

Annual Methodological Archive Research Review

<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume 3, Issue 5 (2025)

Pictures Say What Words can't: A Visual Grammar Analysis of Pakistani Facebook Posts about Palestinian Issue

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Article Details

Keywords: visual grammar, visual design, posts about Palestinian issue. This study also investigates that how visual elements visual elements, facebook posts, contribute in constructing visual design and transferring meanings. Theoretical representational meanings, narrative meanings and compositional meanings

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to find out what people want to convey through visual elements. This study also investigates that how visual elements visual elements, facebook posts, contribute in constructing visual design and transferring meanings. Theoretical representational meanings, narrative meanings and compositional meanings framework for this research work includes the Grammar of Visual Design by Kress and Leeuwen (2006). Data is collected from Facebook posts during the timeframe of October 2023 to December 2023. Convenient sampling technique is used to collect and analyze Facebook posts which are about various approaches of common people about Palestinian Issue. These posts are images and photo-shopped pictures without any text. The Visual Grammar analysis of the posts helps us understand that what type of meanings, feelings and reactions common Pakistani Facebook users are sharing through pictures and which type of representational meanings, narrative meanings and compositional meanings are emerging from those visual designs.

Introduction

Language is not the only medium of communication there are many other forms which help in sending the message across e.g. non-verbal communication, and visual communication. Pictures are a major and pivotal part of visual communication and have already been used as a part of message transmission either it's a matter of clearing a concept at educational institutes or it's the task to transform an idea in the form of image to get it across in professional scenarios.

Facebook is one of the most popular social media in Pakistan where common people seem to express their opinion in various forms including text, comments, memes, videos, pictures and images. In current scenario, the use of images is increasing everywhere e.g. chat stickers, gif, use of streaks and various types of photo shopped versions of images in all social media platforms. Overall, communication seem to incline towards visual communication.

Literature Review

The concept of Visual Grammar Analysis (VGA) began with Kress and Leeuwen (1996, 2006) who strongly advocate that pictures should be analyzed like language as pictures have visual syntax which is similar to linguistic syntax. The book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006) illustrates that images have various smaller dimensions which work individually and collaborate collectively to generate meaning. In addition to meaning construction, visuals also perform social function as they can inform, instruct, ask and convince like language (Kress & Leeuwen 2006).

Visual Grammar Analysis is applied in various contexts for example VGA of; Lesaffre's website (Ping, 2018), Channel's Spring-Summer 2021 Campaign Teaser Pictures in the Pandemic Era (Hafifah & Sinar, 2021), advertisements (Guo & Feng, 2017) and 'Advertisements of Educational Institutions' (Bilal, Asghar, Nawaz, & Zaman, 2021). All these studies emphasize that visuals play in generating and transferring meanings.

There are numerous researches which explored the three major metafunctions of VGA i.e. Representation, Interactive and Compositional meanings. Yang & Zhang (2014) investigated the representation meanings of editorials in *The Economist* and revealed that pictures function in meanings' interpretation and are closely linked with text. Wang (2023) explored interactive meaning in the film *frozen* and advocate that VGA can also be applied to filmic discourses as well. Knoll & Fuzer (2019) worked on analyzing the compositional metafunction of VGA with reference to multimodality in infographics of advertising sphere in order to comprehend that how the selected messages were composed.

Numerous researches are done on pictures, Palestine and Facebook posts which include texts, pictures and videos but these three factors are explored individually or in different combinations than the current work. Tasseron (2023) conducted research on news coverage of the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza by select British and South African print news outlets in order to see the semiotics of visual and textual legitimacy in the 2014 Gaza war. Garra-Alloush, & Magadley (2022) brought into light that social media platforms are replete with strong political opinion about Palestine Israel issue which do not appear otherwise. Al-Dala'ien, et al, (2023) scrutinized the Arab Facebook posts about Plestinian Issue and emphasize that visual coding is loaded with implicit meanings which required analysis to dig out the hidden meanings. The study based on visuals and their interaction with textual contents showed that while comparing texts with visuals in Gaza-Israel conflict, the pictures tell a different story indicating that pictures should be studied more (Jungblut, & Zakareviciute, 2019). Facebook posts of Israeli lobby were analyzed by

Arqoub (2019) in a context of engineering of consent.

