her affective sighs and awkward giggles, in the process of making the image. The sound was the material, discursive, and affective labour behind the image.

J: "I like the second one more because I like how the light hits my face...." She studies the photo a bit longer and then adds "I usually like it more when my cheek bones look prominent". She looks in the camera lens and touches her hand to her cheeks—first on one side and then on the other. She lifts the camera up again and sucks in her cheeks, again looking behind her for the location of the light and turning her body in relation to the light and how it looks on the screen of the camera.

J: "...and if there's sort of a shadow at my jaw line".

I ask her: "How do you achieve that? The jaw line?"

J: "Lighting". She pauses and looks at the screen again. "Angle". She moves the camera around again.

I'm amazed by this process. Every girl I've interviewed has developed a different relationship with the camera. Kayla, who I interviewed the day before, in the same room, and who has been taking selfies the longest (2 years), had no problem with this task. She pulled out her phone, snapped five photos and said that of those, three would be good enough to share on Instagram. For Jackie, she seems naturally to be able to toggle between an anthropocentric "habit of looking" (Hillevi) at the photo to a, maybe we can call it a *techno-centric* habit of seeing as she moves to the level of photographic glitches, lighting, angle, and image quality—discourses of self-presentation are revealed in both embodied presentation and technological manipulation.

But here Jackie is struggling. I'm sitting in a different room from her. In re-watching I remember what I was feeling well in this moment. And here I place my tracings on the map as a researcher in that moment; I at once knew what data I needed to be collected but I also remember thinking in that moment that words were not enough here. Other forces were at play. I was watching her on my desktop computer and I was feeling worried. Embarrassed a bit. I had started to really affectively sense the awkwardness of this research room set up for her. In my efforts to visually record these girls in the act of taking selfies, I manufactured a most false set-up for them to play in. Selfies don't happen in interview rooms. I knew this. I'd published papers on this. They happen in everyday life. But given what I wanted to learn—*the experience in the moment of taking a selfie*, how would I ever record this? I started to see what Jackie saw—the fluorescent lighting overhead is terrible. The light I brought in as a prop was warm but not bright enough. Maybe I should have rented some professional lighting equipment? But that would have definitely affected the outcomes of this research assemblage. The girls would see

<sup>4</sup> Although this was the quality of image I asked of them, I did not ask them to post the images online.

<sup>5</sup> I was unable to use visuals from the actual interview in this article first, for ethical reasons and assuring the confidentiality of my participants but second so that the analysis moves visual research beyond the visual to other sensory dimensions of data.

themselves through the lighting of a professional magazine shoot. In any case, I start writing these thoughts on a scrap piece of paper on my desk to the side and thought: how can I at once let the girls take selfies of themselves as they naturally would in everyday practice *and* still record the rich visual data of them in the second to second process of taking the image and reflecting on it? Is it even possible? I write the word space on a piece of paper on my desk with three question marks after it. I return to Jackie:

J: "So I'm going to delete the first one. Should I delete them or should I keep them all first?" Jackie looks at the image on the screen of her phone and sticks out her lip.

I answer: "Ya, you can delete the ones you aren't going to keep and save the two you would be okay posting online and just tell me about the ones you are going to delete and why you are deleting them".

Jackie nods and there is a longer pause as she takes more photos always with an air of ambivalence. I find myself *listening for sound* instead of just attending to Jackie's words. She is quieter than the other girls. Reserved with words but her body speaks a lot. I try to attend to a diffractive method: producing the script but then listening to the space in-between and attentive to the *bodily vibrations* of the participant. When she came into the room her body was confident, as the interview goes on, she seems frustrated and the fatigued.

J: "See, this one I don't like it because my face looks really, really round", she swipes her thumb up on the screen to delete it "yup, nope". She takes another couple.

I ask: "And how would you achieve it not being so round?"

J: "Like this angle" Jackie holds the camera directly out in front of her. Her arms are outstretched. She continues, "...and from the front". She looks at the camera held out, smiles and then stops smiling. She looks at the camera, and then at me at the other side of the recording device, seemingly a bit frustrated, "So it is harder than I thought".

I say: "The room isn't ideal is it".

J: "Well, I mean the white background is good. I like that a lot. But the lighting, it just doesn't work".

There is a long pause and Jackie seems focused and determined in the space. She has stopped moving around the room and seems fixed in one spot. She is not taking many different and varied poses, but rather is working on micro permutations of one look.

