Connecting with visually acculturated audiences: A hypermodern perspective

Ganga Sasidharan Dhanesh

Abstract

Framing of the research: This paper connects the theoretical lens of hypermodernity, organizational rhetoric, and organizational identification to understand visually acculturated audiences in a social-media saturated world and enable organizations to effectively engage with hypermodern audiences.

Purpose of the paper: This conceptual paper aims to examine drivers behind the emergent communication preference of audiences towards visual media in a social-media saturated age. It also offers recommendations for organizations to adapt their engagement strategies with visually oriented audiences.

Methodology: NA as this is a conceptual paper

Findings: Through the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identification, this paper suggests that organizations can foster identification with visually acculturated audiences by co-creating identity with individual rhetors. This involves leveraging visual spectacles that resonate with hypermodern audiences, who prioritize crafting unique and extraordinary identities rooted in experiential, emotion-rich consumption, and a love of the spectacular.

Research limits: This is an exploratory conceptual paper, which could be followed up with empirical work. Future studies could create research instruments that could help to identify hypermodern audiences. Studies can also examine the processes through which visual rhetoric of organizational identity accomplishes identification with hypermodern audiences.

Practical implications: Communicators in organizations can strengthen their audience engagement strategies through co-creating organizational identities that are likely to resonate with these hypermodern audiences.

Originality of the paper: This paper enriches audience research in organizational contexts applicable across disciplinary domains such as organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising by connecting the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identification.

Key words: *visual communication; hypermodernity; organizational identification; organizational rhetoric; audiences; social media*

1. Introduction

From cave paintings of mammoths in the stone ages to memes of button-nosed puppies in the social ages, visuals have enthralled the human imagination. However, rapid innovations in communication technologies and the viral spread of social media platforms that foreground visuals over text have accentuated the role of visuals in communication, contributing to

the creation of audiences acculturated to a social world of visual spectacle (Edwards, 2018; Seo, 2014; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). 91% of consumers now prefer visual content over text-based media (www.forbes.com).

The emergence of visually acculturated audiences acquires great significance particularly because there is increasing evidence of the ability of visuals and images to affect individuals' persuasion and decision-making through affective and heuristic routes to persuasion, circumventing logic, and rationality (Quick *et al.*, 2015; Rhodes, 2017). This trend holds important implications for organizations as they communicate and engage with their diverse internal and external stakeholders across domains such as organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising (Clancy and Clancy, 2016; Dhanesh, 2018; Ihlen and Heath, 2018; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Yet, research on the visual dimension in organizations has been sparse. Even within this sparse body of work most of the research has been organization-centric, largely employing a strategic, rhetorical perspective examining issues such as legitimacy, identity, identification, and community building (Kjeldsen, 2018; Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Scholars have called for more studies on the characteristics of audiences who have been acclimatized to visual rhetoric fueled by the spread of social media (Edwards, 2018; Kjeldsen, 2018).

Accordingly, this conceptual paper proposes hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2005; Schaal, 2013) as a theoretical lens to understand visually acculturated audiences. This paper has chosen the concept of hypermodernity to generate insights into these emergent audiences because the concept of hypermodernity provides rich, insightful glimpses into the attitudes, behaviors, and communication preferences of a set of contemporary publics in advanced data-driven societies (Armitage, 2001; Lipovetsky, 2005; Roberts and Armitage, 2006; Schaal, 2013). Connecting these theoretical insights with the key tenets of organizational rhetoric (Ihlen and Heath, 2018; Heath *et al.*, 2018) and the body of work on organizational identity (Cheney and Christensen, 2001; He and Brown, 2013), this paper also offers recommendations for organizations to adapt their communication and engagement strategies with visually oriented audiences.

Theoretically, this paper makes two novel contributions. First, it enriches sparse work on audience research in organizational contexts applicable across disciplinary domains such as organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising. Second, by borrowing and connecting the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identity, it offers a novel perspective on understanding and adapting to visually acculturated audiences in a social-media saturated age. Practically, it will offer communication managers valuable theory-based insights that could strengthen their approach to engaging with these hypermodern audiences, particularly by building and articulating organizational identities that are likely to resonate with them.

