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Towards Visual strategic communication

– an innovative interdisciplinary perspective on visual dimensions within the strategic communications field

Introduction – a visual turn in the profession of strategic communication

Recently, there has been a wide interest in the visual aspects of communication (Barnhurst, Vari, Rodriguez, 2004; Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012; Müller, 2007, 2008; Machin, 2014; Fahmy, Bock, Wanta, 2014). Consequently, there is a need to reflect on what it means claiming that society is increasingly visual (Machin, 2014). New information technologies affect media culture and the way images are used (Becker, 2004; Jenkins 2006), and the visual has become a big part of our daily life, especially on the internet and in social media (Fahmy et al., 2014; Adami & Jewitt, 2016). The digital image form has changed people's relationship, and by digital images we memorialize social and organisational life (Davison, McLean, Warren, 2015). According to previous research, the role of practitioners is changing and they require more competencies to be successful in their communication roles (Zerfass et al., 2007, 2013 in Tench & Moreno, 2015). A factor that might cause changes in the practice of communication professionals are the participation thru social media (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). In 2015 a study on communication management competencies for European practitioners points out that practitioner's competence acquires knowledge in new technologies, web tools effects on organisational communication, media systems and intercultural aspects at communication messages (Tench & Moreno, 2015). A plethora of visual channels, for example youtube, instagram and snapchat, are available, and according to previous research, practitioners have the perception that social media tools are important for organisations but there are no real strategic orientation for the professional use of social media today (Moreno, Navarro, Tench, Zerfass, 2015). Additionally, there is an increasing presence of the visual in the practitioners daily work (Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, van Leeuwen, 2013; de Vaujany & Vast, 2016; Bell, Warren, Schroeder, 2014). Consequently, as the use of new media and the new uses of traditional media evolve in the contemporary everyday life, scholars argue that an evoking empowering trend transfers power from organisations to stakeholders (Melo, 2015). Also, from an isomorphism point of view (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998), scholars indicate the phenomena of organisations developing their identity by investing in lavish, often generic, visual identities (Blomgren, Hedmo, Waks, 2016; Drori, Delmestri, Oberg, 2015).

While interest in the visual is thus expanding within the management and organisational studies, research is still limited and requires more theoretical, conceptual and methodological development (Davison et al., 2012). From an ethical aspects, the visual is part of the construction of truths and communicated ideas, and by that means, visual research is not just a tool to study the visual approach of an organisation, or the study of accessory visual elements in communication, but an investigation of contemporary organisation as it is visually grounded and memorialized. This paper seeks to take some small steps in this direction by bringing together papers with a visual approach in the research area of strategic communication, and contributes to a stronger and more prominent integration of the visual in the field strategic communication. Altogether, there is a myriad of visual expressions which intervene in many areas of an organisational life (Davison et al., 2012) and this proposed new perspective goes beyond marketing, advertising and promotional imagery, to include organisational visual strategic communication such as the visual appearance of the organisation in for example social media, annual

reports, visual identities and web pages. Therefore, we argue that a visual strategic communication perspective not only could bring, but collect ideas, tools and approaches which allows scholars to trace and capture the role that the visual may play in organisations strategic communication to fulfill its mission.

Visual resources in communication are acknowledged to be powerful in cognition and memory (Paivo, 1991), but they are not just transmitters of information; they are the products of cultural histories and the cognitive resources we use to create meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Mirzoeff, 1999). About 75% of all information reaching the brain is visual and that becomes the main source of stimulus to which we rely forming our perception of reality as thus guide our behavior, visual communication is a primary way to assimilate information and knowledge (Newton, 2004). Furthermore, scholars have observed a growth of interest in visual communication across academic disciplines (Barnhurst et al., 2004; Pauwels, 2012; Rose, 2012; Hansen & Machin, 2013; Schill, 2012). It can be noticed in texts and research, cross-disciplinary interest groups and new academic journals (Becker, 2004). There is now much evidence to support that it all together can be seen as a "visual turn" in research (Mitchell, 1994; Becker, 2004; Felten, 2008; Holsanova, 2012; Teruggi Page, 2014).

This study is built upon work by the well-cited researchers Barnhurst, Vari and Rodriguez (2004) who documented the main currents of visual studies in communication during 1999–2003. Using Barnhurst et al. classification of visual research in communication studies is in line with a call for more specialisation and interaction with other disciplines (Tench et al., 2012). According to Barnhurst et al. (2004), all communication has a visual dimension and research in communication areas such as advertising and public relations often relies on a visual language. Despite the expanding field of visual studies in communication research, there is a lack of references to previous visual studies and visual theories (Barnhurst et al., 2004; Becker, 2004). Elkins (2003, p.17) describes visual studies as a "set of overlapping concerns" and compared to other fields of communication, visual communication is not a professional practice and it is not a discipline. Visual communication does not have one central or several unifying theories or its own methodology (Moriarty, 2002; Elkins, 2003; Moriarty & Barbatsis, 2011).