Despite the extensive research done on visual grammar analysis in various domains, there is still a significant research gap in the context of analyzing Pakistani Facebook posts regarding Palestinian issue. This work is an attempt to fill that gap and unveil the underlying messages and perspectives of the Pakistani community about Palestine crisis. This work can help in understanding that how visual communication shapes discourse and perception within Pakistani context particularly about the sensitive socio-political issues.

Research Questions

This work aims to find out the answer of the following research questions:

Q1: What are the Representational, Interactive and Compositional structures of the selected posts?

Q2: How the Representational, Interactive and Compositional structures construct overall meanings?

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is 'Visual Grammar' by Kress and Leuween (2006); they presented this approach in their book 'Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design (2006)' which provides a systematic and logical demonstration of the grammar of visual design. They have divided the metafunctions of visual communication into Representational, Interactive and Compositional meanings.

Representational Meanings

Representational meanings represent aspects of the world as it is experienced by humans (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.42). People, place and things of various types which compose visuals are known as 'participants' (Kress & Leeuwen 2006; Yang & Zhang, 2014).

Narrative Representation

Narrative Representation is "when participants are connected by a vector, they are represented as doing something to or for each other" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.59) and vector is an oblique line between participants which indicate the direction of action. On the basis of number of participants and types of vectors different kinds of narrative processes can occur; non-transactional process which has only one participant called 'actor' as the vector emancipates from it whereas the transactional process also has actor and 'Goal' i.e. a participant towards which vector is directed (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006; Yang & Zhang, 2014).

Conceptual Representation

According to Kress and Leuween (2006) Conceptual arrangement can be divided into classification structures, analytical structures and symbolic structures; classification structures create hyponymical relations between participants, analytical structures generate meronymical relations and symbolic structures describe participants visually as who they are and what they mean.

Interactive Meanings

Interactive Meanings function to illustrate the interaction between image and the viewer. The metafunctions of interactive meanings are contact, social distance, perspective, and

modality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Wang, 2023).

Contact

As per Kress & Leeuwen (2006; Wang, 2023) Contact is the gaze of participant; if the participant is looking directly at the audience it is called 'demand act' and if there is no direct visual contact of the object with the audience then it is 'offer act'.

Social Distance

Social distance depicts the level of affinity between participants ranging from intimacy to separation; if objects are placed closely, they are in strong relation and if the distance is increased, the elements are detached too (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006; Wang, 2023).

Perspective

Perspective deals with angle; high level angle symbolizes participant inferior than viewer, an eye-level angle emphasizes equality whereas a low angle forces the viewer to look up and implies object more powerful than audience (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006; Wang, 2023).

Modality

According to Kress & Leeuwen, (2006) *Modality* deals with color saturation, color differentiation, color modulation, contextualization, representation, depth, Illumination, brightness and it varies in three degrees, high, medium and low. High modality suggests involvement while low modality shows detachment (Wang, 2023).

Compositional Meanings

Compositional meanings suggest analyzing the ways visuals are organized and how this arrangement results in various kinds of meanings. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) categorized the compositional meanings into information value, framing, and salience.

Information value

The position and distribution of the elements in a layout determines its information value; if the elements are occupying the central position, they are important and if the elements are located at the margins, their value is marginal (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006; Knoll & Fuzer, 2019).

Framing

Framing refers to the use of frame or lines which attach or detach the certain elements of the image as they create meanings of inclusion and elimination between constituents (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006; Knoll & Fuzer, 2019).

Salience

The complex interplay among factors such as relative size of elements, focus, sharpness, contrast of tones, difference of colors, location of element, perspective and cultural factors results into the graphic weight of elements in a visual design which is known as Salience (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006; Knoll & Fuzer, 2019).