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2. The rise of a visual world fueled by social media

Social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram with their mostly visual affordances; Facebook with live streams and TikTok and YouTube with videos enable the construction of a social world that is increasingly more visual than verbal. Photo albums, pictures, and videos generate far more likes and reactions from publics than content without images (Seo, 2014; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Most importantly, images shared on social media travel freely across linguistic, national, and cultural borders with real life implications for individuals and organizations. For instance, Doerr's (2017) study examining European far-right activists' use of cartoon images making fun of immigrants found that images depicting immigrants as black sheep, initially circulated via online blogs and social networks in Switzerland, not only crossed linguistic and national borders in Europe through online networks, but was also picked up by mainstream media, and finally affected public and policy agendas. Similarly, opponents of genetically modified (GM) foods in the U.S. and Europe were successful in their visual campaign against GM foods by employing memetic images such as Frankenfoods that could travel freely across borders, and contest rational arguments about the safety of GM foods (Clancy and Clancy, 2016).

Various reasons have been offered for the popularity and effectiveness of visuals in the age of social media. First, visuals are regarded as attention-grabbing, and easy-to-digest media content (Flam and Doerr, 2015; Rose, 2012; Seo, 2014). Second, as the previous examples demonstrate, visuals can transcend linguistic, national, and cultural barriers. Research on transnational political communication in the European Union has shown that language poses a barrier for citizens communicating online across different countries (Doerr, 2010; Doerr and Mattoni, 2014). Visual and digital media offer a solution by facilitating connections among diverse political actors across national, linguistic, and cultural barriers (Doerr, 2017; Seo, 2014). Further examining why offensive images can easily transcend linguistic and national boundaries, Flam and Doerr (2015) argued it could be because images are carried through the emotional reactions they create. Visual imagery draws its persuasive power from its ability to trigger emotions necessary for persuasion and hence visuals have been an important aspect of propaganda research (Brantner, *et al.*, 2011; Fahmy *et al.*, 2014; Rose, 2012). The powerful effect of images to trigger emotions has been explained using theories such as Heuristic Systematic Model of information processing (Dixon, 2016; Kim and Cameron, 2011) situated within increasing research that examines the role of affect in communication (e.g., Druckman and McDermott, 2008; Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004; Nabi, 2003).

The body of work reviewed above clearly places the reasons for the popularity of visuals on the characteristics of visuals themselves as attention-grabbing, easy to share, and able to transcend multiple boundaries. It has also been explained using theories of affect and their role in persuasion. However, scholars have called for more research on audience characteristics, the *bodies* that confer meaning on visuals, especially in

the context of social media (Edwards, 2018). Adami and Jewitt (2016) summarized four themes that sum up research on social media and visual research published in a special issue on the topic. These themes include the study of emerging genres and practices; identity construction for individuals and organizations through visuals shared online; every day vernacular practices of sharing visuals that make the private public; and the transmedia circulation and appropriation of images that are edited, manipulated, and reused. Even within this recent body of work, there is hardly any focus on the audience and their characteristics.

Beyond the study of visuals in social media, a review of the literature on visual studies in communication identified three major strains of thought: visual rhetoric, visual pragmatics and visual semantics (Barnhurst *et al.*, 2004), among which visual rhetoric, or "the actual image rhetors generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating" (Foss, 2005: 143), was identified as the most widely used approach to visual studies in communication. Most of the visual research presented at conferences of the International Communication Association also employed a visual rhetoric approach, arguing that visual imagery influences ideas, ways of living, and pictures of the world, across varying audience demographics. The rhetorical approach can be employed to examine the role of visuals within organizations too (Kjeldsen, 2018; Meyer *et al.*, 2013).

