

### **Austėja Virketienė**

Mykolas Romeris University  
Vilnius, Lithuania  
austeja.virketiene@gmail.com

### **Agota Giedrė Raišienė**

Mykolas Romeris University  
Vilnius, Lithuania  
agotar@mruni.eu  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4641-7616

# Beyond the Subjective Experience of Visual Information in the Modern Media

## **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** According to researchers, visibility appeals to the cognitive aspects of image consumption, hence, the nature of information technologies becomes more important than the content itself. Based on this relevance, the article's aim is twofold: when seeking to better understand the phenomenon of visual information to analyse the visual communication experience of public relation professionals who apply visual solutions to achieve a specific effect in their work.

**Methodology:** A quasi-structured in-depth interview of the experts and the method of interpretive phenomenological analysis were used to gather and process the data of the research.

**Findings:** The paper presents insights into the interaction between receiver's visual information experience and one's world view. The research revealed that the visual information influences a person's perception and interpretation of a message when it serves as supplement for information alongside text in press, advertisement, etc.

**Value Added:** Based on the research, the visual information experience was defined as an instantaneous action of giving meaning to personal experience and imagination by finding the intersection of narratives between the image and oneself.

**Recommendations:** A narrow boundary exists between the stimulation and constriction of the observer's imagination when analysing the visual message. With the help of image communication, a new reality can be created. To reach effective communication, it is recommended to avoid abstract images that allow the observer's imagination to give it whole other meanings than intended by the sender of the message.

**Key words:** visual culture, visual communication, public relations, modern media, phenomenology

**JEL codes:** M3, D83

## Introduction

The article deals with an effect of individual's subjective experience on their understanding and explanation of visual information.

Although role of visuality traditionally was examined in advertising (e.g. Daly, 2017), currently, much wider range of professionals are interested in visual culture. The attention for visual information from the experts of culture, philosophy, public communication, social psychology, and others indicates that the so-called visual shift is a real phenomenon in our time. Visuals communicate and stimulate the imagination more immediately than words (Tascon, 2019). The domination of visuality is linked to the entrenchment of informational and telecommunication technologies and new opportunities to spread information through images. Visuality consists not only of what an individual sees directly, but also of what they experience in relation with the image, how they feel. In other words, every person has his „internal vision“

which can not necessarily coincide with the visuality expressed externally. Such an intersubjective process becomes a challenge not only for the recipient of the visual information who is being attacked by ads, plaques and other visual solutions, but firstly for the sender who does not have a guaranteed answer how will the message they are communicating will be interpreted when it reaches the recipient's mind.

Here, it is important to highlight that researchers sometimes stand out in discussion about possibility to characterise visual culture. Some of them argue that visual culture does not exist, and we can talk about commonalities of particular societal groups only (Davis, 2011). Nevertheless, other authors state that visual culture is a concept linked with ocularcentrism (e.g. Yun-Qi, 2015), when in the environment filled with media, visuals and audiovisuals it creates contemporary moment and alternative time and space (Parikka, 2018). According to Tascon (2019), „We tend to trust visual images (in the mistaken belief that the camera cannot lie) and to accept their validity and veracity“.

Visuality appeals to the cognitive and phenomenological aspects of image consumption (Tascon, 2019), and it even became a sign of postmodern culture which highlights consumerist society (Rubavičius, 2014; Appignanesi et al., 2007). Thus, the nature of information technologies becomes more important than the content itself (McLuhan, 1994).

Mitchell (1984) was one of the first to talk about the effect of individual's memories, imagination and other subconsciousness factors on the interpretation of visual information, nevertheless, there is still a gap in research on intersubjective experience of visual information. Therefore, in the article, we highlight the interaction between the image and the individual based on the reverse direction of relationship. We discuss the influence of an individual on the visual information. In other words, we are examining how the visual experience of each individual returns, how it manifests through their acts of visual communication and/or products they are creating. In our research, we describe the phenomenon of visual information experience by developing the cultural discourse based on phenomenological research.

The data for the research was gathered through a qualitative analysis – an in-depth interview and processed using methods of interpretational phenomenological analysis.

The paper consists of three main sections: the research theoretical background, the research methodology, and the research results. In the end of the article, the research findings are provided.