When I think of the different modes of data collection, I am grateful of the layers I have: I have the photos the young women took. I have the video of the image production, and I have my observational notes. Were I to have just used the script of the immediate photo elicitation, I wouldn't be able to, as I am now, go back on and reflect on both the production of the image through the video, or my own reactions to the production of the video. The video becomes my recording of the research assemblage as a whole. I can listen not only to the sighs,

grunts, and giggles that reflected the labour behind the image, but also reflect the affective relationship resulting from the entanglement of the image, the girl, and the less-than-perfect interview room.

J: "Okay, so I feel like I like this photo but I kind of want to edit it?"

I find myself happy at her saying that. I was worried that this whole process was a disaster but she seemed to develop determination and focus. And now she had a photo. I say "Ya, so tell me how are you going to edit it".

J: "I go to the app, and I open it, can you see it?" She opens the app and holds it up to the camera in the interview room so I can see it. "And I usually choose this filter. And then I go to fade and I just move that down a little bit". She is very fast with the filter app. Her finger slides across the image alternating between adjusting levels and clicking settings.

I ask: "Can you tell me a little bit, when you are looking at yourself in the camera but you haven't taken the image yet. What are you feeling or looking for?"

J: Shadows. "I try to look, like, I don't know how to explain it. ya, shadows. I like how this looks a little, I don't know how to..."

I ask, "You don't like shadows?"

J: "No, I *do* like shadows. I like seeing my cheek bones a bit". She uses the phone like a mirror and turns her head from side to side looking at her face. She turns her head a little more and looks at her ears. "And also I kind of like it when I show my ears".

Me: "Okay".

J: "Because I feel like my ears are my achievement because I've stretched them for more than 2 years".

In this moment I attend to this specific moment of *positive difference*, in the Deleuzian sense. Whereas up to this point Jackie had practiced habitual gendered modes of self-presentation: holding the camera at a high angle to diminish the size of her body, sucking in her cheeks, looking for shadows that made her face look slim, in this moment she collages certain standardly feminine presentational tropes with her non-stereotypically feminine stretched ear lobes. Using Deleuzian terms, here we see the familiar territorization of practices of gendered self-representation, but along side this is an affective line of flight—her stretched ears!—that shows the radical uniqueness of Jackie's affectively informed performance of the self. I wonder if perhaps the sparseness of the room brought her attention to focus on the details of her face. For Jackie, her ears aren't a defiance of beauty—she doesn't see them as intentionally not beautiful—she sees them as another form of beauty. They are a bodily representation of a non-normative presentation of femininity one marked by persistence, commitment, and achievement. In a positive Deleuzian sense, she is not defying femininity in a binary sense, but laying out a new line of playful and creative flight, a new potential, a micro permutation, a new line of flight amidst infinite other lines.

## 11. Conclusion

### 11.1. Reflections

I began with a select review of literature on new materialism, and research methods. I chose not to do a comprehensive analysis and instead focus on new methods that applied most directly to my original research design for my pilot study on selfies, which were phenomenological interviews and photo elicitation. These new materialist methods included: *intra*-views, reading images horizontally and using Deleuzian difference. I then detailed the research methodology I used for my original study last year. After this procedural account of the method, I return to my messy research notes, and reread only one interview using photo elicitation with one young woman, Jackie, to mine the research assemblage for data that would otherwise not be visible with my original humanist methods. I discuss how by focusing on the unit of the research assemblage, and not simply the transcripts, we move the usable data from a tight focus on the words (discourse) of the transcripts to more comprehensively include the discursive, material, and affective forces at work in the production of knowledge in visual research.

I begin by discussing the Deleuzian concept of tracing or the habitual movement through a research assemblage, which arises when a researcher adopts an attitude of certainty. Instead I discuss the approach of uncertainty where the researcher always remains open and attentive to moments in research where cracks, fissures and openings appear, which either challenge the limitation of the research method, or challenge the established knowledge of the phenomenon under study.

I discuss deeply the important of the material components of the research assemblage. I show how the research room itself, the lighting in the room, the cellphone camera, the glitches of the camera, or the available filters can all *intra*-act to both shape the moment of data collection and the knowledge that is produced in the research encounter.