3. Rhetorical approach to studying visuals in organizations

Organizations need to communicate, and rhetoric helps explain the ways in which organizations use words and symbols to accomplish their political or economic goals by co-creating meaning, crafting identities, and building relationships with multiple stakeholders (Ihlen and Heath, 2018). However, acknowledging that work on rhetoric has been confined to disciplinary domains, Ihlen and Heath (2018) brought together scholars from the allied disciples of organizational communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising to produce *The Handbook of Organizational Rhetoric and Communication* in an attempt to break down silos among work on rhetoric.

Scholars who have contributed to this book noted that the rhetorical tradition, drawn from the ancient writings of Aristotle and Isocrates, and from modern scholars of rhetoric such as Burke and Perelman, has shifted focus from individual rhetors to examine all forms of symbolic action by human social collectives (see Conrad and Cheney, 2018; Ihlen and Heath, 2018). Although rhetoric implies the purposive, strategic use of symbols intended to influence others, perhaps of most relevance to this paper is Burke's focus on rhetoric as accomplishing identification rather than persuasion (Conrad and Cheney, 2018; Ihlen and Heath, 2018; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Smudde and Courtright, 2018). Identification can be accomplished by the ethos of the rhetor, individuals or organizations, as well as by the attitudes and perspectives shared with others. Applying the concept of identification to organizational rhetoric, Rosenfeld (1969: 183) proposed that identification "is finding a shared element between the speaker's point

of view and the audience's, or finding the audience's point of view and the speaker's and convincing them that they share a common element." Cheney (1983; 1991) argued that organizations' efforts to achieve identification with their stakeholders can take different forms such as the rhetor (a) establishing a common ground with the audience, (b) posing an antithesis or a *common enemy* to unite against and (c) creating transcendence where individuals or organizations ally with similar others to share a group identity. According to the theory of the rhetoric of identification, poetry, rhetoric, and dialectic are three types of symbolic action through which human beings try to influence each other (Heath, 1986). Arguing that the ultimate purpose of rhetoric is identification, compared to conventional purposes such as persuasion, information, and entertainment; and cardinal purposes such as influencing knowledge, attitude and behavior, Smudde and Courtright (2018) applied rhetoric to message design and argued that Burke's dramatism and Bormann's (2001) Symbolic Convergence Theory helped to explain identification.

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Drawing on Burke's concept of dramatism, Smudde and Courtright (2018) argued that identification can be realized through message design when organizations enact dramas about issues and topics that are compatible with stakeholders' dramas about these issues and topics. Similarly, Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory centers on messages that inspire identification with a larger group through generating fantasy themes, fantasy types, symbolic cues, and sagas. According to the theory, *fantasy* refers to any component of a message that could capture an audience's imagination. It becomes a *fantasy theme* when the theme catches on and is accepted by a group of individuals. The more a theme is shared and spreads, the more likely audiences are to develop *symbolic cues*, which are rhetorical signals that indicate the theme. The *fantasy type* is broader and is based on recognizing intertextuality with other similar discourses prevalent in other groups, which could produce similar stock scenarios. A collection of such scenarios could then yield a *saga* or a much repeated telling of stories of individuals or groups. However, the authors also noted that the idea of convergence obscures ethical issues of power such as motivating self-interests and issues of hegemonic intentions.

For rhetoric to be effective and create identification between organizations and their audiences, it must be in sync with the thoughts and vocabulary of its intended audiences (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2011). Several scholars have theorized about audiences as rhetorical constructions. For example, the audience as visualized by the speaker could fall into two categories, the *particular audience*, for whom specific message appeals and arguments are created and the broader *universal audience*, to whom facts and truths are addressed (Perelman, 1979); a *constructed audience* in a rhetorical situation who enacts agency within the context of a specific problem (Bitzer, 1968); the notion of the *second persona* or the agentic intended audience that responds to the speaker or the *first persona* (Black, 1970); and the notion of the *constituted audience* who are constructed through the process of identification between organizations and their audiences (Charland, 1987). Yet, as in most rhetorical studies, the focus of research on communication and organizations has been on the speaker

and message, and the role of the audience as an active contributor to the communication process has been mostly ignored (Edwards, 2018; Leitch and Neilson, 2001).