## Theoretical highlights of visual communication and person's individual experience

In the times of communication technology breakthrough, the studies of visibility are being expanded by experts of not only art, philosophy and psychology but also representatives of fields that conventionally have nothing in common with image creation and sight effect on the viewer – business management, public relations, marketing, social communication and other. The latter communication technologies are exclusively based on visibility and in that way create a new - visual culture that includes all the aspects of commonly treated culture:

„It is more and more clear that the relationship between a man and media or technology in general are created by not only him <...>, they become an individual's mental, symbolic and technical environment. <...> Subjective representation is also becoming very advertising, thus motivating the production and consumption of sights, pictures and images. <...> we live in a time of great technological shift or even progress into a new techno sapiens evolution phase". (Rubavičius, 2010, p. 203).

A great influence for the study of visibility had the theory of visual (pictorial) turn authored by Mitchell (1984). He claimed that visual turn in society's everyday life urges to shift the attention to new aspects of visibility, and visibility in language at first. Mitchell also emphasized the problem of surge of image. He raised such questions as what the relationships of images with verbal language are, how images affect the observer and the world or vice versa, and how the observer and the world affect the images (Mitchell, 1984; 2002).

Mitchell's ideas were supported by Boehm (1994) who suggested a theory of iconic turn. According to him, a strong image is one that makes the portrayed object actually visible, comprehended, starts to exist and comes alive. Strong and affective images make one see that which is not portrait. In general, Boehm talks not about what and how the observer sees, but rather what the image shows, i.e. about the influence and power of the image to manipulate meanings.

Mitchell's and Boehm's ideas of „pictoriality“ and „iconology“ formed a new paradigm shift in Western thinking (2009). Based on the works of Mitchell and Boehm, two dominant directions of visuality discourse have developed. The first one states that in the mind of the consumers, image surpasses the status of sign and medium, that the image is somewhere between the sensual experience, interpersonal and societal relationships and existence. The other one claims that an image has a distinctive value of comprehension. In other words, every observer that is in an intersection point of personal experience and imagination can see and interpret the image differently, convey different ideas of the author of the image.

In turn, Jameson (1998) distinguishes two characteristics of visuality culture. Those are i) the transformation of reality into images, and ii) the fragmentation of time into many continuous, eternal now. According to Ap-pignanesi et al. (2007), the modern time of visual culture can be recognized by three features: reproduction of original creations, aura of consumers and image consumption. Thus, the modern times have one special exclusivity compared to the culture features that were dominant in earlier times – a sceptical approach to universal truth as images allow everyone to create one's own, separate truth, one's own reality. Due to this reason, the world of every person in the postmodern culture is subjective. New possibilities of consumption and products, rapid rhythm of style change, development of the media and technology culture are but a few characteristics that lead to situations where not only individuals but also the society do not distinguish reality from illusion. Desires and aims are stimulated by images and concrete

consumption locations that cause direct physical excitement and aesthetic pleasure (Guogis, Rakšnys, 2014). If popular culture were treated as a medium for socialization and dominant of visuality, it could be stated that image is manipulating human emotions. The boundaries between art and entertainment, culture and consumerism disappear. The terms are mostly dictated by the media as the formulated images affect the nature of communication more and more. Visual literacy becomes relevant – the idea that an image can be „read” (Vidauskytė, 2014). It seems that in this situation, the main creator of visual communication and guarantor of effectiveness is not the sender of the message but its recipient. The user interaction with visual in a process of communication is highlighted by Tascon (2019), whereas Brown (2010) goes on talking about visual consumer’s „inner layer of the world”.

In this context, it is natural that creators and consumers of visual communication run into challenges that in earlier times would raise questions about one’s sanity. One of the challenges is the inability to give an answer to the question: which is more real – the reality or its image. Creations of cinema, internet, television and photography, their digital and cinematography reproductions are not only images where one is invited to look at. It is an environment of a human living. The screen becomes a peculiar environment and everyday existence in the world, a psychosocial medium. Seeing becomes inseparable from sight and comprehension while our personal experiences become a basis that influence the value of what is seen. According to Yun-Qi (2015) who discuss the influence of occularcentrism on the visual culture, sight can be equated to mind gaze, i.e. gaze that leads to truth and knowledge. Undoubtedly, the content of visual message or the colour, form or design of the image are the main factors that influence the effectiveness of communication. The main moment – the percept – lies deep inside every one of us. Thus, pictorial artifacts should be comprehended as only the means of communication. Returning to the thought that nothing is real and every phenomenon is what we personally experience it to be and the world as no other meaning except for the one that we give it (Hoffman, 2011),

it has to be acknowledged that consciousness cannot experience images in ways other than how the images are shown to us or how they look to us.

