

## PERSUASION AND VISUAL IMAGERY IN POLITICS

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### *Abstract*

*The present paper provides insight into ways of crafting powerful political campaign images to convey specific messages to the electors. Essentially, there are two main reasons for studying visual imagery in the political field. First, we need to know **what** visual images are constructed while delivering the political message, and second we need to determine **the effects** of the images. Taken these aspects into consideration we will focus our attention on two important elements of visual images when political images are under scrutiny: production techniques and politicians' nonverbal behavior cues (with emphasis on affect displays).*

**Keywords:** political images, affect displays, persuasion, motivational appeals.

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### *1. Persuasion in the media age. Words and visual images*

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Humans have studied persuasion for centuries and have presented a plethora of definitions for the word. For the current study we have chosen the definition offered by Borchers (2004: 18) who states that “the persuader uses verbal and visuals symbols of culture – as well as audience analysis – to affect the attitudes of an audience member. The result of persuasion is a state of identification between the persuader and the audience member”. The key word of this definition is the **identification** concept. Gary C. Woodward (2003) equates the term with *common ground, associating* and *connecting*, explaining that the persuader seeks to build an intimate, ongoing relationship with the audience members, in our case the electors, in order to communicate the value of their product, i.e. the political candidate.

Political campaigns are nowadays seen as production staged by political persuaders (often called political consultants) who use relationship-building strategies to shape voters' attitudes. Relationships are formed through the use of language and images. For instance, Barack Obama in the 2008 biographical ad “Country I Love” uses the direct and obvious language method of identification when he announces that he is running for the presidency:

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*Obama: I'm Barack Obama. America's a country of strong families, and strong values. My life's been blessed by both. I was raised by a single mom and my grandparents. We didn't have much money, but they taught me values straight from the Kansas Heartland where they grew up. Accountability and self-reliance. Love of country. Working hard without making excuses. Treating your neighbor as you'd like to be treated. It's what guided me as I worked my way up, taking jobs and loans to make it through college. It's what led me to pass up Wall Street jobs and go to Chicago instead helping neighborhoods devastated when steel plants closed. That's why I passed laws moving people from welfare to work. Cut taxes for working families. Extended health care for wounded troops who'd been neglected. I approved this message because I'll never forget those values. And if I have the honor of taking the oath of office as President, it will be with a deep and abiding faith in the country I love.*

In order to identify with his target audience Obama shows that he is one of them sharing the same concerns and beliefs. He shows that he comes from a humble background yet with strong values instilled by his mother and grandparents (the idea of a missing father who deprived him of paternal love is being explicitly inferred). Furthermore, his advertorial narrative style has an emotional impact over the audience's feelings fostering intimate connections with them. Borchers (2004: 303) explains that "on a deeper level, persuaders seek to create our emotions, needs and values as well. They define for us what is important and beautiful, we internalize those feelings and then we behave in ways that benefit the persuader". Motivational appeals are the strongest: they spark conviction, move and motivate the audience to believe and take action. Campbell (1963) advocates that people must have passion for what the persuader says to be moved to action. The craftiest campaign consultants or politicians are those who have the skills to shape our belief system about what it takes to experience happiness. In the ad "Country I Love", Obama brings the audience to a calm and hopeful state by constructing his message on Maslow's theory of needs which include *physiological needs* ("working hard without making excuses"), *safety needs* ("helping neighborhoods devastated when steel plants closed. That's why I passed laws moving people from welfare to work. Cut taxes for working families. Extended health care for wounded troops"), *love needs* ("faith in the country I love"), *esteem needs* ("treating your neighbor as you'd like to be treated") and last but not least *self-actualization needs* ("I worked my way up, taking jobs and loans to make it through college", "and if I have the honor of taking the oath of office as President"). It's a masterful persuasive trick since Maslow's hierarchy of needs has served to guide public speakers, politicians, persuaders in general for years due to its value in explaining how individuals seek to accomplish their needs, thus ensuring themselves a state of mental and physical comfort.