Reviewing research on visual rhetoric within organizational studies, scholars have noted that although communication in and by organizations is becoming increasingly dominated by visuals, there is hardly any focus on the practice and research of the visual dimension in organizations (Kjeldsen, 2018; Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Kjeldsen (2018) noted that research tended to examine issues related to trust and credibility, legitimacy, values and norms, and identity, identification, and community, the latter three mostly from advertising and brand research. Meyer *et al.* (2013) classified the scant research on visuals in organizations into five approaches, amongst which the strategic approach, which examines the ability of visuals to draw desired responses from audiences, is the most rhetorically informed by examining concepts such as meaning-making, influence, and persuasion employing concepts from the rhetorical tradition. However, this body of work, similar to traditional rhetorical studies focuses on the message and the organization and does not deal with the role of audiences in rhetorical arenas.

If we are living in an increasingly visual world hyper connected through transnational online social networks, and if visuals exert strong persuasive powers through emotions, and the heuristics and biases they trigger, and if these technology-driven sociological and communication trends have given rise to visually acculturated audiences, then how can organizations understand these audiences and the underlying sociological trends and respond materially and rhetorically? The following sections aim to answer these questions, through the lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identity.

4. Characteristics of Hypermodernity

According to French scholars, the postmodern era transitioned into the hypermodern age in the 1980s, characterized by *hyperconsumption* and *hyperindividualism* (Aubert, 2005; Lipovetsky, 2005). What distinguishes hypermodernity from postmodernity seems to be a singular focus on excess (Gottschalk, 2009). "In every domain there is a certain excessiveness, one that oversteps all limits, like an excrescence…" (Lipovetsky, 2005: 32). This penchant for excess is demonstrated in all domains of social life: in reality shows on television that insist on hyper transparency, in urban, overpopulated hyper megalopolises, in hyper surveillance in the face of terrorism, even in individual behavior as evidenced by manic consumption, the penchant for extreme sports that pushes one to the limits of human endurance, the phenomenon of bulimia and anorexia and the consumption of performance enhancing drugs to reach beyond one's best.

To Lipovetsky, hypermodernity is the ultimate manifestation of modernity: "Far from modernity having passed away, what we are seeing is its consummation, which takes the concrete form of a globalized liberalism, the quasi-general commercialization of lifestyles, the exploitation 'to

death' of instrumental reason, and rampant individualism" (Lipovetsky, 2005: 31). The following section will discuss three specific characteristics of hyperindividualism that are particularly relevant to understanding visually acculturated audiences (1) experiential and emotional consumption, (2) the need for constructing extraordinary identities, and (3) obsession with the spectacular.

4.1 Experiential and emotional consumption

The hypermodern individual does not consume for the sake of flaunting to others, or to outshine others but consumes for the sake of individual pleasure. "The quest for private pleasures has taken over from the demand that one flaunts one's status and win social recognition: the contemporary period is witnessing the establishment of a luxury of an unprecedented kind - an emotional, experiential, psychologized luxury, which replaces the theatricality of social display by the primacy accorded to sensations" (Charles, 2005: 11). However, the objects of consumption have changed from material to qualitative, enriching experiences. Hypermodern individuals engage in *experiential* and *emotional* consumption avidly relishing the consumption of culture, travel, fitness, spirituality, and history over material consumption (Aubert, 2005; Gottschalk, 2009; Lipovetsky, 2005). For instance, a hypermodern individual might prefer an exploratory adventure along the Nile or the Amazon over buying the latest branded suit or handbag. Emerging consumption-scapes reflect such hypermodern sociological trends of post-materialism or an increasing detachment to material possessions that have propelled the rise of the sharing economy, where instead of purchasing and owning things, consumers prefer to pay for the experience of temporarily accessing the goods and services they want. Experience, not ownership, has become the ultimate expression of consumer desire (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Examining consumers' relationship to material possessions, specifically in the context of contemporary global nomadism, where individuals and families engage in serial relocation and frequent short-term mobility Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) found a liquid relationship to possessions, characterized by detachment and flexibility. A detached, *liquid* relationship to material possessions and increasing emphasis on engaging with an experience economy is also bound up with hypermodern individuals' need to actively construct their sense of identity.

