

**Jack of all trades or master of one? What public relations can learn from two consistent, but contrasting, 2016 presidential visual twitter strategies**

Dean E. Mundy, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
University of Oregon  
[dmundy@uoregon.edu](mailto:dmundy@uoregon.edu)

Nicole Smith Dahmen, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of Oregon  
[ndahmen@uoregon.edu](mailto:ndahmen@uoregon.edu)

**Abstract**

Drawing from models in public relations and visual communication research, this study examines Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's specific use of visuals on Twitter during the 2016 presidential election. Their respective visual strategies varied widely, though in unexpected ways. Clinton's campaign, for example, incorporated visuals in their tweets twice as often, and with more variety, than the Trump campaign. Clinton's tweets primarily conveyed the campaign's stance on core issues while highlighting the risk associated with making the wrong choice. Trump's campaign used visual tweets primarily to promote campaign stops and poll numbers rather than to address specific issues or discuss the choice between the two candidates. Both candidates' strategies inform public relations' strategic use of visuals—particularly the importance of tactical consistency and understanding audiences on specific social mediums. Certainly, the mandate to understand audiences has long been central to public relations practice. With the increasing importance of visuals, though, this study's findings specifically reinforce how a visual strategy also must address audience expectations specific to certain mediums while supporting the messaging strategy. The respective twitter strategies demonstrate that the campaigns understood which of their supporters were active on Twitter and the types of information they expected—reflecting what Pew found in their own 2016 research regarding the profiles of voters on different social mediums. Finally, in addition to applying the Situational Theory of Publics to research on visual strategy, the authors contend that findings also reinforce the untapped potential of using frame analysis in public relations research.

**Keywords:** political communication, political strategy, framing, visual communication, situational theory of public

## **Executive Summary**

Drawing from models in public relations and visual communication research, this study applies a framing analysis to examine Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's specific use of visuals on Twitter during the 2016 presidential election. In doing so, it provides takeaways in terms of best practices regarding the use of visuals in political communication, and it directly informs public relations practice.

The bodies of research that guide this study include the use of visuals in social media, the foundations of framing research, how visual communication scholars have applied the principles of framing, and how public relations studies have explored framing as ways to highlight best practices. Accordingly, the authors contend that framing's potential remains largely untapped in public relations research. There are opportunities to build on existing framing schemas that can help inform best practices in public relations. There also are opportunities to explore how framing can be used in conjunction with more-widely explored public relations theory.

The data resulted from a qualitative analysis of all visual tweets made by the respective campaigns during September 2016 (the midpoint of the campaign season, and the core period in which the candidates established their positions for the general election and distinguished themselves from each other for the voters). The analysis applied two framing schemas, one used in visual communication research and one from public relations scholarship. In addition to determining best practices used by the campaigns, the goal was to explore what public relations can learn from politically focused visual twitter strategies.

While both campaigns focused on building the image of the individual candidates, the balance of their respective visual Twitter strategy varied widely in unexpected ways. Clinton's campaign message highlighted implicit and explicit choice—tweeting on a wide range of issues almost twice as frequently as the Trump campaign. Conversely, the Trump campaign used visual tweets to promote campaign stops and poll numbers rather than addressing individual issues. Both candidates' strategies indicate the importance of tactical consistency, and they inform public relations' use of visuals in a broader communication strategy. To that end, the findings indicate the importance of knowing one's audience—the mediums they use, the types of information they seek, and their psychographics generally. Certainly, audience research has long been central to public relations practice, but this study extends that mandate to the use of visuals in conjunction with text, and it emphasizes the importance of understanding how audiences differ across different social media platforms. A “one size fits all” social media strategy risks falling short of audience expectations on specific platforms.

The authors contend that the findings reinforce the largely untapped potential of using frame analysis in public relations research and offer a revised (condensed) framing schema that could be used in future research specifically examining the use of visuals. Accordingly, while the findings themselves are not generalizable, they do indicate possibilities for future research that extends this study's premise.

## **Introduction**

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign revolutionized presidential politics (Carr, 2008; Miller, 2008; Smith, 2009). Building on Howard Dean's 2004 campaign—which raised

substantial funds through small donations made online by hundreds of thousands of voters—the Obama campaign was the first to forge a grassroots political movement via a holistic Internet and social media strategy. When Obama ran for reelection in 2012, *The New York Times* reported that he had more than 20 million Twitter followers, 29 million Facebook followers, and 233,000 YouTube followers, compared to his opponent Mitt Romney, whose campaign reported 1.2 million, 8 million, and 21,000 followers respectively (Worthman, 2012). President Obama’s 2012 victory photo shared via Twitter—showing the President and First Lady hugging—broke social media records for likes and re-tweets (Byford, 2012), as did his farewell tweet in January 2017 (Dolcourt, 2017).

