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Editorial: The power of images: how they act and how we act with them

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[The power of images: how they act and how we act with them](#)

“Today everything exists to end in a photograph.” [Sontag \(1977\)](#) prophetic statement from 1977 is even more true in the age of the pictorial turn: the cultural shift toward a media society in which images increasingly dominate communication. Today, everything exists to end in an image or, more precisely, in a digital image. Images permeate our everyday life. Our daily access to reality is mainly based on visual media and visual representations. Images and visual representations can be easily created, edited, shared, and recontextualized not only by professionals but by anyone. Images are not just passive testimonies but possess an active semantic power (intrinsic power) that turns them into visual agents or “quasi-living organisms” ([Mitchell, 2005](#); [Rose, 2016](#)). They act to frame our perception of the world, including gender, age, ethnicity, and social behavior. They act to confirm, reinforce, or dispel stereotypes. They act to constitute reality and to form identity.

With the second part of the title “How they act and how we act with them”, we do not refer to a specific image act theory (e.g., [Kjørup, 1974, 1978](#); [Boehm, 2001](#); [Mitchell, 2005](#); [Bredenkamp, 2014, 2018](#)) but subsume under the term “image act” various actions in the course of which images are created, received, or used for specific communicative purposes and target groups. The articles in this Research Topic focus primarily on the pragmatic aspects of image acts, i.e., how people act on and interact with images as semiotic signs and use images as tools in communicative processes.

This Research Topic reflects on image acts from multiple perspectives: images in social media, in online media publications, and in virtual reality; it shows how different types of images and visual representations create meaning in cultural, social, and political contexts. At first glance, the contributions to this Research Topic may seem rather disparate: ideograms in online media campaigns by ISIS; emojis in Chinese WeChat; the classification of selfies from a perceptual perspective; and the effect of immersive images on decision-making and prosocial behavior. They address the image act in different ways: how selfies affect viewers’ perceptions (see [Schneider and Carbon](#)); how Chinese Generation Z act with emojis and emoticons (see [Liu](#)); and how reconstituted communities act with visual ideographs (see [Winkler](#)). Virtual reality opens up another dimension of the image act through the interactive features it offers in immersive environments (see [Martínez-Cano et al.](#) and [Weber et al.](#)). What the articles have in common, however, is that they all shed light on the power of images. Each demonstrates the power of images in a specific context.

Schneider and Carbon study the semantics of selfies (SoS). By SoS, they mean how viewers describe the impression a selfie makes on them. Selfies are a powerful way to express ourselves, communicate our state of mind, or convey the personal meaning of an event. However, there is no unified nomenclature or established classification system for selfies. This gap is the starting point for their research. In the study, participants were asked to generate spontaneous associations from a pool of 1,001 selfies. The result was five main categories (aesthetics, imagination, trait, state, and theory of mind) that form a characteristic semantic profile for selfies. Thus, the article provides a classification system for how certain selfies influence viewers to perceive certain qualities in the self-portrayed person in a very compact visual form.

Liu focuses on another, relatively new, form of visual language: emojis, emoticons, and stickers. As visual forms of expression, what are they good for? Can they empower affective communication? The article provides a better understanding of how Chinese Generation Z uses different graphicons (emoticons, emojis, and stickers) to cope with various interpersonal contexts and groups: their elders or superiors, equivalent peers, and intimate lovers or friends. The study found that emoticons and stickers are becoming virtual gifts, aesthetic identities, and the affection language of Generation Z. The findings are based on interviews with 10 Gen Z youths from urban China and a 2-month participatory observation of three WeChat group chats.

Winkler explores another type of image: visual ideographs and how images become visual ideographs for reconstituted collectives. Her article shows how ideographs function in relation to the visual images in ISIS's online media campaign. To identify ISIS's ideographs, the study analyzes over 9,000 images distributed from 2014 to 2020. The key insights from this analysis are a better understanding of how visual ideograms function to attract global followers in the online environment and how visual icons and term-based ideographs intersect to mark a culture. In other words, it is about the power of images and images of power.

Martínez-Cano et al. draw our attention to the power of immersive images. They present a very detailed and systematic literature review of empirical research on the potential of virtual reality to elicit prosocial behaviors. The main question here is whether audiovisual VR content can influence an individual's thoughts and feelings about otherness and elicit prosocial behaviors. The review identifies several trends in research on the prosocial potential of VR content, with perspective-taking emerging as one of the most common strategies.

Weber et al. provide insights into the power of immersive images in the context of political communication. They investigated the question of whether virtual reality could have an impact on

political decision-making. In an experimental research design, they assessed participants' voting behavior on a fictitious popular initiative by presenting the voting issue as a text format and a VR scenario. Their findings suggest that experiencing a voting issue in VR has a positive reinforcing effect on voting outcomes compared to reading equivalent information in a traditional text format. They conclude that immersive images can have tremendous persuasive power by making the virtual feel real.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to the authors, reviewers, and editors involved in this Research Topic. The collection would not have been possible without their dedication and interest in exploring the power of images.

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