The use of visual images is an essential aspect of the persuasive strategy of a political campaign as they suggest powerful messages to the audiences. Put simply, images often substitute for words in a persuader's attempt to form relationships

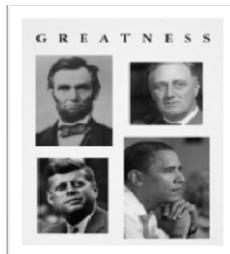
with the audience. Specialists agree that the nature of the medium (e.g. typography, photography, motion pictures, computer-generated images, etc.) affects how visual images persuade. In the present article we choose to focus our attention mainly on photography and agree on Messaris's theory (1997) which states that people perceive visual images as direct copies of reality. Moreover, Moriarty and Popovich (1991) add that visual images are powerful message forms performing key roles in communication, such as evoking positive and/or negative feelings, conveying realism, credibility, authenticity, and truthfulness. However, Borchers (2004: 165) explains that "we might believe that what we see is an accurate representation of reality, but in fact photographic images are subjective interpretations of events. We often treat these as if they were objective (...)". Boulding (1956) explains that an image is another word for knowledge, while Boorstin (1975, apud Borchers, 2004: 251) states that "images give us a small amount of the total knowledge available about an individual (...). They are shorthand ways of thinking about concepts and people". Still, they have cognitive, emotional and behavioral effects on audiences.

In their study, Holtz- Bacha and Kaid (2007: 322) explain that research on image shows that

*There are three basic conceptual approaches to political images. The first views the image as projected by the political source. The second sees the image as a mental construct in the perceiver of the political source. The third view is that the image results from an interaction of projected traits and mental reactions of the perceiver. These three views can arguably apply to all types of political images. The projection model stresses what is created and disseminated by specific communication campaigns.*

On the other hand, Grabe and Bucy (2009) state that there are three representative images created by the campaign image handlers:

- a) *The ideal candidate* – The candidate appears near elected officials, living heroes, patriots, people with power, status, and money, whether on the national or local level. Implicit analogy is done. The visual packaging techniques used are *association* and *mise-en-scene* and they transfer symbolic meaning and qualities (such as statesmanship and compassion) to a political candidate.



**Figure 1 Obama's symbolic visual associations with former presidents JF Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt**



**Figure 2 Obama emphasizes his softer side: father of his family and of the nation (Barack Obama and the 1st Family)**

- b) *The populist campaigner* – The main visual framings created and orchestrated by image handlers are linked to two main qualities: *mass appeal* and *ordinariness* and are captured in “visual appearances with regular folks, display of physical activity, athletic ability or outdoor activity and in the style of dress that candidate develops” (Grabe and Bucy, 2009: 107).



**Figure 3 Obama is photographed while engaging in physical activities which makes him look normal, but also cool and determined.**

- c) *The sure loser* framing may arise from “unattractive visual imagery of the opposition attacks on the credibility, honesty, integrity, or trustworthiness of a candidate (qualities that contribute to the ideal candidate frame)” (Grabe and Bucy, 2009: 110). As visual manifestations we mention shots of the candidate punching the air, pumping a fist or shots of citizens holding posters with disapproving comments, protesting, etc.



**Figure 4 Loser framing arose from opposition attack in order to undermine perceptions of leadership potential**

Having looked at some general characteristics of persuasive relationship-building strategies formed through the use of language and images in order to shape voters' attitudes, we will turn our attention now to the second key ingredient of persuasive political images: the nonverbal behavior cues – more specific the affect displays.

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## ***2. Persuasion and affect displays***

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Just as persuaders foster emotional connections with their audience through language, they can also do so through bodily communication. *How you look* when you speak is just as important as what you see. In the political arena this means that voters are exposed to the message on politicians' face more often than the message in their speeches. Bucy and Grabe (2009) state that:

*the face is the primary channel that communicates emotions, intentions, and sends social signals to others. Voters, unconsciously or not, may use your facial displays as heuristics to judge your personality and evaluate whether you have the traits they want in a leader, such as honesty and credibility. More importantly, because visual experience is the most dominant mode of learning, they may remember images better than any accompanying words* (Heinrich, 2012).

The same authors outline in their 2009 study that research on political leaders' nonverbal behavior has acknowledged three general categories of facial displays recognized for their social significance: anger/threat, fear/evasion and happiness/reassurance. The two authors group these three expressive displays according to two styles of interaction: the agonistic style and the hedonic style. **Hedonic displays** (happiness/reassurance) facilitate a friendly mode of social interaction and are usually characterized by the following: smile or relaxed mouth position, wide open or normal eyes, visible upper or upper and lower teeth etc. Below we have selected some examples of politicians conveying enthusiasm through friendly facial expressions warm gestures which signal their desire for social bonding and consequently gaining high approval ratings (Enache, Militaru, 2013: 131).