Visual studies and strategic communication may not seem to intersect, given their independent growth and institutional separation of the discipline of humanities and social science. But as communication through campaigning, advertising and social media, scholars argue that more attention should be payed to the intersection of the visual and the field of communication (Barnhurst et al., 2004; Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012; Müller, 2007 & 2008; Fahmy et al., 2014). In conducting this study, we suggest that visual communication is present in all speciality areas of the strategic communication profession that Hallahan et al. (2007) addresses – whether it is management communication, marketing communication, public relations, technical communication, political communication or social marketing campaigns – the visual aspect of strategic communication is involved. As we continue talking about strategic communication we adopt the widely recognised definition of strategic communicating as: "the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). In addition, strategic communication is also about how organisational symbols are created through communication practice (ibid., 2007) and with the growing presence of visuality in the profession (Meyer, 2013; de Vaujany & Vaast, 2016) scholars argue that it is important to

examine since visuals fulfill communicational roles for organisations (Bell et al., 2014). In this study the dimensions of the visual are intentionally broad and includes aspects on the visual as visual communication, visual rhetoric and visual studies. Drawing upon above challenges and the "visual turn" phenomena, we propose that further studies of visual strategic communication are needed. Even so, scholars argue that the conceptualization of strategic communication as an interdisciplinary field, uniting several disciplines, is an important step forward, but has been disappointing so far (Nothhaft, 2016).

Against this background, the *purpose of this study is to explore how a visual perspective can be applied to strategic communication research.* First, the term visual communication will be examined from various perspectives with an attempt to develop a foundation for this new academic territory. Second, this study summarizes how visual approaches are applied in strategic communication research during 2005–2015. This is done by a literature review and an overall content analysis. By conceptualising the multifaceted way of how an organisation communicates visually, this study has the intention to provide important knowledge and identify implications for research, practice and society by introducing an innovative visual perspective in strategic communication research.

Visual Communication as a research field

With an attempt to develop a foundation for this new academic territory of visual strategic communication, this chapter examines the term visual communication from various perspectives. In order to do so, initially a fairly broad literature review was done in order to get a theoretical background on visual communication as a research field. We intended to be comprehensive within the field of visual communication studies, and therefore studies on visual artifacts and art (paintings, drawings, sketches, sculptures, art photography and other material forms of visuality) was excluded, we also did not include practice based research and studies on abstract manifestations like layout, color or typography). The literature review starts with a brief history of the emergence of the research field and continues with an overview of the by previous scholars identified main strains of visual approaches in communication science (Barnhurst, 2004; Martin, 2011).

Studies in the visual emerged from its base in the arts during the late 1950s, as the history of film and photography expanded its relations to popular culture. By this time scholars from many fields began to notice an increasing visuality in culture (Barnhurst et al., 2004). In the mid-1960s anthropologist Sol Worth (1981) began developing visual studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Worth´s graduate course on visual communication theory and research may have been the first of its kind (Gross & Ruby, 2015). In addition, Worth introduced the theoretical approach to visual communication studies.

Attempting to determine the roots and offshoots of visual communication as a research field, Moriarty and Barbatsis (2011), used a rhizome analysis. A rhizome is the metaphor the researchers used to map visual communication as a way to explain the complexity and the dynamics of the field. The analysis involves identifying nodes of discourse as well as the relevant disciplines that contribute to the emerging field of visual communication. One outcome of their study is the theories that have contributed to the field of visual

communication have their origin in the traditional disciplines of social science and humanities, and when it comes to biological and physical aspects; natural science. Most reference points to visual communication are to be found in arts and design, communication, psychology and cultural and critical studies. Although Martin (2011) argues that the rhizome map of Smith et al.´s is limited since it has no hierarchy or rank order and fails to convey a clearer and deeper understanding of the field of visual communication.

In 2004, Barnhurst et al. propose the main currents of visual studies in communication research. In their review of published research in books and journals during 1999–2003, they identify the three major common strains of visual approaches in communication science: visual rhetoric (mainly studies on mass media and popular culture), visual pragmatics (considering the visual as a practice, the production of images and designs), and visual semantics (considering the visual as a "text" with the aim to discover the signs that organizes meanings). According to this study the visual field will continue to evolve along an interdisciplinary path, without signs of paradigm shift.

However, there are other theoretical overviews of visual research (Elkins 2003; Dikovitskaya, 2005; Meyer et al., 2013), but in addition, Barnhurst et al. (2004) describe the link between visual studies and the field of communication studies. In 2011, Martin further clarifies the visual concepts of Barnhurst et al. (2004), and building primarily on the insights of Martin (2011) and Barnhurst et al. (2004), this article sets out to consolidate previous scholarly efforts. Research that takes a primarily rhetorical approach is classified as *visual rhetoric*, research that takes a primarily semantic approach is classified as *visual studies*, and research that takes a pragmatic approach is classified as empirical *visual communication*. According to Martin (2011) above approaches to visual communication studies are the most prevalent, and we adopt these in order to summarize how visual approaches are applied in strategic communication research during 2005–2015. As shown in Figure 1, the findings of visual approaches in communication research from literature reviews in studies conducted by previous scholars (Barnhurst et al., 2004; Martin, 2011).