4.2 The need for constructing extraordinary identities

Extreme levels of independence and autonomy characterize hypermodern individuals, produced largely by the collapse of dominant social structures of meaning imposed on individuals. Hypermodern individuals are not doled out similar sets of prefabricated identities such as Muslim, Christian, Spanish or British that come with their own set of stable and predictable norms and practices. In the hypermodern world, bereft of such fixed and prefabricated identities and rigid mandates that are handed down, individuals are faced with new needs for meaning, security,

for belonging to new groups and communities. On their own, they need to actively craft fresh identities that have become more fluid and malleable, and are continually open to contestation, negotiation, articulation, and re-articulation. These emergent identities are actively constructed by hypermodern individuals through self-reflexive deliberation (Schaal, 2013) fashioning themselves into eco-warriors, the socially conscious, minimalists, and stoics in ways that permeate rigid boundaries and envision identities that are unique and boundary-spanning. Above all, in a hypermodern world, these freshly minted and continually configured identities must be hyper exclusive and unrivalled, identities that discard averageness and celebrate exceptionalism.

Hyperconsuming emotion-rich experiences has a natural fit with actively constructing extraordinary identities for hypermodern individuals. For instance, a trekking trip along the Amazon or the Nile perfectly resonates with an identity built on themes of eco-consciousness, curiosity, exploration, and adventure. Or, participating in an organization's socially responsible volunteer drive of rebuilding homes in a typhoon battered community in Puerto Rico might tie in well with an avowed identity of care and compassion (Dhanesh, 2020). These identities built upon a repertoire of emotional, experiential consumption are further strengthened through visual rhetoric facilitated by online social media networks.

4.3 Obsession with the spectacular

Hypermodern individuals are consumed by a love of spectacles and grandiose, fantastic representations of realities. The hypermodern individual, who has been treated to a plethora of individual choices offered by the logics of mass-produced fashion, is rather fickle when it comes to preferences and inclinations, without steadfast and deeply entrenched likes and dislikes. Faced with a multitude of options and unstable, shapeshifting whims and fancies, the hypermodern individual can be moved to action only by spectacular representations of the social world.

According to Lipovetsky (1994), the media have pandered to this need for spectacle and superficiality by foregrounding the entertainment and theatrical values of their messages. Instead of focusing on the real and the rational, advertisements feature the spectacular and the fantastic, or the hyperspectacle. Lipovetsky (1994: 158) argues, "Advertising does not seduce *homo psycho-analyticus*, but *homo ludens*. Its effectiveness has to do with its playful superficiality, with the cocktail of images, sounds, and meanings it offers without any concern for the constraints of reality or the seriousness of truth." Beyond advertising, Lipovetsky's (2005) thoughts on hyperspectacle are highly evident in the emergence of a visual culture fueled by social media, which has enabled a massive surge in the production and consumption of visual imagery over online networks that has produced audiences acculturated to a social world of visual spectacle (Clancy and Clancy, 2016; Dhanesh, 2018; Edwards, 2018; Seo, 2014; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016).

Experiential consumption that actively feeds narratives of freshly fashioned identities can now be made more vivid and spectacular with

visuals that are shared seamlessly over boundaryless online social networks. For example, a selfie posted online with the ethereal Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis in the background not only exemplifies hypermodern individuals' experiential and emotion-rich consumption that can amplify identity narratives of exploration and adventure, but also their obsession with spectacles.