So if all the elements are combines at one place, they would take the following shape (Table 1)

Grammar of Visual Design

Representational Meanings	Interactive Meanings	Compositional Meanings
1. Narrative Representation 2. Conceptual Representation	1. Contact 2. Social Distance 3. Perspective 4. Modality	1. Information value 2. Framing 3. Salience

Table 1

Methodology

Facebook posts about Palestinian issue dated from October 2023 to December 2023 are collected through convenient sampling technique. The selected posts are the images but they are not the actual photographs of Palestinian disasters. The images under study are graphical representation of people's feelings and thoughts about Palestinian issue in the form of images which do not include any text. It is believed that nonverbal cues serve as a visual language for communicating concepts, feelings, and thoughts (Arafah and Hasyim, 2019; Hussein and Aljamili, 2020). Therefore, the current study excluded written communication and focuses on visual communication only.

Data Analysis:

The selected images are analyzed with reference to three dimensions of meaning construction e.g. Representational, Interactive and Compositional meanings.



Picture 1

Picture 1- Representational Meanings:

Representational meanings refer to recreating and reproducing the real world so the picture 1 is a regeneration of the actual situation of social media platforms about Palestinian issue. It can be seen that how various prominent social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and twitter are minimizing the voice of Palestine. So the picture 1 is representing the real scenario of social media silence over Palestinian issue.

Narrative Representation of picture 1 denotes Actors in the form of human hands which are representing Israel and three mainstream social media channels i.e. twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Since Picture 1 indicates transactional structure where the action process shown by human hands and the goal is a female wearing scarf and Palestinian flag on her eyes and around her neck shows her identity. The raised eyebrows seem to be a reaction of fear and suffocation she might be feeling because of Israeli hand around her neck. Narrative process helps in understanding the transactional action and reactional processes of visual communication.

Conceptual Representation of picture 1 deals with classification structures as the hyponymical relations are quite obvious between the subordinate (the female) and the superordinate (human hands controlling the girl). The symbolic structures of picture 1 are very strong and prominent; the female representing the current situation of Palestine where as human hands signifying social media and the hand holding the girls neck symbolizes Israel.

Picture 1 - Interactive Meanings

The interactive meanings include contact, social distance, perspective and modality. In picture 1, the **visual contact** of the female is hidden behind Palestinian flags which conveys the message that those eyes are actually the eyes of Palestine which is unable to see the world as they are trapped in disastrous situation. So when there is no direct gaze, it means there is 'offer act' which provides information to the audience i.e. Palestinian flags at the place of eyes.

Social Distance stands for the close connection among participants. Picture 1 shows the 'close up shot' of all the participants which means that all participants are closely linked. The hands on mouth and around neck also signify that how this social closeness is acting as power exertion and suffocation for the female participant.

Perspective of picture 1 reveals an eye-level angle and this emphasizes that the audience is at equal level with female participant; Palestine and the rest of the world audience is equally helpless to resolve this issue. The degree of **Modality** of picture 1 is high as the color saturation, color modulation and color differentiation are at its peak. It is noticeable that colors are very bright, different colors are used and even the shades of the same color are applied very carefully e.g. different shade of blue for twitter and Facebook and the different shade of skins for hand. The contextualization is also intensifying modality as the flames of fire can also be seen in the background.

Picture 1 - Compositional Meanings

The compositional meanings of picture emancipates from information value, framing and salience. The **Information value** of picture 1 infers that the girl representing Palestine is of dominant importance as compared to all other visual object because it is occupying the central position. **Framing** of the picture also arranged in a way to bring that girl into limelight; all other visual elements are connected with her. In order to show the distinction between her skin and other skins color discontinuity is applied. On the other place, color continuity is used to show her shoulders by using the same color of her scarf.

Salience which considers the overall visual weight of the object also entails that girl symbolizing Palestine carries maximum visual weight as it is in complex interaction with other visual objects, has comparatively bigger size and occupies the central focus.