Visual rhetoric	Visual studies	Visual communication
Studies on mass-media, everyday life and popular culture. Power, community and history. How a piece can move an audience or how an audience may identify with a piece.	Society´s access to images and how they can be used to generate power. To be compared to culture studies.	Provide understanding of the creation, presentation and support of media works. The visual as a "text" with the aim to discover the signs that organizes meaning.
Involves theories of: persuasion, invention and interpretation, semiotics.	*Involves theories of:* examining issues on access for audiences, representation.	*Involves theories of:* investigating creation, presentation, effects, reception of audiences.

Figure 1: Visual approaches in communication research (Barnhurst et al., 2004; Martin, 2011).

In order to explain *Visual rhetoric, Visual studies and Visual communication* farther, an overview of each visual approach follows.

Visual rhetoric
Theoretical assumptions

Visual rhetoric is a form of communication that uses images to create meaning and/or construct an argument. It's about how images, either on their own or in cooperation with other elements, create an argument that is designed for an audience to present information through image (Albakry & Daimin, 2014). According to Catellani (2015) a visual rhetoric approach focuses on how images and visual layout of organisational communication, for example CSR reports and annual reports, contribute to the definition of meaning of the organisations and their actions. Two definitions can be used when referring to visual rhetoric. One refers to the visual impact of the object itself (i.e the visual rhetoric of the political advertisement helped constitute the nature of the organisation). The second definition refers to an approach rhetorical scholars use to analyse the visual, here is semiotics and visual semantics elements involved. Together the two definitions deal with understanding how the use of visual symbols functions influence and manage meanings rhetorically in cultures (Martin, 2011; Foss 2005). Theories in visual semiotics focus on how images communicate and how meaning is constructed through images and signs, tools used in these studies are also used in discourse analysis (Foss, 2005; Nilsson, 2015; Machin, 2013; Rose, 2012). In visual rhetoric theory, visuals are analysed with a focus on a rhetorical response to images rather than the aesthetics. Images in advertising, TV, film, architecture are a major part of the rhetorical environment and has as great cultural significance as speakers had earlier. But all visual objects are not visual rhetoric, three distinctive characteristics should be present: the image must be symbolic, involving human intervention and presented to an audience with the intention to communicate with it. The audience is important in visual rhetoric, to understand the impact of visual artifacts (Foss, 2005). Moreover, Albakry and Daimin (2014) argues that the power of visual rhetoric by semiotics helps to create a bridge for 'cultural gaps' in the social environment.

Methodology

Scholars analyze the symbolic meaning of visuals which persuade an audience in almost the same way that verbal communication does, using either inductive or deductive methods with the purpose of to discover the "communicative dimensions of images through attention to their nature, function, or evaluation" (Foss, 2005, p.150). Methods commonly used in visual rhetoric are semiotics, visual semantics and visual arguments, which are used to reflect and interpret images as an expression of cultural meanings (Martin, 2011). One example of a visual rhetorical study is *Street Galleries – Visual Rhetoric in Outdoor Advertising* by Seliger (2009). The study examines the visual rhetoric in outdoor advertising using visual ethnographic methods and semiotic analyses and the major outcome is the taxonomy of visual rhetoric in advertising. Blair (2004) means that images act as arguments with the audience filling in and completing the arguments. According to Schill (2012) this is common especially in political communication where the images have a rhetorical impact making persuasive arguments to the viewers. One example is a study by Fahmy (2007) where images of Iraqis cheering American troops' removal of a Saddam Hussein statue during second Iraq War and invited viewers to the conclusion that the war was over and that the Iraqis supported the American efforts. Another example is a study which investigates how

the circulation of particular images during a political president campaign might develop unspoken arguments and provide additional insights, in this case an empty chair as a rhetorical device (Cos & Martin, 2012). In 2015, Catellani presents visual rhetoric research on CSR reports published by a French oil and gas company between 2004 and 2013. The analysis focuses on the visual dimension of the reports, and is aimed at understanding the visual rhetoric developed in these texts, its components and its evolution (Catellani, 2015). Also, Davison (2002, 2008) explores specific rhetorical devices apparent in the visual images in the financial reporting of Reuters and BT's corporate communication.

Disciplinary home

Rhetoric has its origin in classical Greece and is concerned with the study of the use of symbols to communicate. The study of visual communication and imagery using the language from the rhetorical tradition, visual rhetoric, is relatively new. Today's definition expands to touch on more than verbal texts, visual rhetoric is defined as the social function that affects and controls the sense. (Foss, 2005). Visual rhetoric reveals meaning from many perspectives and has links to cultural studies, psychology, media studies, rhetoric, epistemology, anthropology and art theory and are used in for example advertising as a tool to convince the audience and help them understand the images quickly, and to convey messages to audiences in a convincing manner (Albakry & Daimin, 2014).

Limitations

There is a need to expand visual rhetorical theory and the understanding in the multivarious ways symbols communicate, making it more inclusive (Foss, 2005). According to Martin (2011), the most common criticism of visual rhetoric is that the field has become too specialized, and visual rhetoric analysis should be supported by findings or strategies from other areas of research, for example cognitive studies or neuroscience.