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To summarize, these three rich, nuanced insights into the psychographic preferences of hypermodern individuals can help to explain the rise of visually acculturated audiences. Although hypermodern theorists did not apply the concept of hypermodernity to the specific context of social media, this paper argues that hypermodern individuals' love of the spectacular is stoked by the spread of social media platforms that are underpinned by their rich visual affordances that celebrate the creation and amplification of online visual spectacles.

However, hypermodern audiences' love of spectacle doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is founded on their need to build unique, exceptional identities on a base of hyperconsumption of emotion-laden experiences. Hence, what appears to be visually acculturated audiences might reflect much deeper hypermodern motivations to rhetorically construct individual identities that are unique and extraordinary, built on a base of rich, emotion-laden experiences.

How can these insights into hypermodern audiences help organizational communicators?

5. Adapting to hypermodern audiences through organizational identification

If talking the language of the audience is a prerequisite for organizational rhetoric to achieve intended outcomes, and if audiences are increasingly turning to the visual in a social media-saturated world, it appears as though there is a pressing need for organizations to draw on the powers of the visual and engage in a *conversation of images* with key audiences (Adami and Jewitt, 2016; Clancy and Clancy, 2016). However, insights from hypermodernity into probable motivations of these visually acculturated audiences indicate that for organizations to respond using visuals might be insufficient.

There could be a need to delve deeper and engage with the identity-building motivations behind hypermodern audiences' love for visual spectacle. Hypermodern individuals are intensely focused on the individual self and produce and consume fantastical visuals driven by the need to craft individual identities. In response, organizations could go back to the basics, to posing existential questions - who are we? what do we stand for? - before even beginning to engage with hypermodern audiences using the language of visuals. Literature on organizational/corporate identity has much to offer on this topic.

Just as individuals have their own identities, organizations also have their distinctive identities that distinguish them from other organizations, and help to maintain credibility and legitimacy, for both internal and external

stakeholders (Bravo *et al.*, 2012; Cheney and Christensen, 2001). While literature on identity has grown across a variety of disciplines, including organizational behavior, marketing, organizational communication, sociology, advertising, public relations, and organizational strategy, literature on identity in institutional contexts have two main homes - the complementary concepts of *organizational identity* in organizational behavior and *corporate identity* in marketing (Balmer, 2008). However, while the notion of organizational identity tends to take on an internal, employee focus answering the question - who are we? - the notion of corporate identity has a more external focus, answering the question - how do we want to be known? (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007; He and Brown, 2013).

In their seminal work, Albert and Whetten (1985) proposed that an organization's identity was constituted by a set of claims on what was central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization. Reviewing literatures on organizational identity and identification, He and Brown (2013) noted that work on organizational identity has been characterized by an intense focus on the collective, organizational selves. He and Brown (2013) also noted that in addition to functionalist perspectives that consider organizational identity to consist of tangible features such as corporate logos, and physical attributes of organizations; organizational identity has also been theorized as discursive and rhetoric constructions co-created by the narrator and the audience, which is more in line with the rhetorical perspective of creating identities and enabling identification.

Similar to the functionalist perspective of organizational identity, the origin of corporate identity can be traced to visual and graphic design and the symbolic ways in which organizations present themselves to audiences, mostly using elements of visual design (Balmer, 2008; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007; He and Brown, 2013). However, more recently, the definition of corporate identity has extended beyond that of visual imagery to encompass the core set of characteristics that define an organization, including characteristics and attributes that represent its essence, personality, values, commitment to social responsibilities, and internal culture (Balmer, 2008; Balmer *et al.*, 2007; Bravo *et al.*, 2012). Perez and Bosque (2011: 147) defined corporate identity as "both the central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics of the company, and the collection of tools the organization uses to present itself to stakeholders." This inclusive transformation is probably perfectly poised to feed into organizational visual rhetoric that could aim to achieve identification with identity-seeking hypermodern audiences in love with the self, experiences, and the spectacular.