Simply put, the Obama 2008 and 2012 social media-driven campaigns established a new standard for strategic communication. Accordingly, toward the end of Obama’s presidency, the Huffington Post ran a story highlighting the ways his public relations team owned the social media space. Most of the highlighted tactics focused on the use of visuals, including the visual use of iconic quotes, graphics to “share with a friend,” graphics with statistics, crowd-sourced designs, humanizing photos, as well as GIFs, animations, and 3D visuals (Kitschke, 2016).

Exploring political use of visuals in social media strategies offers unique insight for public relations. After all, in many ways, political campaign success is tied to establishing strong, political brands through consistent messaging coupled with consistent use of strong visual elements.<sup>1</sup> As the Obama campaigns demonstrated, similar to public relations’ use of social media, political campaigns are increasingly (and effectively) using social media to help establish a powerful brand visually while conveying the key brand’s core messages. Political social media campaigns therefore provide a unique window into how brands solidify a base of support and drive engagement among supports. As we look ahead to the 2018 midterm and 2020 presidential elections, then, the time is apt to look back to the 2016 presidential election—specifically the candidates’ use of visuals in social media to convey positions, engage with voters, and mobilize support—to evaluate how visuals contribute to a digital communication strategy, and how public relations might benefit from examining the online political communication space. To that end, by drawing from framing principles used in public relations and visual communication research, and applying the Situational Theory of Publics, this article examines Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump’s specific use of visuals on Twitter during September 2016—the heart of the general election cycle between the end of the political conventions and the election itself. Doing so not only highlights current practices in political communication, it also contributes to the growing body of public relations research and practice regarding the use of visuals on social media.

## **Literature Review**

This study argues for the use of two theoretical applications to the study of visuals in public relations: the Situational Theory of Publics, and media framing. Although there is a wealth of public relations research regarding the Situational Theory, the theory’s application to visual communication has gone unexplored. Additionally, some public relations scholars have applied a framing lens to their research, but the application remains largely untapped in the discipline. As such, the literature review first examines the growth of social media and the value

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. George W. Bush’s branded white “W” on a black background or Barack Obama’s classic rising sun campaign logo.

of visuals in political communication. It then walks through key research regarding the Situational Theory of Publics that informs the current study, and then explores the foundations of framing, the principles of media framing, and how framing has been applied in advocacy and strategic communication research.

### ***Social Media and Visuals***

The central role of social media in political campaigns has grown substantially in the last five years. Pew reported that by 2012, 25 percent of voters cited the Internet as their primary campaign news source, making it the second most frequently used news source after television—with Twitter and Facebook playing “modest roles” (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2012, pg. 1). By the 2014 midterm election, 16 percent of registered U.S. voters engaged specifically with social networking sites (SNS) in order to learn about political news and to feel more connected with candidates (Smith, 2014), and in 2016 a majority of U.S. adults (62%) reported getting news on social media, with 18% doing so “often” (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). In fact, the 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer highlighted that increasingly, individuals trust various digital platforms as their news source, and it emphasized that millennials most trust search engines in seeking news.

Social media, therefore, have created a “foundational change” for political communication tactics (Gainous & Wagner, 2014). Gainous and Wagner (2014) developed a model for political communication that reflects how social media bypass traditional media by providing a platform for direct communication between candidates and audiences. Central to this process is use of visuals, which are key for audience engagement on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Walter, 2012). The use of visuals in political campaigns certainly is not new; scholars have noted the central, powerful role visuals play in shaping a political candidate’s image (e.g. Graber, 1987). Among the various types of visuals that can be used in political campaigning, photographs have a particularly high level of influence on viewers. Research has demonstrated that photos are processed more automatically than text (Graber, 1996) and that news photographs can elicit specific emotions (Pfau et al., 2006). Photos increase audience attention to the story (Adam, Quinn, & Edmonds, 2007), and they are easier to recall than words (Paivio, Rogers, & Smythe, 1968). Moreover, photos have been shown to influence political attitudes (Aday, 2010).

Accordingly, as Schill (2012) explained, “Images clearly play a foundational role in the political communication process” (p. 133). He argued, however, that despite their value, the study of visuals is “one of the least studied and the least understood areas” of political communication scholarship (Schill, 2012, p. 119). To that end, Schill (2012) posited that visuals have ten critical functions in political communication. Like text, visuals can document important events and set the public agenda (Coleman, 2010; Miller & Roberts, 2010; Schill, 2012). They can make a strong persuasive argument independently or in tandem with a dramatization and emotional function (Schill, 2012). That argument can be either explicit (i.e. this candidate interacts with voters) or ambiguous. Images can work to build the image of a political candidate, through such aesthetic considerations as the candidate’s wardrobe, the lighting and backdrop, and the presence of an attentive crowd (citation removed for blind review). Image building also can occur visually through the societal symbol function of political imagery—such as connecting with iconic patriotic symbols like that of the American flag or the Statue of Liberty. Finally, visuals can help voters better identify with a candidate or provide metaphorical transportation to

symbolic times or places (i.e. the Reagan “Morning in America” ads) (Schill, 2012). In short, a visual can (1) provide an argument itself, (2) help set the agenda, (3) add drama, (4) emphasize emotion, (5) build someone or something’s image, (6) identify, (7) document, (8) highlight a societal symbol, (9) transport, and/or (10) create ambiguity.