Visual studies

Theoretical assumptions

According to Dikovitskaya (2006) visual studies is a an interdisciplinary emerging research field that studies the cultural construction of the visual in arts, media and everyday life. Other scholars describe visual studies as the studying of the visual and its' connection to human action, culture and social life (Smith, 2008; Rose, 2012;). Halls's theory of encoding/decoding (1974) is a foundational theory for visual studies, and the main premise of the theory is that there are no single meaning for a message because the audience do not accept the dominant message unless they prefer it. Producing meaning depends on the audience interpretation of the message, and interpretation is sustained by the audience actively using the code – encoding: putting things into the code – and the individual interpreting or decoding the meaning of the message. The message is decoded in different ways depending on the individual's background and social context (Hall, 1980). Accordingly, the concept of representation is one main concern within this approach. Visual studies is often referred to as visual culture (Mitchell, 2005; Martin, 2011), although Elkins (2003) argues that the terms have vague but important differences. The term "visual studies" is the youngest and was used by Mitchell (1994) to describe the "pictorial turn"; a collective tension about images and visual media and a turn to images in disciplines of human science and natural sciences. According to Martin (2011), "visual studies" is becoming more popular in the

communication discipline, and this is partly because of its main objective to solve practical challenges through visual and material means. Also Becker (2004) points out that this relatively new theoretical perspective contributes to the field of media and communication studies.

Methodology

The visual studies approach use methods to examine for example questions of power and images (Evans & Hall, 2005), visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002), and examines the concept of visual pleasure (Azoulay, 2005) and cultural production (Mirzoeff, 1999). Studies with this approach devotes attention to for example Barthes, Baudrillard and Foucault and therefore methods used often are connected to culturally oriented sociological analysis including a critical interpretive element (Martin, 2011). An example of a study within this approach is a paper that sheds light on the way by which corporations visually communicate their values and norms through the construction of the material environment (Pauwels, 2008). Also, by studying transnational energy companies' with semiological analysis, Friedel (2008) discusses how corporate advertising and social responsibility reports can be understood as a system of visual representation, reflecting a particular standpoint by truth and myths and unequal relations of power. Another example of a study from a critical cultural perspective is *Beyond authenticity: A visual-material analysis of locality in the global redesign of Starbucks stores* (Aiello et al., 2014). In the article, the researchers use a visual-material discourse analysis to examine the design strategy efforts to create global aesthetics grounded in locality, focusing on meaning potentials of materiality.

Disciplinary home

Visual studies has not a specific disciplinary home, instead it is considered as an interdisciplinary project that began in the early 1990s, influenced by fields such as cultural studies, media studies, communication, art history, film studies and aesthetics (Martin, 2011).

Limitations

Although, visual studies approaches are sometimes criticized from positivist or quantitative perspectives. Elkins (2003) on the other hand, points to another limitation that can be found within visual studies, and is concerned by the way a limited number of models and topics of analysis have been settled upon. Also, he argues that the approach overall is shallow and lacks visuality and that there is too much interest in social meanings rather than form.

Visual communication

Theoretical assumptions

One of the theories used in visual communication is visual framing which is aggregated in one of the major theories of mass media research, the framing theory, and is about the capacity of the image to communicate messages in an implicit and symbolic way (Nilsson, 2015). In 1996, Kress and Van Leeuwen enhanced and introduced framing as specific to visual communication and challenged the way of making sense in the semiotic process and started considering the varied forms that extend beyond language and images (2001). There is a growth in content-analytical studies that uses visual framing as a theoretical reference (Fahmy, 2004; Parry,

2010). In 1999, Hallahan argues that framing is a potentially useful paradigm for examining the strategic creation of public relations messages and audience responses (1999).

Methods

Research methods in visual communication are both qualitative and quantitative and also problem-oriented and more empirical in design than methods in visual rhetoric or visual studies. The methods are critical and have pedagogical intentions when using scientific methods to empirically explain different processes and meanings of mass-mediated visuals and the producing, distributing and receiving messages, but also the meaning of visuals in the society (Müller, 2007). The variety of contributing disciplines results in the use of a variety of empirical methods, but content analysis is the most commonly method used. One example with a relatively new phenomenon and a visual communication empirical approach, is a study where IKEA provides an avatar called ANNA to represent the organisation in order to visually lead the customers through the buying process online (Martin, 2011). According to Holsanova (2013), viewers perception and interpretation play an active dynamic role in the interaction with visual messages. The recipient, the multimodal message and the situational context of the visuals, co-create its meaning, and consequently, this could give a better understanding on organisations communication.

Disciplinary home

The visual communication approach is an expanding subfield of communication science and uses social scientific methods to explain the production, distribution and reception processes, and also meanings of mass-mediated visuals in several contexts. There are many other fields making contributions within visual communication, for example British art history, information visualization, visual literacy and cognitive and media psychological approaches (Müller, 2007). The field of visual communication strongly influence and overlap with research within visual studies where visual communication scholars influence their studies by a social science tradition. The purpose of studies in visual communication is to provide understanding of creation, presentation, and support of media works as well as effects of audiences (Martin, 2011).