Here it can be stated that image along with consciousness is always situative. Hence, only the analysis of a subject and experience give the opportunity to come closer to the analysed phenomenon. The problem of comprehension is examined through phenomenological approach with good reason. A phenomenological method which allows to eliminate the need to react to prejudice and stereotypes allows to concentrate the attention to the essence of the subject, which is why it is especially favourable when analysing questions of art and aesthetics.

From a phenomenological perspective, the value of images is not influenced by images that exist or have existed but rather the fact that they allow new shapes emerge. There are no equal experiences and even if a person tries to conceptualize and generalize them, it remains relative (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Through images, the individual sees not what reality looks like, but what it could look like. In other words, picture, image and reality become one in the mind of individual subject when the observed sight as an artifact becomes invisible to the observer but creates meaning by waking his imagination and inspiring change or abstention from change initiation.

Based on the discussed approach, the experience of „world participants“ or „observers of reality“ cannot be evaluated in categories of „correct“ sight, value or other ranking categories. However, the experience of some individuals, when the view observed wakes imagination and creative initiative, transforms into generation of new pictures and images which in turn influences other individuals. The research we present in this article is exactly about that.

## Research methodology

The phenomenon of visual experience requires a specific research instrument. When modeling the research, analysis of the methodological literature revealed that the essential task of research of such nature should not be the

interest in the quantitative parameters of the phenomenon (if such parameters can even be defined at all) by invoking statistical and other calculation methods but rather the examination of image „participant’s” emotions, senses, experience interpretation, behavior and other qualitative categories. Taking on this approach, qualitative research has the required characteristics as it is defined as systematic, unstructured analysis of an individual, group or situation in an attempt to understand the researched phenomenon in a natural environment (Hochman, 2014; Manovich, 2016). The methodology of qualitative research is based on the philosophical paradigm of phenomena, explained in an individualistic approach which is one of the main sources of image comprehension. The research relies on an assumption that the dominance of visibility is a phenomenon which is intersubjective on its own. Due to this essential reason, phenomenological analysis was chosen as the strategy of the research, the main goal of which was to reveal the individual experiences in an attempt to define the phenomenon.

*Research method.* The research invoked Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an analysis method for qualitative data which analyses phenomenologically focused approach to personal interpretations of experience. Using the method, the attention is focused on an individual experience rather than on what is common. The choice of IPA was influenced by fairly concrete procedure of the analysis, room for interpretations of the researcher and adaptation for further research and interpretation of the changes of the phenomenon (Smith, 1996). When using IPA, the existence of difference between what really takes place and what the subject understands is acknowledged (Osborne, Smith, 2007). Returning to the arguments presented in the theoretical part of the article that validate the approach that individual’s subjective view of the image is influenced by their own baggage of experiences and this view does not necessarily coincide with the view of the author, it is confirmed once more that IPA is a method appropriate for defining the phenomenon of visual communication. The method is interpretive because the research is carried out as a dynamic process of collaboration



between two or more people. The role of the researcher is also specific as it is namely his own internal attitude and personal comprehension of the phenomenon that allows to provide the examined phenomenon with a new tone or meaning in the end of the interpretational process.

*Research participants.* The research participants were invited according to their work field and communication experience. Experts were sought out who would represent both the sender and the recipient of visual information. Such choice was influenced by the expectation that an expert has competences of visual communication literacy which makes the biggest influence on the opportunity to universally interpret the units of visual information. The criteria for the selection of respondents were as follows:

- daily work is in public communication, public relations, or advertising;
- at least ten years of work experience in the field;
- acknowledged as professional in the international market;
- reached exceptional results in his/her professional work.

Finally, five experts were chosen for the interview. Selection of a small group was methodologically significant decision because the phenomenological interview for data analysis is based on an ideographic principle (in-depth analysis of each case), hence, the participants of the research were supposed to represent a perspective, not a population. Legal protection of personal data was implemented when analysing research results, thus, the data that could help identify the respondents are not given in the paper. Table 1 gives only a general information about interview participants.