### ***Visual Framing and the Situational Theory of Publics***

Understanding the power of visuals in online communication strategies is central to this study, and can be understood perhaps most effectively through public relations’ Situational Theory of Publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). When selecting certain mediums through which to communicate, it is vital to understand who uses those mediums and how those audiences engage with those mediums. As the Situational Theory posits, it is important to gauge audiences’ recognition of a problem, level of involvement in a problem, and the extent to which they feel limited (constrained) to engage with the problem. Doing so helps campaigns know who and how to target—if the audience is active and information seeking, or dormant, either unaware or untouched by an issue. Consequently, being able to measure publics’ problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition helps understand the extent to which they are an active, aware, latent, or nonpublic.

Three studies that have explored the situational theory are particularly instructive to this study. First, McKeever (2013) researched what kinds of non-profit messaging can move people beyond awareness and actively participate in a cause. She found, in part, that the level of perceived constraint was perhaps the biggest factor preventing a public to become active. As a result, messages that help reduce those perceptions of constraint could prove more fruitful than messages that try to tap into individuals’ emotions. Aldoory and Grunig (2012) reinforced the distinction between “hot-issue” publics and the traditionally researched (active, aware, latent and non) publics, with hot-issues being those issues covered widely in the media and exposed to most or all of a population. Hot-issue publics tend to form and dissipate in conjunction with media attention on an issue (p. 93). Accordingly, the authors found that hot-issue publics are not necessarily the most active publics; they are more identified by their level of problem recognition. That said, unique types of issues, such as terrorist acts or threats related to national or personal security, can spur action more than others. Finally, Aldoory, Kim, and Tindall (2010) added that when messages are positioned in a way that the receiver perceives a shared experience, particularly a shared potential risk, then that message can influence the receiver’s problem recognition and level of involvement. Together, while these studies were focused more on the written message strategies, the findings suggest ways the situational theory can be used in exploring visual framing in political campaigns, through images that help remove perceived constraint, capitalize on hot-issues, and convey a shared experience and/or shared risk. In so doing, this study extends the situational theory’s lens regarding best practices in visual communication.

### ***Media Framing***

In addition to demonstrating how the study of visuals can help build public relations-specific theory, Schill’s 10-factor typology of visuals in political communication reflects a growing body of “visual framing” research, (see, Coleman, 2010). Moreover, as Messaris and Abraham (2003) argued in their foundational work on visual framing, visual communication is “especially relevant to the concerns of framing theory” (p. 225). While exploring the potential

that the Situational Theory has in understanding a campaign's use of visuals, it is also important, therefore, to understand the power of the media, and how different media-focused theories—particularly media framing—help shape public understanding of core issues.

Because media have the ability to identify issues for public attention and discourse in a democratic society, media producers wield great responsibility and power in setting and shaping the public agenda—the individuals, issues, events, and topics that are seen as vital to society and public interest. Accordingly, three related theories—agenda setting, priming, and media framing—help explain media's powerful societal influence (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Agenda setting argues that media—through their attention and coverage—define the issues most (and least) important for public discussion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Priming adds to this lens by arguing that the issues in the public agenda become benchmarks for evaluating performance (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Media framing moves beyond exploring “what” the public agenda comprises and focuses on the literal and visual devices (commonly known as media frames) journalists and media producers use to organize and make sense of the news, which influences how audiences interpret that news (Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Iyengar, 1991). Media framing's roots are in anthropology (Bateson, 1972) and sociology (Goffman, 1974), and the study of how individuals experience (organize) and engage in everyday life. Goffman argued, in part, that everyone sees and interprets the same event from different schemas, or frameworks. One event means different things to different individuals. By extension, then, media framing explores the processes by which the media organize and make sense of the news for public consumption. Media frames are those characteristics or properties used to lend or detract salience in order to help audiences formulate a perspective of often-complex issues.

There has been significant discussion regarding the distinction between agenda-setting theory and media framing. Scholars have argued, however, if agenda setting shows that media set the agenda in terms of those topics most important to consider, media framing research reflects “a broader range of cognitive processes—such as moral evaluations, causal reasoning, appeals to principles, and recommendations for treatment of problems” (Weaver, 2007, pg. 146). Entman (1993), for example, posited that media frame events in four ways; frames define the cause, suggest a solution, identify the responsible party(s), and/or imply a moral judgment. Iyengar (1991) added that media frame stories in either an episodic or thematic fashion—where events are presented either as a standalone, one-time, random occurrence, or reflective of an ongoing trend evidenced through prior examples. Consequently, whether a story is episodic or thematic attributes different levels and types of responsibility.