Limitations

One of the limitations in this approach is that visual communication researchers adapt methods that they have learned in other areas like journalism and mass communication, linguistics, sociology, social psychology, or anthropology (Martin, 2011). Kenney (2009) argues that a problem using content-analysis on images is the difficulty of reading images while interpreting them and that the researcher can associate frequency of content with the significance of content. Another limitation in this approach is using content categories without relating to theoretical perspectives. Some critics argue that there are not a grammar of visuals, but Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argue the contrary, and propose a theory of Western visual grammar with the intention to find a framework where you can invent and organize visual content.

Based on the examination of the term visual communication, the three theoretical approaches presented above are proposed as the basis for how visual communication is conceptualized in research. Furthermore, the

conceptualization functions as a foundation for exploring how a visual perspective can be applied to strategic communication research.

Methodology

This paper examines how visual approaches can be applied to strategic communication research. This is done through an overall content analysis, and this section of the paper presents how the material was collected, the coding variables and the selected categories in the content analysis.

Selection of material

In order to explore how visual approaches can be applied to strategic communication research, the first step of the study started on a macrolevel by defining the material for the study, retrieving literature *published* in the most prominent and wellcited scientific journals in the field of strategic communication 2005–2015. Like previous researchers (Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012; Barnhurst 2004), we also inspected publications from the related discipline of public relations. According to Nothhaft (2016) the term strategic communication is becoming recognized as a concept under which not only public relations, but also organisational communication, marketing communication and corporate communications, are united. Therefore, the review of visual approaches in strategic communication research includes articles published in: *International Journal of Strategic Communication, Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review, Public Relations Quarterly*, *Public Relations Inquiry, Journal of Communication Management, Corporate Communications: An International Journal* and *Journal of Communication.* The selection of journals were made followed by searches in databases. The keywords *visual* and *strategic communication* were used to search and systematically cover the amount of visual oriented research in the field of strategic communication. The N-value when searching with the keywords visual and strategic communication for articles was 115.

Content analysis and coding variables

The second step, on a microlevel, was to do a brief qualitative content analysis in order to provide a detailed pattern of theoretical visual approaches in strategic communication. A qualitative coding scheme for the content analysis was developed covering the classification of visual approaches in communication research by Barnhurst et al. (2004) and Martin (2011). The coding variables included in the content analysis were sources, year, main theory, common methods, research questions and main approach (visual rhetoric, visual studies, visual communication or other). A detailed coding manual were used, and sometimes the abstracts were difficult to code because of inadequate information in the abstracts. Then we had to read through the whole articles to be able to code the content.

From the outset, we excluded nine articles from the 115 that did not pay any attention to the visual dimension in strategic communication at all. We found 48 research articles focusing on studying the visual in relation to the three coding variables visual rhetoric, visual studies, visual communication. In accordance with Barnhurst et al. (2004), we call these 48 articles *significant* to indicate that the articles appear to study the visual from the three main visual approaches (see Figure 2). Despite our efforts, we still had 58 studies among the remaining 106 articles that could not be coded as visual rhetoric, visual studies or visual communication. Therefore, we coded

those 58 articles as other as they seemed to focus on the visual from another point of view. These articles are called *nominal* to indicate that they appear to study the visual but without any relation to the three three main visual approaches.

Significant visual approaches   ------------------------------   Nominal visual approaches

Figure 2: Significant and nominal visual approaches in strategic communication research (2017).

Discussion of results

A table with a summary analysis with the frequency were made. The total number of records found, year by year and the total number within visual approaches in strategic communication journals was 106 (see Table 1).

Journal Year	Public Relations Review	Public Relations Quarterly	Public Relations Inquiry	Journal of Public Relations Research	International Journal of Strategic Communication	Corporate Communications	Journal of Communication Management	Journal of Communication	Total
2005	2	1				1	1		5
2006	1					1	1	1	5
2007					1		3	2	6
2008	3				2		2	1	8
2009	1				1		3	1	6
2010	1			1	1		2	1	6
2011	4		1				2	1	8
2012	5		2			1	2	4	14
2013	2		6		1		2	1	12
2014	4		10	1	2		4	1	22
2015	3		5				2	4	14
Sum	26	1	24	2	8	4	24	17	106

TABLE 1: Visual approaches in strategic communication journals 2005–2015, n = 106.

Our results point in the direction of a slightly increased focus on visual studies within strategic communication, but in this sense it is relevant to notice that not only research on strategic communication has emerged in the

past years, but also the development of strategy in strategic communication which should be thought of as an emerging phenomenon (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2011; Torp, 2014; Rosén, 2014). When reflecting on the results it is also relevant to have the decoding/encoding theory in mind and that the material might be decoded in different ways depending on the individual's background and social context (Hall, 1974, 1980).

According to the significant visual approach, the three categories – visual rhetoric, visual studies and visual communication – are represented in the material. Regarding how visual approaches are applied in strategic communication research 2005–2015, the study shows that 48 out of 106 research articles have a significant visual focus and these articles have a distinct connection to either of the three categories visual rhetoric, visual studies or visual communication. In comparison, 58 articles coded as other seemed to focus on the visual, but turned out not to have a reference to any of the three identified categories. Notably, within this category we found articles focusing on strategies that could be connected to the visual, and these examples of studies will be further discussed in the next chapter.