**Figure 5** Hillary Clinton, 2008



**Figure 6** Barack Obama, 2008

High-status leaders are said to have an expressive quality that holds the attention of electors and those who are effective in politics “are able to emit convincing displays of happiness/reassurance” in contrast with political leaders who lack this ability. Quoting researcher Paul Ekman “voters are not going to pay as much attention to [people with unexpressive faces]. They will tend to drift off into their own thoughts if you have a less expressive face while talking” (Heinrich, 2012). The ability of being charismatic elicit in viewers strong positive emotions such as optimism, enthusiasm and warm feelings. Goman (2011: 106-107) describes charisma as:

*personal magnetism or charm. Charismatic people are more outgoing (...) It's not just what these leaders project that makes them charismatic; it's how they make others feel about themselves. Good leaders make employees believe in them. Great leaders make employees believe in themselves. It's all about dealing compassionately and effectively with people: listening, empathizing, and encouraging others to achieve outstanding results. So learning to read and respond to body language signals is crucial to leadership charisma. But, of course, charisma is also about an individual's infectious positive attitude, personal energy, and enthusiasm, as projected through his or her body language.”* The author continues by stating that “learning body language skills isn't just helpful for communicating effectively to an audience; it also trains you to adopt positive, powerful, and uplifting postures and movements that in turn affect your mental state. As you assume the posture, gestures, expressions, and stance of confidence and charisma, you actually become more charismatic.

**Agonic displays (Anger/Threat and Fear/Evasion)** are, by contrast, associated with candidates, who are behind in the polls. The audiences rate this type of candidate as less expressive and less physically attractive, because these affects indicate nervousness and tension and elicit negative feelings from both supporters and critics. Angry facial expressions can cause people to feel threatened and can create distance between them. Fear/evasion displays are characterized by features such as: lips stretched horizontally, raised eyebrows and eyelids, gaze aversion, etc. (Enache, Militaru, 2013: 133).



Figure 7 Examples of politicians displaying anger, frustration, anxiety/ fury

To sum up Leathers (1997) puts forward the concepts of *positive nonverbal indicators of assertiveness* and *power* and claims that performing persuaders usually can control and monitor their body movements, engaging thus in certain pre-established, well-studied behaviors.

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### **3. Conclusions**

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Images play a dominant role in the persuasion process and often communicate in ways that words cannot. Borchers (2004: 185) explains that images serve three major functions for persuaders: *as representations of reality* attracting attention and making an emotional appeal, *as proof* of some real experience and *as argumentative claim*. In the political field, images are rhetorically constructed to serve only one purpose: electing a candidate to office. They are powerful mental pictures that shape how we think, feel and act. By understanding how persuasive images are created during political campaigns, we can understand attempts of candidates to influence our impression of them.

By displaying the right body language political leaders make electors, one more time, believe in them and implicitly in their leadership charisma. The politicians' agonistic and hedonic behavioral styles of interaction can facilitate or not social bonding with the voters. However, the precise meaning of a facial expression often depends on context. In happiness/reassurance displays, nonthreatening gestures are combined with friendly facial actions such as open-mouth smiles and raised eyebrows. Smiles usually act as ways of neutralizing aggression and function as a warm gesture. In contrast, agonistic facial expressions, i.e. angry/threatening emotional displays are unambiguous and immediately decoded by the audience. Dominant leaders are more adept at deploying aggressive behavior as a means of holding or getting the floor in a face to face interaction.

Our article has tried to outline the importance and dimensions of nonverbal display behavior in politics while constructing a charismatic *mental* image in the voters' eyes which influence their disposition to support a political leader. In essence, nonverbal communication may not necessarily help candidates but rather hurt them and their effectiveness as leaders. No candidate can afford a nonverbal mishap that would result in him being characterized as a poor, no inspirational leader therefore, everybody must be aware of the fact that virtually all politicians are coached by body language experts about proper gestures, postures and mannerisms to use in public.

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