That said, while much of the notable media framing research has focused specifically on exploring political topics, issues, and campaigns, little work has been done regarding how political entities employ the principles of framing themselves—particularly by using visuals. It is important to study, then, how social movement and public relations research has applied framing to the study of organizational communication strategies.

### ***Social movement & public relations framing***

Scholars have argued for framing's application to studying strategic communication processes, particularly in the context of social movement and public relations research. First, social movement framing studies have shown how organizations that are focused on political and social action employ frames to forge common understandings around certain issues, and then

mobilize support for those issues. Benford and Snow (2000) emphasized, for example, the importance of “collective action frames,” which revolve three supporting, coordinated tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (p. 615). Diagnostic framing defines the core problem and problem attributes; prognostic framing suggests solutions and remedies; and motivational framing mobilizes constituents into action. As the authors explained, collective action frames focus on building consensus and then spurring action, “moving people from the balcony to the barricades” (p. 615).

Gamson (1995) posited a related model, arguing that collective action depends on organizations highlighting frames of injustice, agency, and identity. Injustice frames highlight the importance of the issue, using emotion to emphasize the inequality and potential hardships. Agency frames highlight the action(s)—if done collectively—that can help resolve the injustice. Identity frames demarcate “we” versus “they” by emphasizing shared values, experiences and expectations. Gamson added, “Emotion is an important component of collective action frames.... it is quite possible to trigger a burst of moral indignation by finding the right photograph or clever slogan” (p. 105). Simultaneously, sponsors of collective action frames must analyze news media coverage to determine if and how their messages are conveyed compared to others. Gamson and colleagues (1992) suggested: “Participants in symbolic contests read their success or failure by how well their preferred meanings and interpretation are doing in various media arenas.... sponsors of different frames monitor media discourse to see how well it tells the story they want told, and they measure their success or failure accordingly” (p. 385).

Certainly, creating shared meaning around and mobilizing support for issues—while simultaneously monitoring media exposure—reflects core principles in public relations. As Hallahan (1999) argued, “If public relations is defined as the process of establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relations between an organization and publics... the establishment of common frame of reference about topics or issues of mutual concern is a necessary condition” (p. 207). Accordingly, building from much of the core literature outlined above, Hallahan (1999) identified seven types of frames that specifically reflected in public relations practice: situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. He explained that framing situations helps structure experience and context for analysis. Attributes focus on an event’s more/less salient characteristics. Choice frames highlight the risk of choosing a bad option. Actions tease out what individuals might be able to accomplish. Issues convey how different stakeholders define and perceive a social problem. Responsibility implies the root cause of events. Finally, news frames help reveal how media discuss and reflect information related to the events themselves. Hallahan explained that, together, these frames should inform public relations practice, arguing, “public relations professionals fundamentally operate as *frame strategists*, who strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, and responsibility should be posed to achieve favorable outcomes” (p. 224).

Beyond Hallahan’s call, public relations research has used aspects of framing theory in three ways. First, studies have explored how organizations frame events during a crisis, or how crises and crisis responses are reported in the media (e.g. Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Wenbo, 2013; van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2014; Rim, Ha, & Kioussis 2014; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & van Atteveldt, 2012). Second, scholars have explored how public relations is reflected in various types of news media (e.g. Bardhan, 2013; Cheng, Golan, & Kioussis, 2016), and how framing can inform best-practices in media relations (e.g. Verhoeven, 2016; Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Third, research has explored how activists have employed

framing techniques in their campaigns (e.g. Reber & Berger, 2005; Darmon, Fitzpatrick, Bronstein, 2008; Zoch, Collins, Sisco, & Supa, 2008; Barnett, 2005).

This study—at the intersection of visual communication and public relations—investigates the potential of framing’s lens to explore how strategic use of visuals on Twitter can inform best public relations practice, particularly as understood through the Situational Theory of Publics. Doing so can provide insight regarding if and how campaigns target certain online publics. The following research questions therefore are as follows:

RQ1: What does a frame analysis of images in Clinton and Trump’s tweets indicate regarding the differences between their respective campaign’s digital visual communication strategy?

RQ2: How does the comparison between the visual Twitter strategies of the 2016 democratic and republican presidential candidates inform visual communication strategy in public relations practice?

## **Method**

The data resulted from coding original Tweets including images issued by the Clinton and Trump campaigns during September 2016. Given this study’s central goal of understanding how the political space can inform public relations practice, September was chosen purposefully because of its timing as the mid-point in the general election, the long slog between the end of the last national convention (the Democratic Convention) on July 28 and the election on November 8. Focusing on September provided a way to isolate core campaign messaging during the heart of their campaigns. This one month of data helps isolate and evaluate the long-term, core campaign messaging rather than specific messaging such as during the conventions or in the lead up to the election. Moreover, because this analysis is qualitative, it was important to focus more on a deep dive analysis during a purposive, limited period rather than analyze all tweets throughout the general campaign season.