I suggest throughout the article that visual methods move towards seeing photos in a posthuman sense as a snapshot of a material-discursive and affective moment. A strong attention to affect in visual research recognizes the embodied vibrations that can connect or disconnect a photo to a participant or perhaps bring up issues in the sharing of those images with researchers. I particularly apply the importance of the affective intensity of images to my participants and use the same measure of care they have with their images to my use of the images. Even if participants have signed photo releases, I recognize the affective variability of one photo to another and avoid using images in my work that seem to have strongly ambiguous affective relations to my participants. Or if I need to, I discuss individual photos with them, doubly confirming the consensual use of an image in my work.

There are many tools researchers of digital visual phenomena can take with them: digital images are entan-

gled with their specific locations and environments and visual researchers need to be creative in finding ways to collect this nomadic visual data. Researchers need to be attentive to affect in image use and production since affect is often the measure of the degree of ethical duty a researcher has to the images being used. Researchers also need to remain uncertain and open to data gathering since new visual phenomena require a degree of curiosity and intrigue lest we automatically treat them in the same way as their analogue antecedents.

### 11.2. Lessons for Future Visual Analysis

There are many benefits to a posthuman approach to *intra*-views and new materialist informed photo elicitation, which I mention in the introduction and would like to take up here:

1) *Attentiveness to the complexity human and non-human agents complicit in the production of the phenomenon and the research assemblage.* By making the unit of analysis not a single or series of words, but rather the fundamental material-discursive complexity of phenomena, new materialist methods demand attentiveness to both human and non-human agents complicit in the production of the phenomenon.

2) *A response-ability* or an ethical duty researchers must have to not simplifying the complexity of the phenomena they study. *Intra*-active self-reflexivity forces researchers to acknowledge their role and influence in the research program. Nomadic thinking encourages researchers to break out of the habitual practices of qualitative methods and look at them anew. Nomadic thinking encourages a floating in the moment to see what the phenomenon offers unto itself rather than forcing the phenomenon to conform to the parameters of a specific method.

3) *Listening to the sounds* rather than reading the script of the research encounter—sounds resonated in my research design both through Jackie's body—the way she would sigh, seem hopeful, and then slouch or frown in disappointment. Sounds also resonated in relation to the non-human elements of the research assemblage: the insufficient design of the room, poor lighting, and impact of the camera. Listening for sounds and not just words, adjusts data collection to incorporate affective material and discursive data sources.

4) *A reminder that, methodology seems to be the stage, which is the least malleable, least questioned of the stages in a research design.* Methodologies are not a limited set of perfect tools but systems of knowledge making that are themselves designed upon worldviews and ontologies of a given moment in time and a given genealogy of thinking. When we dare to shake up methodologies and contest their reification, we keep research methods current and proximate to the mutable nature of the human experience.

I would like to finish by providing one last reflection on my research assemblage. I mentioned at the start that



the interview I drew on here was part of a pilot study for future work on young women and digital self-imaging practices. I'd like to speak briefly of my current work on this project. I sat for a long time with the methodological issues I've pointed out in this project: how can I both be with the young women but not be present while they photo themselves? How can I also have the young women photograph themselves while also permitting the photos to take place in more natural environments? I'm grateful to be living in a time of mobile app development and technological innovation. I'm presently working with a user-interface company to use one of their apps, originally designed to run behind an existing app to visually capture how users use an app so as to improve the interface design. I'm presently working with my ethics board, and the app company, to use the interface to record my participants while they take photos of themselves to be shared on social media. How this would work is the app runs invisibly behind a social media platform's interface and my participants can turn on the app before they take photos. They would live record themselves photographing themselves in their specific locations and I would be able to watch them, and talk with them, on my computer at home in the live process of taking these videos. In short, it would be reproducing the set up I had for my pilot but the desk mounted video camera I used in my pilot would be swallowed invisibly into a background-running app on the cellphone itself while the young women weren't restricted to the, as we've established, terribly equipped interview room. I suspect there will be glitches. I am attentive to the ethics hurdles that will need to be cautiously worked through, but I'm excited about keeping visual methods fresh, novel, and creative, while also close to changing human experiences especially when it comes to our everyday uses of mobile imaging technologies.

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Book Review

## The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet

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### Abstract

This paper reviews Marcel Danesi’s new book on the use of emoji in particular, and the use of visual language more generally. Danesi offers a number of interesting examples of emoji use, pointing out that their use has risen considerably in a number of contexts. He goes on to question how far emoji use can be extended by examining the structure of the emoji ‘language’. Overall this is an accessible book that presents a number of examples of visual languages and comments on the possibilities and challenges for visual language use against a backdrop of technological change.