6. Humanizing organizations and communicating spectacularly

Hypermodern audiences are intensely fixated on crafting extraordinary individual identities based on affect-laden experiences, rhetorically accomplished through spectacular visual imagery. Three aspects are crucial here. One, the intense consumption of emotion-rich experiences. Two, the focus on crafting exceptional identities. Three, the love of the spectacular. In order to appeal to these hypermodern bodies,

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the image's privileged subjects who are imperative to meaning making, organizations need to mirror these hypermodern audiences by creating an expanded conceptualization of organizational identity focused on their core values, character and soul; humanize and personalize this expanded conceptualization of identity through the ethos of the individual rhetor; and then employ spectacular visual imagery to rhetorically co-construct their identities and enable identification with these hypermodern audiences. See Figure 1 for the proposed conceptual framework.

For instance, Nike's organizational identity reflected in its slogan, *Just Do It,* is built around the idea of an organization that is committed to an intense focus on action, on pushing boundaries to actualize possibilities. Instead of staying bound by notions of organizational identity focused on the collective organizational self (He and Brown, 2013) Nike personalizes organizational identity by tapping on the ethos of individual rhetors such as Colin Kaepernick, Lebron James, and Serena Williams. It then employs emotion-laden appeals and striking visual imagery to rhetorically construct its corporate identity. Each of these factors - the core, distinctive character of the organization, individual rhetors, and spectacular visual imagery - together comprise the ingredients needed to enable identification with hypermodern audiences who might themselves be searching for individual identities premised on breaking boundaries and standing up for what one believes in. For these visually acculturated hypermodern audiences, posting online striking pictures of going for a run in an exotic location, while wearing Nike shoes could be a manifestation of not only identification with the company but also of drawing from Nike's corporate identity to feed into the rhetorical construction of a fantastical individual identity built on notions of fitness and adventure. This idea also resonates with the idea of narrative transportation or the view that that an image must narrate, act, and resonate (NAR) to encourage narrative processing and thus transport viewers into the organizational narrative (Nikulina *et al.*, 2024).

Applying Symbolic Convergence Theory (Bormann, 2001) to message design (Smudde and Courtright, 2018), one can argue that Nike's commitment to pushing boundaries of action, as a central, enduring, distinctive feature of its identity, conveyed through striking visual imagery could rhetorically create a fantasy theme in its messaging that catches the imagination of hypermodern audiences, which could generate symbolic cues, fantasy types and sagas across multiple individual rhetors that tie in with the identity construction of hypermodern audiences who might see themselves as adventurers, or brave warriors standing up for something. It can also be argued that Burke's concept of dramatism is at play here as identification can be realized through message design (Smudde and Courtright, 2018) when Nike enacts dramas about issues of advocacy that are compatible with hypermodern audiences' dramas about the same issue.

In this respect, organizations can also borrow from influencer marketing wherein individual social media influencers leverage their authenticity with spectacular visual rhetoric to build and maintain relationships with their followers (Abidin and Ots, 2015; Khamis *et al.*, 2016). For instance, social media entrepreneurs such as Kylie Jenner and Huda Kattan have built successful businesses premised on rhetorical personification conveyed

through hyperspectacles. Similarly, organizations need to focus on their core identity, who they are, their soul, and their character in a way that will enable stakeholder identification for those hypermodern audiences that are seeking to create their own unique identities. They then need to communicate organizational identity using individual rhetors and visual hyperspectacles that will appeal to hypermodern audiences. In this way, organizations will be in sync with their audiences and can hope to achieve stakeholder identification. Although this paper considered visuals as being able to transcend cultural and national boundaries, the strand of scholarly research on visual social semiotics argues that visual communication strategies might differ by cultural or national contexts as meanings are often negotiated between the producer and the viewer, and reflects the social, political, and cultural beliefs, values and attitudes of specific contexts (Aiello, 2020; Harrison, 2003; Sommer, 2021). Hence, organizations might also want to customize their visual communication strategies depending on cultural or national contexts of practice.