Table 1. Participants of the research

No.	Code	Gender	Age	Work specifics	Work experience in communication
1.	R1	F	41	Head of an advertising and marketing agency, an author of books for children	15 years

2.	R2	M	36	Head of the public communication department in a business organization	12 years
3.	R3	F	52	Partner in a public relations agency, PR consultant	26 years
4.	R4	F	49	Coach in the area of trademarks and company image management, head of marketing department in a business organization	24 years
5.	R5	M	43	Author of documentary films and books, publisher, photographer	22 years

Source: compiled by authors.

*Data gathering method.* For this interview, an in-depth non-structured interview was chosen where only the introductory and essential questions were prepared in advance and only the general topics for discussion are given. Such interview allows to reach a desired depth of discussion and relation with respondent through unplanned questions and reactions. Non-structured interview allows to ensure the main principles of IPA: to analyze the comprehension of the phenomenon; examine the meaning given to the analyzed experience; remember that the both the respondent and the researcher are making interpretations; distinguish differences and only then look for similarities, the generalization of which provide the results of the research.

*Research process.* Before the meeting, the participants of the research were provided with an extended presentation of the goals and tasks of the research. The interviews took place in an environment acceptable to the respondents. At the start of the research, the interviewees were presented with context material: advertisements from the press, illustrated text messages on the news, trailers of culture events etc. Firstly, the respondents were asked to evaluate the visual impression and effect of the information received, later they were invited to think how concrete image-impression meanings and interpretations form, what personal associations the image raises or what percept it creates. Due to the researched experts being

well prepared to speak about the possibilities of the effect of visuality and to define their own personal visual experience both through emotion and content interpretation prisms, in the end of the discussion they were asked to formulate a substantive definition of image experience.

*Research ethics.* The questions of the interview were formulated in a way that they would reveal the respondents' experience in a relation with the object rather than dictate the researcher's attitude to the researched phenomenon. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees, their names were encoded.

*Process of research result analysis.* All interviews were analyzed as separate and independent from one another. When generalizing, the similarities between answers were grouped into common topics, based on which the phenomenological definition of visual information experience was formed and possible benefit for visual culture and communication science and practice fields was defined and structured.

*Research limitations.* When applying the conclusions of the research in practice, it is necessary to take into consideration that the audience of public communication and in turn visual communication is very broad and varied. Due to this reason, the insights of the interviewees reflect only the characteristics of a specific audience's experience.

## Research results

During the analysis of the interview results, topics similar in content were combined and main ideas were highlighted. Table 2 presents the results of the research. As can be seen, main groups of topics that define subjective visual information experience emerged, which are: aesthetic function, stimulation of imagination, giving a meaning to personal experience, self-analysis and reflection, function of emotion stimulation and enframing the present.

Table 2. Research results

Main theme	Subtheme	Grounding statements
Aesthetic function	Importance of aesthetics, image attractiveness	"For me, the positive emotion stimulated by an aesthetical image is the most important", "I cannot read information in a background of a deterrent image", "Attractive image subconsciously makes you get closer to the object", "Harmony of image and the direct message [...]", "Nice presentation attracts"
	Attention to detail	"It is very important to notice the details", "Second plan images also speak"
Stimulation of imagination	Creation of scenarios	"Constructs a possible past and probable future of the image in one's mind"
	Illusional seeing	"[...] I sometimes fantasize away"; "opportunity for ingenuity"; "power of imagination"; "[...] what they, having little or no experience can see in the images and what they think is depicted"
	Novelty	"New forms and solutions are needed"
Giving a meaning to personal experience	Original development of the idea	"Not only the sender engages in creative decisions of the thought to be spread but also the recipient creatively develops the idea further"
	Attained experience and emotions	"Feels like I have done, tried and experienced it already"; "Places one has seen, scenarios lived allow to better understand the essence and content of the message being sent"; "Recognizability is like a cyphered text, the key of which is personal knowledge and experience"; "Bigger intrigue is caused by emotions that were already experienced rather than the opportunity of a new discovery"; "We are caught by what we have already experienced"
	Importance of associations	"Through associations, the recipient's consciousness can be directed in a particular direction of image analysis"; "Information deciphering takes place by connecting the objects and comparing them to something"