To identify the tweets that fit the criteria for analysis, an attempt was made to download all tweets from each candidate’s account—@HillaryClinton and @realDonaldTrump—made during September 2016. To ensure completeness, tweets were downloaded weekly as PDF files, based on a Saturday-to-Saturday pattern. Ten files of data—five per candidate—were retrieved: August 27-September 3, September 3-10, September 10-17, September 17-24, and September 24-October 1. The overlapping of data between files on the 3rd, 10th, 17th, and 24th helped ensure the researchers had a complete set of tweets for analysis. Each tweet was examined to determine fit of criteria: an original tweet that included an image. Tweets with text only, retweets, and tweets with links to external sites were eliminated.

In all, during September 2016 the Clinton campaign issued 756 tweets, compared to 281 tweets issued by the Trump campaign—a difference of 475 tweets. Each week, the Clinton campaign issued, on average, more than two-and-a-half times the number of tweets as Trump’s campaign. For both campaigns, the only outlier in their overall patterns was September 11. On that day, each candidate issued just one tweet—a simple text-only message honoring the 15-year remembrance of 9/11. Reflective of the overall pattern, Clinton’s campaign issued approximately

twice the number of visually focused original tweets as Trump’s campaign (119 vs. 61), which accounted for approximately 16% and 22% of their campaigns’ overall tweets respectively. Accordingly, the data results from the framing analysis of a combined 180 visual tweets, which comprised photos, screenshots, graphic text (words presented in a visual form), symbols, and infographics.

For each candidate, researchers first applied Hallahan’s (1999) public relations frames, determining if tweets could be defined as situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, or news. Second, researchers coded those same tweets using Schill’s (2012) visual frames: Image as argument, agenda setting function, dramatization, emotional function, image-building, identification, documentation, societal symbol, transportation, or ambiguity (see Table 1). While analysis focused mainly on the interaction of text and image, because the very nature of a political campaign is rooted in making an argument, Schill’s “Image as Argument” frame required special treatment to prevent the misuse of that frame. Accordingly, the researchers defined “Image as Argument” specifically as a tweet that was an image only, not accompanied by or including text—an image which alone made an argument.

**Table 1: Framing schemas used for analysis**

<b>Hallahan’s 7-factor PR Frame Schema</b>	<b>Schill’s 10-factor Visual Frame Schema</b>
Situations	Image as Argument
Attributes	Agenda Setting
Choices	Dramatization
Actions	Emotion
Issues	Image Building
Responsibility	Identification
News	Documentation
	Societal symbol
	Transportation
	Ambiguity

The researchers applied a semiotic approach for analysis, which focuses on examining the relationship between the visual/observable characteristics of an object and its meaning. Semiotic analysis enabled a close reading of content, exploring the meaning beyond the explicit message to consider connotative meanings of content and use (Rose, 2012). Accordingly, this approach allowed for a more-layered approach to exploring how images support and reinforce text, and vice versa. As Silverman (2000) explained, quantitative content analyses can produce valuable data, but risks assuming a global, common understanding while obscuring the process of interpretation—rather than approaching documents as socially constructed. He offered, instead, the potential of semiotic and discourse analysis, explaining, “semiotics treats texts as

systems of signs... and discourse analysis focuses on how different versions of the world are produced through the use of interpretive repertoires” (p. 826). Frow and Morris (2000) emphasized, through their focus on television’s unique visually driven site of study, the importance of a textual analysis of the semiotic environment—moving beyond the text itself and understanding the broader political and economic environment through which the combination of text and visuals are understood and interpreted. Building on the premises of textual analysis, a semiotic approach therefore allows layered interpretation, focused on the interaction of texts and visual elements. The researchers therefore first analyzed tweets for the type of visual being used, and then examined how any corresponding text engaged with the image – such as by supporting, echoing, or reinforcing the visual, or if there was a disconnect between visual and text. Such a layered analysis allowed the researchers to determine if and how the respective framing schemas applied.

Frow and Morris (2000) clarified, however, that semiotics also requires analyzing contextual elements that help with interpretation of the text and image. To that end, the researchers also pulled in data that provided cues into the campaigns’ broader Twitter strategies. For example, the researchers coded if the tweet focused on the candidate her/himself, focused on her/his opponent, or focused on both. The researchers also noted if additional frames were being used in a supporting role, or if a tweet did not directly fit into a framing schema. Finally, the researchers noted the general topic addressed in each tweet in order to gauge variety of subjects covered during September 2016.