In the following section, the 48 research articles with a significant visual approach within the categories of visual rhetoric, visual studies and visual communication, are primarily discussed. A clear pattern within the category visual studies is that the studies appear to show interest in visual cultural issues as intended of visual cultural studies. For example Carneiro and Johnson (2015) show how museum websites through message strategies can use the visual to communicate memories of the past to represent cultural memory and ethnic identity. From a critical cultural perspective, Ristino (2008) proposes a model by applying learning strategies with the aim to describe and explain how communication practitioners, through the use of symbols, language and shape can provide a deeper understanding of the strategic significance as they transmit organisational culture, internal and external. In addition, Morton (2005), points out that only a small part of graphic design tradition has been tested and that public relations managers must rely primarily on information based on graphic design tradition rather than on research to communicate well visually. van Woerkum and Aarts (2009) argue that there is a plenty of visual material to be seen in advertisements or corporate communication campaigns but they are questioning if this matches visual information needs. The authors suggest that semiotic analysis could be a relevant tool in studying visual campaigns. Another example of a culture-focused study within the visual studies category is *Guerrilla communication, visual consumption, and consumer public relations*, by McNaughton (2008). In the study the author discusses the integration of visual consumption and public relations, as advertising, marketing, and public relations practices become progressively more visually focused. In sum, McNaughton (2008) addresses that visual consumption will play an increasing part in the cultural roles performed by these practices. In comparison, Lewis (2012) argues that advertisements in urban public spaces are an influential and present form of communication, but yet there are few studies that examine the advertisements creation, development and influence. Accordingly, in our study we find that logotypes are rarely discussed in research articles of strategic communication. One single example found is a study by Lee et al (2012) in which logotypes of countries are examined by an online survey.

Common to the articles that are encoded within the approach of visual communication is that they put interest in the message itself. Research focus is on the visual as a "text" with the aim to discover the signs that organizes meaning. Examples of articles in the category of visual communication are Verser and Wiks' (2006) image

analysis of presidential candidates on their official campaign web sites, and Nagel et al. (2012) study of the influence of verbal, visual, and vocal communication on viewers' immediate impressions of political candidates. Effects of campaign planning and communication campaigns are frequently studied within this approach (Kiwanuka-Tondo et al., 2009; Saxton & Waters, 2014; Kiousis & Dimitrova, 2006). Studies examining communication styles could also be found within this category (Niederdepp et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2014).

The results show that studies of the visual in strategic communication often is done by content analysis, image analysis, and by mixed methods often including experiments. The last decade there has also been a focus on semiotic studies in the field of strategic communication. Using a socio-semiotic analysis, Catellani (2012) presents observations on recent pro-nuclear rhetorical forms before and after the massive accident in Fukushima. Baines and O'Shaughnessy (2014) present an analysis of terrorist propaganda of Al-Qaeda, the islamic militant organisation, between 1998 and 2008 to see what symbolizations, themes and messages exist in AQ video clips, using a combination of semiotic, content and propaganda analysis approaches. One study that also could be related to this approach is an article by Coombs and Holladay (2011), examining how news media and organisations use visual images in reports of crisis events.

Our findings indicate that strategic communication studies within the category of visual rhetoric, are rather limited. Xifra and Girona (2012) have a rhetorical perspective analyzing Frank Capra's documentary series. From a rhetorical view, Bucy and Grabe (2007) conclude that image bites in presidential elections constituted a greater percentage of total campaign coverage than sound bites. Another example of a visual rhetoric-related study is by Catellani (2011), who examines the image of organisations in environmental campaigns online, and in the article the authour argue that applying semiotics to the analysis of communication campaigns is rare and innovative and can contribute to the field of PR studies. In contrast, the last example of a study within the visual rhetoric approach is the Bernays Cup winning article by Sadler-Trainor (2005), who points out that there is a risk of a visual overdose in the field.

The overview of visual theoretical assumptions found in strategic communication research, not only uncover current patterns but also pinpoint areas where research has the opportunity to expand, suggesting opportunities for theory and perspective building. The literature review of visual approaches in strategic communication research during 2005–2015 leads up to a foundation for a new academic territory of visual approaches in strategic communication. A proposal of how a visual perspective can be applied to strategic communication research is discussed below.

Conclusion

Visual strategic communication – an innovative interdisciplinary perspective
Taken together, the results of this study show several implications. In compliance with Hallahan et al. (2007) the visual approach to strategic communication research includes the study of all communication practices, including public relations, advertising and marketing. Mutually is visual communication part of every communication tactics. For example, stakeholders participation in advertising have seized the communication process of organisations, from a one to many, linear direction, to a one-to-one, multiple networked

communication, which also can generate more participation of the stakeholders and their empowerment (Melo, 2013).