Self-analysis and reflection	Specificity	"[...] in my head, I simplify the image and give myself a logical and clear purpose for the image"; "Selection of information [...]"
	Self-projection	"In that way, we are able to see ourselves and project the situation that is most acceptable to us in the given message"; "[...] impersonate the depicted character"; "in image analysis, the person is really analyzing himself"
	Giving meaning to outlook	"Personal system of values is reflected"; "Society's view, way of thinking, understanding of the meaning of life. All of this reflects in the experience of visual information"
	Self-reflection	"Envisioning possible actions and self-recognition in the context of visual communication"
	Interaction of consciousness and subconsciousness	"The message communicated does not have any effect in itself. The meaning is created by the participant himself through understanding of how much the information presented is important to him"; "You cannot understand the information, not be interested, forget it, but everything stays in the subconsciousness"; "[...] the inevitability of analysis, at least subconsciously"
Function of emotion stimulation	Positive emotions	"The image makes you want to feel safe and sound"; "Raise your emotions by looking at the situations with humour"; "Can raise different variations of emotions"
	Formation of expectations	"Experiences become expectations"; "And effect of positive perspective can be created which will stimulate coming closer to the object communicated"
	Emotion stimulation	"[...] indifference is also an emotion"; "Not all emotions stimulate to take action in the perspective of information sent"
	Evocation of attention	"Non-standard solutions, unexpected objects or faces, drama, challenges, brave presentation of visual information works the best"; "Image needs drama and conflict [...]"
	Necessity of an intrigue	"The element of surprise makes one see something more"

Enframing of the present	Relevant environment	"The comprehension of the message is inseparable from the environment"; "[...] interaction of activity executed at the time"
	Mood of the moment	"Information received while in different moods will dictate different comprehension"; "Depends on the emotion the person feels at the time"; "Interpretation depends on the moment, and the emotion being experienced"
	Self-recognition	"We see and experience what we are in a visual message"; "[...] we evaluate it depending on what we think we are"; "only notices the information that is relevant at the given moment"
	Social effect	Illusions and attitudes can be quickly breached by arguments of a person nearby

Source: compiled by authors.

In the end, the interviewees were asked to define a subjective visual information experience. According to the experts, the visual information experience could be understood as:

- Intrigue caused by the image that has a critical influence on acquiring the information.
- Setting of a possible truth about verbal information.
- Awareness based on a visual element of surprise.
- Hunting for information truth acceptable to oneself.
- Interaction between the seeing and the seen.

Summarizing, a person's visual information experience can be defined as an instantaneous action of giving meaning to individual experience and imagination by finding the intersection of narratives between the image and oneself.

## Conclusions

Visual information experience can be evaluated in two ways. On the one hand, visual experience is individual, therefore the initiator is not able to exactly prognosticate what each and every person sees or can see in the visual

message. On the other hand, the results of the research revealed specific features of image comprehension common to all the respondents, based on which the effectiveness of visual communication can be expected. Due to the seeing of reality being inseparable from critical thinking, the skills of which are formed by the culture and general environment of the time, we can see similar moments when interpreting the visual information despite seeing and understanding the world differently.

The aspect of personal experience is one of the most important factors of visual communication effectiveness. The results of the interview revealed that the recognized objects, images seen, or scenarios lived before stimulate the individual to accept the information more actively. This allows to confirm that the images are only granted meaning by the observer.

The interpretation of the image seen by the individual reflects not only their personal system of values but also societal norms. Due to this reason, when creating a relationship with the audience through visual means, one should rely on solutions that allow to broaden the space in which information receiver would recognize himself and their environment. By originally changing the image that is recognizable by the audience, one can create images of reality that form new attitudes and provisions about the reality in the observer's consciousness. This means that with the help of image communication, a new reality can be created.

The research has also shown that there is some sort of contradiction between the content and shape of image. In other words, aesthetic function of the image often becomes more important than the essence of the visual message. A narrow boundary exists between the stimulation and constriction of the observer's imagination when analyzing the visual message. To reach effective communication, it is recommended to avoid abstract images that allow the observer's imagination to give it whole other meanings than intended by the sender of the message.

Based on the research, the visual information experience can be defined as an instantaneous action of giving meaning to personal experience and imagination by finding the intersection of narratives between the image and oneself.

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