Picture 2

Picture 2 - Representational Meanings:

Picture 2 is manifesting the level of destruction in Palestinian context. On a 1st glance, it can be noticed that a beautiful cat seems bewildered among the trashes of exploded buildings. The process of destruction is continued as the smoke is still disseminating from a building.

Narrative Representation of picture 1 is manifesting two participants; cat and the buildings. If we consider the smoke out of a burnt building as a vector then the building is the goal whose actor is not visible in the image. So the transactional process is undergoing in this picture as the action of burning is still going on but the 'actor' who has taken this action is missing from the scene.

Conceptual Representation of picture 2 manifests classification structures between cat being alive (superordinate) and structures being dead (subordinate). The analytical arrangements of picture 2 reveals meronymical relations between cat and surroundings; the cat is the constituent of the trashed buildings around it. In symbolic structures, the cat symbolizes Palestinian alive animals which are befuddled and scared at the current situation and the surroundings symbolizes the overall destructive situation in Palestine.

Picture 2 - Interactive Meanings

The **Visual Contact** of the cat is not directly towards viewer which means it's not a 'demand act' where visual element asks for 'attention' but it's an 'offer act' and the cat is offering information in the direction of her gaze. **Social distance** between cat and the buildings' debris is minimal as the cat is sitting on the trash showing that she is the part of that remains also.

With reference to **Perspective**, picture 2 is showing slanting high level angle which indicates that the audience is more powerful than the cat and the scrap of the buildings. The **Modality** of the picture is medium as there is no much use of excessive or bright colors so color saturation and color differentiation are not applied vigorously. Contextualization is worth noticing as smoke, damaged buildings and their trash contrasting with the cat which is taking the central position in the picture.

Picture 2 - Compositional Meanings

As per the **Information Value** of picture two, the destruction shown on the left side is something which is known to the world already. The burnt building on the right side and its smoke informs the audience that the process of demolition is still continued. The cat in the center of the image emphasizes that life is the most important constituent. The **Framing** of the picture indicates that the cat in the midpoint is belonging to the other parts of the image in a contrastive way as it represents life as compared to the background of death nearby. The **Salience** of the picture again ensures the importance of cat as its visual weight is comparatively much more than other visual fragments due to its larger size and integral focus.



Picture: 3

Picture 3 – Representational Meanings:

Picture 3 provides the graphical representation of genocide of innocent kids. The picture gives the emotional representation of motherly love

Narrative Representation of picture 3 has three participants; woman, kid and building trashes. The picture indicates the 'Reactional process' where the participant 1 is the mother who is looking at her kid and smiling. So, the mother is the 'actor' here and her gaze is the vector. The child is the 'phenomenon' of this process.

Conceptual Representation of picture 3 comprises of analytical and symbolic structures and it does not seem to have any classification structures. The analytical composition indicates that the mother and the kid are also the part of scrap. Symbolically the woman stands for all the mothers who are dead along with their kids even being physically alive.

Picture 3 Interactive Meanings

When we try to find out the **Contact** in picture 3 we see that there is no direct eye contact of the participant with the audience. The woman's face is directed towards her kid and so her eyes even though they look close and the child is looking back to his mother informing the audience that they are the most important visual elements here. The **Distance** between mother and child reveals that they are strongly bond together. The way the mother carrying child signifies that she is being protective towards him too.

The **Perspective** of picture 3 is high angle as the audience seem to look at the symbols through height and the visual elements appear down which implies that audience has

more power as compared to the visual object. The worth noticing point in this picture is the dual angle representation of the objects; the buildings are appearing vertical whereas mother, kid and scrap seem horizontal.

Modality of picture 3 is high; though there is no color saturation and color differentiation but color modulation and contextualization are applied strongly. It can be seen that the whole picture is showing the various shades of the same color. In the same way, the background is strongly portrayed and artistically merged with the central characters.