### Keywords

emoji; visual communication; semiotics; visual languages

### Issue

This book review is part of the issue “Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges”, edited by Uta Russmann (FH Wien der WKW University of Applied Sciences for Management & Communication, Austria) and Jakob Svensson (Malmö University, Sweden).

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### 1. Background

As this book points out in its opening sentence, the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji became the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Word of the Year in 2015. The Word of the Year is chosen as the best reflection of that year in a single word—other contenders included refugee and Brexit (OED, 2016). The OED justification for its choice reveals a great deal about the use of emoji in current digital communication; the OED website states that it made the decision to give the Word of the Year distinction to an emoji because use of emoji not only increased considerably in 2015—with the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji accounting for a fifth of all emoji used—but was also used broadly across social groups. This trend saw emoji used increasingly by advertisers and politicians.

The term emoji refers specifically to the characters systematised by Unicode, which has allowed emoji to be

standardised across operating systems (p. 4). The term emoji actually means *e* (picture) *moji* (letter/character) (p. 2), but its similarity to the English word emotion is of particular note because that is, in fact, how most people use emoji. The designer of emoji, Shigetaka Kurita, highlights this point, stating that it is the rise of digital communication, a medium which doesn’t readily allow for expressions of emotion, which made the use of emoji necessary to compensate for the inability to convey facial expression, tone of voice and gesture in digital communication (Lucas, 2016).

### 2. This Book’s Place

The OED website also adds that emoji can ‘cross language barriers’ (OED, 2016), which is a central theme of this book. Whether or not emoji can be considered a universal language is an issue which is raised in each of the chapters in the book as Marcel Danesi considers both so-

cial and communicative elements of emoji use, as well as linguistic considerations.

There is a theoretical aspect to each chapter which is mostly light in order to maintain accessibility to the general audience to which this book aims to appeal. Despite this there are a number of technical linguistic terms used, for example ‘phatic’ which refers to a communication which contains emotive content (p. 18). These are used sparingly, however, and with full explanation, and so in its mix of general and specialised language, the book does manage to command more general appeal whilst situating its explanations within an established linguistic context.

While the focus of the book is emoji, the sub-title *The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet* indicates the breadth of its scholarship. It is an extended essay on visual languages with many interesting diversions exploring a wide range of relevant topics such as the possible role of gesture in the evolution of language, Medieval illuminated manuscripts, rebus writing, Leibniz’s attempt to develop a universal visual language and even Teilhard de Chardin’s account of an emerging global consciousness written, of course, well before the Internet Age. This historical perspective enables Danesi to advance the interesting hypothesis that emoji may be a retrieval of hybridity in writing, that is to say the combination of picture writing with phonetic writing, where this hybridity goes back to the origins of writing and has been a recurrent theme in the history of writing. He also suggests, in an interesting excursion on Derrida, that emoji writing might be seen as an ‘anti-hegemonic’ reaction to the power relations of print literacy.

Research methods are not explicitly set out in the book, although its origin was based on a database of emoji communications compiled by four research students at the University of Toronto. Instead, examples of the communications are used throughout the book, together with questions and participant responses. There is occasion when it would have been useful to know more about the research context. For example, one of the questions related is ‘Does emoji writing make you feel more comfortable when communicating, reducing the stress of face-to-face interaction?’ (p. 177). We are then told that everyone answered in the affirmative, yet that is hardly surprising given that it appears to be a leading question, making an assumption that face-to-face communication is stressful.

The book is, for the most part, well produced and easy to use with a full index. If there is a practical criticism of this book, it is that the examples of texts and digital communications containing emoji are in small print on a coloured background, making them very difficult to see. It is therefore necessary to refer to accompanying text and back to the emoji frequently in order to work out what is being referred to, which is somewhat frustrating. There are, however, numerous examples provided to illustrate the author’s points, offering an interesting array of the uses of emoji.

### 3. Emoji as Universal Language

The question of whether emoji are a complement to the written word or a substitute is an important one for what has been described as the world’s fastest growing language (Cioletti, 2016). Chapter Three—‘Emoji Competence’—considers this issue, telling us that there are two types of emoji text, adjunctive, where emoji are used alongside text, and substitutive, where emoji are used wholly in place of text.