## **Findings**

The contextual information retrieved in terms of the range of topics covered and whom the tweet highlighted provides insight into the candidates’ broader social media strategies. Clinton’s visual tweets, for example, covered an array of issues ranging from gender equality, to military, international relations, race, faith, and the qualities needed to be president. The Trump campaign focused on a much narrower range of visual tweets, primarily announcing campaign stops and the status of polls; only three of his visual tweets focused on specific policy issues. Of the Clinton campaign’s 119 visual tweets, 63 focused on the Hillary the candidate, 54 focused on Donald Trump, and two focused on both. Conversely, of Trump’s 61 visual tweets, 59 focused on him while only two focused on Clinton. None of the Trump visual tweets during this time focused on both candidates simultaneously.

Given this context, the following sections detail the core findings from the frame analysis. In applying Hallahan’s seven-factor and Schill’s 10-factor framing models, the first section outlines the primary frames used by the Clinton campaign. The second section then walks through the frames employed by the Trump campaign. The third section of findings introduces an additional frame that emerged in the analysis of both the Clinton and Trump tweets, but not reflected in Hallahan and Schill’s framing schemas.

### ***Hillary Clinton: Attributes and Choice through Dramatization and Image Building***

In the context of Hallahan’s framing dimensions, Clinton’s visual tweets consistently prioritized “attributes” and “choices,” with the campaign using those frames in 67 of 119 tweets. Of those 67 tweets, the attribute and choice frames were used to highlight positive characteristics of Clinton 28 times, and negative characteristics of Trump 39 times. Together, the two frames

represented two sides of the same coin, where “Attributes” conveyed implied choice, and “Choices” conveyed explicit choice. For example, the tweet in Image 1 focuses on the specific attribute of steadiness as central to requisite leadership qualities. While the message itself does not explicitly discuss a choice between Clinton and Trump, it implies a character trait most salient for effective leadership. In turn, it implicitly argues—through the use of specific attributes—that Clinton is the right choice.



**Image 1: Attribute of Candidate**

Similarly, the tweet in Image 2 highlights specific attributes of Clinton’s opponent. The message and corresponding image convey a lack of steadiness and rationality. Again, while not explicitly underlining a choice, the use of specific attributes ascribed to her opponent implies choice.



**Image 2: Attribute of opponent**

Conversely, the tweet in Image 3 reflects an explicit use of the “choice” frame by the Clinton campaign, by specifically highlighting the risk in making the “bad choice.”



**Image 3: Explicit Choice**

While Clinton’s campaign used visual tweets to emphasize implicit and explicit choice, it did so through Schill’s frames of Dramatization and Image Building. Together, though, those two frames from Schill’s 10-factor framework accounted for close to half (54) of the 119 visually focused frames. The remaining eight frames were split evenly among the remaining 65 visual tweets.

The following examples reflect how the Clinton campaign used the frames of dramatization and image building. In the Dramatization frame shown in Image 4, for example, the text and corresponding image use questions surrounding Trump’s medical history to paint a more-thematic picture of all possible questions that remain unanswered—building a sense of suspicion. Conversely, the Image Building frame shown in Image 5 highlights a supporter discussing Clinton as an individual, thus helping build a positive image for the candidate.



**Image 4: Dramatization Frame**



**Image 5: Image Building Frame**

Finally, not only did the Clinton campaign rely primarily on Schill’s dramatization and image building frames, those frames also were most consistently paired with Hallahan’s frames of Attributes and Choices. More than one third of all visual tweets (37) reflected some combination of Attributes and Choices with Dramatization and Image-building, with the combination of Attributes and Dramatization as the most frequently coded pairing.

***Donald Trump: News through Image Building and Societal Symbols***

While Trump’s campaign issued far fewer tweets, consistent trends still emerged. That said, being able to squarely place those trends into an explicit frame within Hallahan’s model proved difficult. For example, most of the campaign’s visual tweets either reported on polls, or said “thank you” for attending a campaign rally or special event. In those cases, three possible frames could have applied: situations, choices, and news. The authors determined, however, that the closest applicable frame was that of News. First, saying “Thank you, Tampa, for a great evening,” with a picture from a rally, simply reported an event had occurred rather than implying how to understand that event. Similarly, simply reporting poll numbers without highlighting the salience of any particular aspect also fell closer to reporting news rather than defining a situation or highlighting choice.

Image 6 and 7 provide examples of these frames. In the first tweet, the Trump campaign simply reports of an event in Ohio, and says “Thank You.” In the second tweet, the campaign simply conveys a national poll following a presidential forum on NBC.



**Image 6: News Frame – Thank You**



**Image 7: News Frame - Polls**

Applying Schill’s framework was more straightforward, with the dominant frames of “Image Building” (through pictures of Trump appearing authoritative) and “Societal Symbols” (through the use of American flags and military-focused images). That said, while Image Building was the dominant Schill frame—used in 27 of the 61 visual tweets—societal symbols were used mostly in a supporting role across most tweets. In all, the use of societal symbols occurred 38 times—but 30 times as a supporting tactic, and 21 times as a tactic specific to Image Building. For example, Image 8 clearly focuses on Trump as the central image / message.<sup>2</sup> The American flag is used in a supporting role.