Picture 3 - Compositional Meanings:

The **Information value** of picture 3 loudly emphasize that the lives of human beings turning into dust are far more important than the destruction of building. Occupying the middle point of the image, the mother and kid transmits the message to audience that how they are becoming the integral part of destruction. **Framing** of the image is reinforcing the same message; the trash of the building is merged within the image of the women communicating that how closely these two objects are linked. **Salience** of picture 3 prominently provides the maximum visual weightage to the woman holding kid being the biggest element, getting supreme focus along with cultural factor of covered head.



Picture 4

Picture 4 - Representational Meanings

Picture 4 is the attempt to recreate the boycott movement for Israeli products.

Narrative Representation of picture 4 consists of three participants i.e. human hands which are 'actors' as the direction of blood from them is acting as 'vector'. All three products, Lays, lipton and cocacola are the 'goals' as the 'vector' is directed towards them. The process involved here is 'transactional' as this image has a combination of actor, vector and goal.

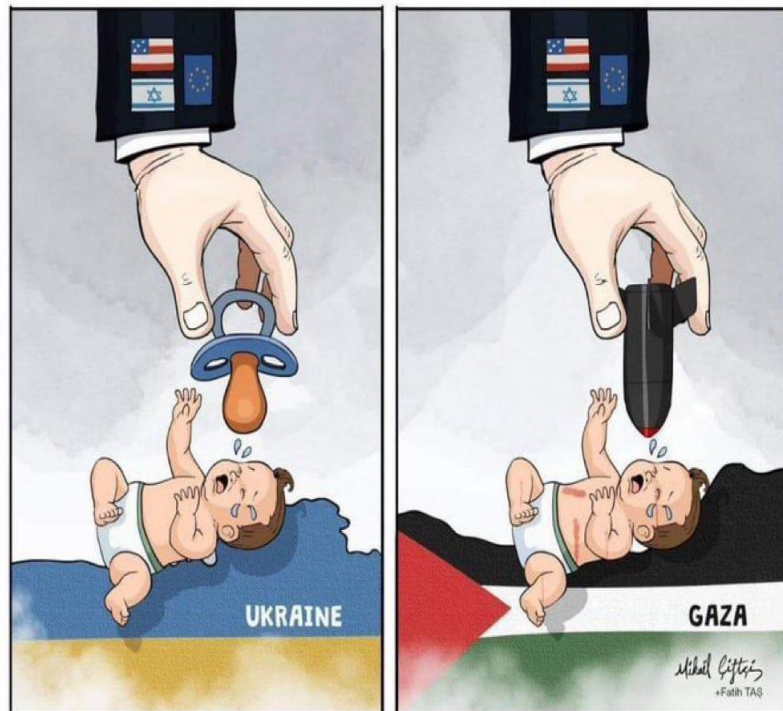
Conceptual Representation of picture 4 seems to have classificational process and overt taxonomy as the relationship between human hands as superordinate and products as subordinates is obvious. The analytical arrangement of the picture unfolds that all humans are equally contributing in Palestinian bloodshed who are using Israeli products so all human hands are a part of the whole. Similarly, all products are the part of the whole i.e. Israel whose flag is visible on teabags's box and the blue color of the flag is turned into red representing blood of Palestinian people. The symbolic value of the picture conveys the message that buying Israeli products is equal to be the part of human killing in Palestine.

Picture 4 - Narrative Meanings

Contact is not found in picture 4 as there is no human or animal gaze used. The minimal distance between users' hands and products mean that there is close '**Social Distance**' as these two things are dependent on each other. The **Perspective** of the picture is eye-level angle which signifies that the visual object and the viewer are at the same power level; audiences can either continue to buy or accompany to boycott. **Modality** level is high as color saturation, color modulation and color differentiation are applied strongly.