The visual approach has links to several research perspectives, and the term "indiscipline", proposed by Mitchell (1995), could be used to describe the various work rooted in the wide range of literature. Based on Barnhurst et al.'s (2004) classification of visual approaches in communication research and further theoretical developments by Martin (2011), the scope of this paper proposes an innovative interdisciplinary perspective including four approaches to visual research in strategic communication. However, the classification has been modified to reflect the findings of the research reviewed here, and a fourth category of visual approaches is added. Therefore, we suggest that the visual strategic communication perspective could include the previous approaches *visual rhetoric, visual studies and visual communication,* and the fourth approach; *visual strategy (see Figure 3).*
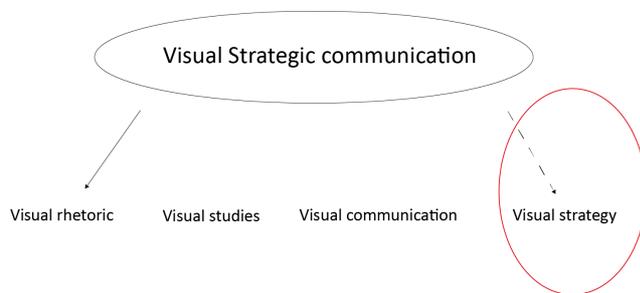

Figure 3. Visual strategic communication – an innovative interdisciplinary perspective, a fourth approach added (2017).

Our findings address a gap in the three previous visual approaches, therefore this fourth approach – visual strategy – has an emphasis on the strategies of an organisation, rather than on the rhetoric, the culture or the message itself, as in the above-presented approaches. Common to the studies found within this approach is the orientation on visual strategy as a purposeful use of communication by an organisation, which is in alliance with previous scholars description as the nature of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007). Consequently, these articles, further discussed below, are focusing on the organisation's visual strategies, such as symbols, identities and visual elements that are part of the strategic communication with the intent to support the organisation's goals. Moreover, studies within the visual strategy approach can be considered to be in accordance with previous research on corporate identity, e.g. in organisation, the visual identity translates the organisation's strategic communication into a visual language (van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Baker, & Balmer, 1997; Simões, Dibb, Fish, 2005), and thus the visual strategy is a guideline of what is a desirable, credible and accurate communication for the organisation. Also, in accordance with Melewar (2001), the visual strategy approach is concerned with the multi-faced way in which an organisation communicates visual to all of an organisation's stakeholders with an attempt to fulfill its mission. Within this approach, there is the possibility of strategically tailoring visual communication to specific target groups, for example people with ADHD which might require different visual solutions in campaign making (Abdipour, 2016). Altogether, this differs the visual

strategy approach from the other three approaches. This approach is also in contrast to previous research on the strategic function of visual elements (Schroeder, 2002; Campbell in Davison, 2012; Meyer et al., 2013), since studies within this approach, altogether seem to be focusing on how visual communication contributes to an organisation's purpose for being. One example of a study that contributes to this new approach is a study by Malewar et al. (2006). In the article the authors emphasize that an organisation's corporate visual identity is a strategic issue. In accordance, van den Bosch et.al, (2005) examine how corporate visual identity, all the symbols and graphical elements that express the being of an organisation, can support how visibility and visual expression emphasize the presence of an organisation and how it can be associated with the organisation's reputation. Likewise, Ditlevsen (2012) argues that corporate identities, as they are expressed visually in annual reports, can be used strategically by organisations to construct corporate identity and with a purpose to become attractive to stakeholders and investors. An article that also could be related to this visual strategy approach is a study by Maier and Andersen (2014), which explores how corporate identity is strategically communicated with texts and images in employees' magazines and how it can affect the organisational identification. The authors believe that multimodal communication will increase and develop in unforeseen ways because of the rapid technological development. Even Dimitrov (2014) could also be considered having a visual strategy approach discussing the recent and significant reforms of UNESCO´s communications. In the study Dimitrov raises the question about what visibility contributes by referring to Perelman et al. (1982): "I would suggest understanding visibility as presence – the opposite of absence" (Perelman et al., 1982: 35–39 in Dimitrov, 2014). Dimitrov (2014) continues by arguing that an organisation's visibility as presence is not static; it needs constant re-enactment.

In sum, this study indicates that a smaller body of work has emerged around the strategies of visual communication as well. This is not only noticed in research articles published in scientific journals, but also in handbooks within strategic communication. In *Handbook of Strategic Communication* for example, Teruggi Pages (2015) presents research of strategic approaches in an organisation´s visual communication. In the article she argues that the force of the visual is greater now than ever before due to the intensity of the visual stimulation in our lives, and from a critical perspective the study focuses on how visual theory offers ways to recognize and understand how strategic intent may influence the construction of a visual image´s form and content. In *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, Werder (2015) seeks to identify, describe and explain the message variables in the strategic communication process, and Kim (2015) points out that it is essential to design compelling message tactics for a fortunate strategic communication campaign, nevertheless there are no parallels to visual theories. Also, the empowerment trend enables stakeholders of an organisation to participate, co-create and give a voice to the people, which in turn affects the organisations proactivity and capability to respond, forecast and manage the feedback (Melo & Sousa, 2013; Melo, 2015; Moreno, et al., 2015). One example of this is a study on the global fashion brand GAP, whose rebranding and new logotype in 2010 lasted only a week due to massive protests and activism from stakeholders (Walsh, 2010 in Melo, 2015). This enlightens the relevance of a visual perspective in the research field of strategic communication.