**Image 8: Image Building through the use of Societal Symbol**

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<sup>2</sup> The tweet simultaneously reflects Hallahan’s “Action” frame, which as mentioned was not a dominant frame.

***Image as placeholder***

Both candidates, in different ways, also regularly used images as a “placeholder” in ways that did not fit explicitly into either framing schema or convey specific messages. In these cases, the campaigns likely intended to draw attention to a message by including an image, but the image did not directly relate to or support the message itself. For example, in Image 9, the screen shot of Hillary Clinton does not convey a message itself or add substantive meaning to the written text. Similarly, in Image 10, the screen shot of Fox News’s set does not correlate with Trump’s “thank you” for a parade.



**Image 9: Image as Placeholder**



**Image 10: Image as Placeholder**

Simply put, the “Image as Placeholder” frame was coded when the visual did not directly support or contribute to the overall message of a tweet. As a result, these visuals served mainly as promotions rather than defining specific types of frames.

**Discussion & Conclusion**

The findings point to several key takeaways. First, not surprisingly given the very nature of political campaigns, both candidates employed Schill’s Image Building frame as a key part of their campaign’s visual Twitter strategy. Beyond the use of that frame, however, the two candidates’ use of visuals was quite different. The Clinton campaign focused on highlighting that people had a choice (implicitly by emphasizing salient attributes needed to be president, and explicitly through head-to-head comparisons). Simultaneously, the campaign used various dramatic arguments to convey—as Hallahan (1999) explained—the high-stakes “risks” in making the wrong choice (p. 225). Moreover, the campaign employed this strategy across a wide range of key campaign issues, from gender equality, to military, international relations, race, faith, and the qualities needed to be president.

Conversely, the Trump campaign was more streamlined in terms of messages conveyed and topics addressed. The campaign overwhelmingly limited their visual tweets to convey the latest poll numbers and to say “thank you” for a rally or special event. Along the way, the

campaign also invoked more societal symbols—mainly the American flag—than did the Clinton campaign. As mentioned, only three of Trump’s visual tweets addressed specific policies or issues.

Together these major takeaways help inform the core research questions. The first question asked what a frame analysis of the images in Clinton and Trump’s tweets indicates regarding the differences between their respective campaign’s digital visual communication strategy. First, both campaigns’ visual tweet strategy reflected the importance of tactical consistency, though in different ways. Clinton’s campaign consistently conveyed choice through dramatic frames across a range of core campaign issue priorities. Trump’s campaign consistently used American societal symbols to highlight polls and say thank you for events campaign events, but those tweets rarely addressing any specific campaign issue priorities.

In terms of the effectiveness of these strategies, various arguments are possible. On one hand, there is merit in using a platform such as Twitter that has broad reach in order to convey campaign positions on an array of priority issues, and how a candidate is the best choice to address those issues. In doing so, though, a campaign might risk the ability to deliver a single, constant, coherent message. Conversely, there is merit in emphasizing one or two messages constantly and consistently; such a strategy is focused and streamlined. It does not take advantage, however, of Twitter’s broad reach to convey core messages and, as a result, risks using the platform simply for promotion. Regardless, the findings indicate that both campaigns purposefully and strategically determined how to leverage visuals in their social media strategy.

That said, data also revealed two unexpected findings. First, perhaps the most surprising finding takes into account the broader context and discussion of Trump’s Twitter reputation. As journalists have documented (e.g. Lee & Quealy, 2017; Palmeri, 2017), Trump is known for his frequent, unapologetic Twitter commentary. Accordingly, the authors expected a similar pattern with Trump’s visual tweets—that they would occur frequently and cover a wide array of topics. Instead, the visual strategy was considerably streamlined and focused in content compared to his written tweets. Also surprising was the infrequent use of the “Image as argument” frame by both candidates. As the literature demonstrated, visuals wield potential power in political communication. Yet, the candidates relied mostly using text to support an image, or leveraging graphics. A potential disconnect therefore exists regarding the strategic use of visuals on Twitter and how to use images most effectively. The 2012 Obama victory photo, as well as the Situation Room photo taken during Osama Bin Laden’s capture, convey the powerful potential a single image could have in a political context. The ways in which the Clinton and Trump campaigns used visuals, however, also suggest that those moments are rare or at least rarely leveraged without explanatory text.

The findings also provide important lessons for public relations strategy, which addresses the second research question. First and foremost, possibly reflective of the situational theory of publics, the findings reinforce the importance of knowing one’s target audience. Certainly, this mandate has long been central to public relations practice. With the increasing incorporation of visual tactics, though, this study’s findings specifically reinforce how an image strategy must also address audience expectations, while supporting the messaging strategy.