The two examples given by the author in fact serve as illustrations as to why emoji use—with or without accompanying words—does not (yet) seem sufficient to produce texts that are equivalent in terms of meaning to the written word alone. The first (p. 36) is an entire, substitutive, emoji text entitled ‘My birth story’. The author points out that it is generally intelligible, but then goes on to misinterpret it, stating that it tells of the writer’s feelings ‘when she was born’ (p. 38). This isn’t the case—the phrase ‘My birth story’ is understood to refer to a woman’s story of when she gave birth. The website BabyCentre has a thread asking its group members to post their birth stories in emoji. A look at this highlights the issue of experience in emoji competence. Once one has read a number of these emoji birth stories, then they become easier to decode (time waiting, drugs taken etc). If one has had the experience of giving birth, then the emoji which represent these events are much easier to decode. It doesn’t seem likely that, with any degree of emoji competence, this would be decodable without knowledge of the experience. This is a challenge to the notion of emoji as a language (let alone a universal one), as the traditional written word is capable of clearly expressing experiences which one has not had.

The same issue is also highlighted in the second example given by Danesi in this chapter. This example is an adjunctive one, the first sentence of this reads ‘This is a [book emoji] all about how my life got [arrow of circles emoji] [up arrow emoji] [down arrow emoji]’ (p. 38). Danesi again highlights that this can be easily understood and translated as ‘this is a story about how my life got turned around, up and down’ (p. 39). But, as is clear from the rest of the example given, it is in fact a partial emoji representation of the theme song to the television show *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. The first line of the song is ‘Now this is a story all about how/my life got flipped turned upside down’ (Smith and Townes, as cited on the LyricsFreak website). It has a very specific meaning that is not translatable as anything else.

There is, then, an extent to which emoji competence is synonymous with cultural competence, and as such, this does not provide a compelling indication that any degree of emoji competence is sufficient to decode emoji text. Instead it highlights the point that, as there are no native emoji speakers, instead the ways in which emoji are used are currently grounded in first languages. ‘No special training is needed to learn emoji use’ (p. 158). The examples given here, and the existence of the Emoji-

pedia, which provides a reference guide to the meanings of emoji indicate that training is needed to learn emoji use. Despite this, Danesi is correct that people use emoji in large numbers on a day-to-day basis without the need for any formal instruction.

#### 4. The Possibilities of Universal Languages

One of the interesting aspects of this book is the array of other picture-writing systems referenced, for example Pitman Shorthand, of which many people will have heard, and Blissymbolics, which remains more obscure. The latter was invented in the mid twentieth century by Charles Bliss, and is interesting because it is capable of conveying whole sentences.

The example of Blissymbolics perhaps provides a hint as to why a universal writing system is an ideal which can never be realised. While it provides a more comprehensive communication system than emoji, Bliss himself was determined that his symbols had a specific meaning, and was vitriolic when institutions interpreted them in other ways. More recently, *The Fundamental Rules of Blissymbolics* document states that 'Creation of terminology must be carried out according to the fundamental rules of Blissymbolics to ensure the integrity of the system' (Blissymbolics Communication International, 2004, p. 2).

Emoji, while standardised by Unicode, does not follow this pattern. Anyone can propose new emoji to become part of the canon and even where icons are rejected, existing emoji take on new meanings to fill this gap. An example of this is the aubergine emoji, which is commonly understood as a phallic symbol. A quick online search reveals a plethora of articles from popular media indicating to readers popular versus official meanings of emoji. (e.g. *Good Housekeeping Guide*, 2016). This raises interesting questions about Danesi's claim that 'human communication in written form is evolving more and more on a single path of hybridization' (p. 88). Emoji as language is both a global practice which highlights the role of human technology in transcending national boundaries, and at the same time a culturally situated practice in flux; emoji use therefore calls attention to universal and particular instances of lan-

guage. The hybridization of visual languages with written ones augments human possibilities for universal language development.

#### 5. Conclusion

Ultimately, as is reiterated throughout this book, emoji are primarily used to add emotion to digital communications. They tend to add a positive tone to messages, seen by their users as 'fun' (p. 179). This is an important compensation for the relative lack of contextual clues in online communication of the kind that are so important to guiding interpretation in face to face communication. Emoji used online can play a similar role to facial expression and gesture and are often to undermine seriousness with a sense of shared humanity. Danesi ends by stating that his conclusion is that he has no conclusion. He rightly points out that the adaptability of human communication is likely to prevail, and the continued use of emoji will depend considerably on the form that new technological development takes as much as any inherent value in emoji communication itself.

#### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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