The findings of this study not only support previous research indicating that visual approaches in communication research are increasing; the study also points in the direction of that visual approaches in the

research field of strategic communication has slightly emerged during 2005–2015. In accordance, Hansen and Machin (2013) claim that the increase of visual studies in the field of communication represents a growing acknowledgment of the important role that is played by visual communication. They also argue that it represents that scholars meet with the purpose to share knowledge of visual communication and look outwards to other disciplines for new methods and theories. There is less work done on visual representations than on textual analysis, and there is a need to reflect on what is meant by "the visual". Approaching a new perspective on strategic communication makes a number of theoretical and conceptual tools available. When adding a visual perspective to strategic communication, one must be aware of the meaning and effect of images depending on the communicative context of their communication (Machin, 2014; Teruggi Page, 2014; Hall, 1980). As receivers of messages, our awareness and knowledge of the communicative situation (including the intended purpose – for example, to inform or to persuade – of the communication to which we are attending) circumscribe how we make sense of, use or react to what we are seeing (Machin, 2014). This is also one of the main concerns within Hall´s theory of encoding/decoding which clarifies that there is no single meaning of a message, instead, receivers accept the messages they prefer (Hall, 1980). In addition, Teruggi Page (2014) points for a need for visual literacy to critically decode visual messages in strategic communication.

In summary, visual communication has developed significantly in the past decade and has become a research-based field that has the potential to be applied as a visual perspective on strategic communication. A visual perspective could play an important role in strategic communication, not only applied in communication activities of an organisation, but as a strategic function in all levels of communication.

Future research

Focusing research in the field of strategic communication will be an interdisciplinary try, and we therefore call for research integrating visual theories with organisational studies. Visual theories in this respect will identify conceptual models of visual strategies of an organisation and a wide range of issues is possible here. In that sense the potential areas of future research is endless, and in order to sketch a future research agenda we select research areas that contribute to the need for an innovative interdisciplinary perspective on visual dimensions within the strategic communications field and we do so by linking back to our classification of visual approaches in strategic communication research. Consequently, the overview of the research agenda includes future research ideas of visual rhetoric, visual studies, visual communication and visual strategy.

But firstly, common to all these future studies is the urgent need of a visual depth. Even though our study indicates that visual approaches in strategic communication research has slightly increased during the last decade, however scholars still hold that the visual remains marginal in the field of communication studies and by that mean there is still a lack of visual theories and methods (Prosser, 1998; Becker, 2004; Finnegan 2006). A critically oriented discussion of the iconophobia discourse would be compelling to develop in future research. Further research may also deepen our understanding of multimodal elements, such as fonts, colors, textures and it's relation to the perception of visual communication messages. The interaction between images and text and how audiences process messages also requires future research. From a more overall view, and future studies, it

would also put light on the construction of a visual culture, on the process itself and on the representation of visual artifacts.

In the approach of visual rhetoric more studies of how the effective use of visual rhetoric may distinguish successful organisations from unsuccessful ones is relevant to highlight in terms of political and economical forces. From a visual studies approach it is necessary to study the process of sensemaking and the related makings of attention, representation and identity. We thus call for research that examines how the visual spatiality, such as materiality and visual layouts, impacts on the individual - as well as the organisational level. In the approach of visual communication we identify a need of studies on the visual language, such as signs and visual codes in campaigning, events and communication activities. One example of such a study is Vliegenhart (2012) which shows that visual elements and the use of party logos in political campaigning posters have increased. Future scholarly work can, for instance, take into account how organisations visually communicate gender, ethics and norms intentionally or unintentionally.

Future research within the approach of visual strategy is inherently interesting since the results of our study show that there is a slightly growing body of studies in this new approach. The profession of strategic communication and public relations struggles with low status in organisations (Falkheimer et. al, 2016, in press), an interesting research question could be for example to investigate how knowledge of visual strategies could implicate the status of the profession.

In addition, we welcome more critically oriented studies about the very meaning of organisation's visual identity. As previous scholars address; the relationship between design, aesthetics and innovation is a growing field that offers insights on how symbolic properties of design result in competitive advantage and are used as strategic resources (Dell Éra & Verganti, 2007; Ravasi & Stigliani, 2012 in Meyer et al., 2013). Eventually, we find that studies that further investigate the unique strengths and possible challenges and further explain the elements and nature of visual strategy, is specifically interesting and we are looking forward to more studies to come.

In closing, it is important to consider how this proposed visual perspective could open up for a diversity of thinking and further research, and we call for studies on all four visual approaches within visual strategic communication.

Endnotes
1. We refer to strategic communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3) and in this study the dimensions of the visual are intentionally broad and includes aspects on the visual as visual rhetoric, visual studies and visual communication.

2. We do, however, exclude research on the moving image (i.e recorded films and animations) from this article, as we argue that such an endeavor is in need of its own study.

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