In terms of audience, for example, Pew (Tyson & Maniam, 2016) found that Clinton did much better among voters with college degrees while Trump performed better among voters without a college degree (67% of whites without a college degree supported Trump). Similarly, while young adults preferred Clinton (55% - 37%), Trump fared better with voters 65 and older.

Coupled with what is known about Twitter users, then, the respective campaign strategies come into focus. Two days after Pew reported the 2016 voter breakdown, Pew also reported (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016) that 36% of all American adults aged 18-29 are on Twitter, compared to 10% of adults 65 and older. Accordingly, 30% of adults who earn more than \$75,000 are on Twitter. Simply put, a large portion of Clinton's targeted audience—young adults (18-29) and college graduates (who tend to have higher incomes)—are on Twitter. Trump's core targeted audience is largely not on Twitter. Consequently, while two of Clinton's key constituencies arguably would expect to receive more-detailed news about issues and campaign status via Twitter, Trump's comparatively small Twitter audience (65+, white, many without college degrees) arguably would respond more to American societal symbols and straightforward messages of thanks. In other words, it makes sense that while both campaigns knew it was important to be on social media broadly, they also were very aware of the various platforms' user profiles, and they customized their content accordingly.

In turn, such lessons are important for public relations social media practice generally, especially in informing a campaign's visual component. Organizations must research how targeted audience profiles differ among social media platforms, and they must be as focused in the resulting visual elements chosen to reach those audiences as they are in crafting effective core campaign messages. The visual and written elements must work together to craft a broader narrative that reflects understanding of audience expectations. Too often, organizations craft messages, select visuals, and then "copy and paste" the combination across digital platforms. This study reinforces the importance of customizing a communication strategy not just for social media, but for the individual audiences on different social media platforms, audiences who are increasingly nuanced.

Finally, in addition to the practical contributions the findings make to public relations practice and research, this study reinforces the merit in applying the Situational Theory of Publics as well as frame analysis to public relations research, especially as a way to explore social media strategy. In terms of the Situational Theory, the findings reflect many of the key takeaways in McKeever (2013), Aldoory and Grunig (2012), and Aldoory et al.'s (2010) studies—particularly through Clinton's visual twitter strategy. Images that emphasize the importance of choice, and the "clear" choice to be made, for example, reinforces McKeever's finding that messages focused on reducing constraint to act, rather than emotion, are more effective. Similarly, by explicitly highlighting risk—a risk that is a threat to us all—Clinton's campaign reflects to Aldoory et al.'s finding that perceptions of a shared experience (risk) can increase levels of involvement among a public. Both candidates leveraged hot-issues—Clinton more so on policy stances and Trump conveying current poll numbers. That said, reflective of Aldoory and Grunig's study, the use of hot-issues took an arguably back seat to the longer term strategies visual strategies getting publics to act.

In terms of framing's application After applying Hallahan (1999) and Schill's (2012) schemas, for example, the researchers concluded that a combined, streamlined five-frame schema warrants investigation. Such as a public relations-specific schema relies most-heavily on Hallahan's schema and comprises Attributes, Choices, Actions, Responsibility, and Education (a new category which collapses the original frames of "clarifying situations," stance on "issues," and organizational "news").

## **Outcomes**

In all, given the theoretical application of the Situational Theory and frame analysis, this study offers three key takeaways that could help practitioners improve their own visual work. First, this study reinforces the importance of not only understanding audience expectations on social media, but also—and perhaps more importantly—understanding how audiences differ among the different tools, and how the use of visuals must reflect those differences. Second, applying the above-proposed five-factor schema when determining visual strategy merits consideration, as it could help practitioners discern the optimal balance among those frames—if a campaign warrants more calls to action, for example, than educating a public about a subject. Finally, to increase a public’s knowledge of, and involvement with, a campaign, practitioners can learn from this study’s application of the Situational Theory. Specifically, practitioners should focus on visuals that help decrease perceptions of constraint in addressing an issue, as well as visuals that help create perceptions of shared experience, where publics can see their own lives reflected in the visual message being conveyed.

Beyond potential benefit to practitioners generally, as we move into the next midterm and presidential election, this study also hopes to provide a baseline of understanding regarding how political brands wage their social media campaigns through the use of visuals in concert with core messaging. The intersection of modern political communication and evolving social media strategy offers a unique site of study for public relations scholars.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

As with all studies, this research is not without limitations. First, while the authors purposively selected September for the month of analysis, an argument could be made for a more quantitative study that analyses a broader range. Also, because of the qualitative nature of this study, the results are not generalizable. That said, the key takeaways provide an important foundation for future research. Future studies should test the proposed streamlined public relations framing schema, investigate how additional framing models—possibly in conjunction with core public relations theory—can inform the process, and apply the framing model to social media content more broadly—across content type.

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