Picture 4 - Compositional Meanings

The **Information Value** of picture 4 is a bit tricky as the image is divided into three parts and each slice has a different central point; the parts of lays and tea bags carry equal position might be signifying the equal consumption of both products whereas the rectangular bigger division gives it more value. **Framing** of all three parts is almost similar as the visual elements are occupying all the space and the lines between user and products are drawn in the same way. **Salience** of the image increases the visual weight of the elements as the colors, dimensions and positions of each individual part adding value to the complete whole.



Picture 5

Picture 5 – Representational Meanings

Picture 5 is an attempt to recreate and represent Western hypocrisy and double standard humanity towards two different states. The picture brings into light the two entirely opposite behaviors of three countries i.e. US, Israel and Micronesia towards two different places i.e. Palestine and Ukraine.

Narrative Representation of picture 5 reveals 'transactional process' with two vectors and four participants; two human hands which are 'actors' and two kids who are 'goal' as per Kress and Leeuwen's VGA. In one segment of the picture, the human hand carrying pacifier towards kid's direction in vector 1 whereas on the other side, the same human hand is approaching the kids at Gaza with rocket is vector 2. Consequently, the kid at Ukraine's flag is 'goal 1' and kid at Palestinian flag is 'goal 2'.

Conceptual Representation in picture 5 indicates towards prominent 'classification structures' where the human hand in both sections is the superordinate as it's the provider or the destructor while the kid at both places is the subordinate as its receiver and dependant on others. This picture does not seem to have any analytical structure. The symbolic arrangement of this picture is prominent and noticeable; the human hand has the flags of three countries including US, Israel and Micronesia whereas the kids' bodies are placed on the flags of Ukraine and Palestine so the image is depicting the situation involving five different countries.

Picture 5 – Interactive Meanings

The **Contact or Gaze** of both kids is towards human hand which means that the visual element is directing viewer's attention towards the actor so it's an 'offer act' scenario. The **Social Distance** between visual objects is quite obvious and this far-fetched distance implies detachment between participants.

Perspective applied in picture 5 is quite interesting as two participants are placed at two different angles which shows the different power relations with the audience; the kids are placed at low level angles indicating that kids have less power than the audience whereas the human hand is located at the higher level manifesting that viewer is less in power than the hand.

Modality of the picture is at high level as the color saturation is visible; the colors of the picture are bright and sharp. Color differentiation is also highly activated as various colors can be seen in the same frame. Color modulation can be witnessed in the use of shades of blue in pacifier and all flags excluding Palestine flag. Contextualization is robust also as it can be seen that kids' belonging is shown through the colors of their respective flags.

Picture 5 – Compositional Meanings

The **Information Value** of picture 5 indicates that both sides of the image are equally important as both are occupying the same place and space. **Framing** reveals the close connection between the visual elements which has been created through the alignment of hand. **Salience** proves that the components have great visual weight as the use of color-contrast, the sizes of the constituents, their location and angles combine the effect together.

Findings

The analysis of the selected images shows that people convey various types of messages on Palestinian Issue; Palestinians are being silenced and suffocated (picture 1), even animals are terrified by seeing the destruction around (picture 2), human life is turning and being treated as scrap (picture 3), people want to show solidarity with Palestine by boycotting Israeli products (picture 4) and how the western hypocrisy is exposed (picture 5).

The visual grammar analysis of the pictures illustrates that visual communication carries a lot of ways of generating meanings; the visuals not only represent the reality but it can also magnify and amplify the effects by using various techniques, colors, angles, location, representation and connection of the elements within and with the viewer.

Conclusion

Considering the analysis and findings, it can be concluded that visual grammar analysis is an excellent approach to analyze images; this analytical research design can help us understand the mind of the people; what people think and want in any selected area. The increasing use of visuals by people at various social media platform specifies that visual communication is an emerging trend which can be explored further.

Recommendation & Limitations

Visual analysis is an understudied aspect in Pakistani context where the use of images and memes remains at peak even in serious and grave scenarios that consequently makes it a research dimension which has a lot of potential to be explored.

This study is limited to only five Pakistani Facebook posts, the same study can be applied on a larger data to form a bigger picture of people's thoughts, feelings and opinions.

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