Tab. 1: The conceptual framework

Organizations	Tocreatefantasy themes, sumbolic cues, fantasytypes and sagasthat can rhetorically enable identification with	Hypermodern Audiences
• Humanize and personalize organizational identity through the ethos of individual rhetors • Conveyed through spectacular visual imagery		• Who create extraordinary identities based on • Intense consumption of emotion-rich experiences • Conveyed through spectacular visual imagery

Source: Author's own illustration

7. Conclusion

This conceptual paper argued that to accomplish organizational rhetoric's purpose of identification between organizations and their audiences, organizations ought to articulate their organizational identity constructed around their soul and character, through individual rhetors, and visually spectacular constructions of organizational identity. These spectacles of communicated visual identity can then generate fantasy themes, symbolic cues, fantasy types and sagas that can enable identification with hypermodern audiences, who are visually acculturated. The arguments proposed in this paper have important implications for theory and practice.

Theoretically, it has added perspectives from the sociological trend of hypermodernity to our understanding of visually acculturated audiences. The paper has achieved this by highlighting connections among literatures on visual rhetoric, hypermodernity, and organizational identity, adding to bodies of work at the intersections of visual studies, organizational rhetoric and communication. Specifically, it has added a sociological perspective to the body of knowledge on the reasons for the popularity and effectiveness

of visuals in the age of social media. While existing literature clearly situates reasons for popularity on the characteristics of visuals themselves (Doerr and Mattoni, 2014; Flam and Doerr, 2015; Seo, 2014) and on their ability to trigger heuristic thinking through affective shortcuts (Dixon, 2016; Kim and Cameron, 2011) this paper has provided insights into audience characteristics that could explain the rise in popularity of visuals. It has also added insights to the literature on the construction of identities by individuals and organizations over social media (Adami and Jewitt, 2016) and most importantly, to the body of knowledge on organizational rhetoric that has tended to be organization- and message-centric largely ignoring the role of visuals and the audience (Edwards, 2018; Kjeldsen, 2018; Leitch and Neilson, 2001).

Practically, communicators in organizations across domains such as internal communication, corporate communication, public relations, marketing, and advertising can interrogate current practices of identity building and enable identification with visually acculturated audiences through a return to the basics - of articulating who they are, and co-creating identity through individual rhetors using visual spectacles that might appeal to hypermodern audiences who are just as driven by an intense focus on the self, and on creating extraordinary and unique identities based on experiential, emotion-rich consumption and their love of the spectacular. Practitioners could identify individual actors/rhetors who personify the organization's identity, then employ emotional appeals, and striking visual imagery that can capture the attention of visually attuned hypermodern audiences to convey their corporate identity.

This exploratory conceptual paper could be followed up with empirical work. For instance, future studies could create research instruments that could help to identify hypermodern audiences. Future research can draw on existing instruments that help to measure individuals' need to craft unique identities, need for emotional experiences, and affinity for spectacular visual imagery to create a composite instrument that can help to identify hypermodern audiences. Not all visually acculturated audiences will be hypermodern. However, as seen from the explanations given in this paper, some of them could be driven by hypermodern motivations. It is imperative to understand who these audiences are to engage with the most relevant set of audiences. Creating such a research instrument can help with understanding and segmenting these audiences. Studies can also examine the processes through which visual rhetoric of organizational identity accomplishes identification with hypermodern audiences. For instance, empirical work can content analyze communication campaigns to identify the use of individual rhetors, the extent of their personification of corporate identity, the use of emotional appeals, and the spectacularity of visuals employed. It can further run quasi experiments or surveys to see which aspects of these campaigns lead to greater identification with hypermodern audiences. Future research can also conduct focus groups with audiences who identify as hypermodern to assess what aspects of organizational communication resonate the most with them and why. Finally, future research could examine how visual communication strategies might differ by cultural or national contexts reflecting variations in contexts of practice,

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thus deepening our understanding of the applicability of theories across different settings.

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Academic or professional position and contacts

Ganga Sasidharan Dhanesh
MBA, PhD Public Relations, Communication Management
United States of America
e-mail: ganga@umd.edu