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The Role of Social Media Graphics in Modern Business Communication

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Visual content—particularly social media graphics—has become indispensable in contemporary business communication. This paper examines how social media graphics function as strategic communication tools that shape brand identity, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and influence consumer decision-making. Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics, the study conceptualises graphics as communicative acts situated within digital platforms' affordances and constraints. A qualitative research methodology was employed: semi-structured interviews with communications managers, content designers, and social media strategists across diverse industries ($n = 22$), combined with purposive sampling of organisational graphic artefacts and thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Findings reveal that effective social media graphics enhance message clarity and memorability, serve as instruments of narrative and brand symbolism, mediate emotional connection through visual affordances, and require strategic alignment with platform-specific conventions and metrics. The paper articulates a theoretical framework integrating visual rhetoric, social semiotics, and media richness theory to explain how graphics translate organisational aims into audience action. Practical recommendations for practitioners and implications for future research are provided.

Keywords: social media graphics, visual communication, business communication, multimodal discourse, social semiotics, qualitative research.

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1. Introduction

The rise of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of business communication. Organisations no longer rely solely on traditional written or spoken messages; instead, they deploy a wide range of multimodal artefacts—images, infographics, short videos, animated GIFs, and branded visuals—to engage audiences. Social media graphics occupy a unique position: they must be simultaneously attention-grabbing, brand-consistent, platform-appropriate, and message-accurate. The integration of visuals into strategic communication reflects shifts in audience expectation, where attention scarcity and high information load make concise and compelling visuals more effective than long-form textual explanations.

This paper explores how social media graphics function in modern business communication, focusing on the communicative intents of organisations, the affordances of social media platforms, and the interpretive strategies of audiences. The inquiry centres on three broad questions: What communicative roles do social media graphics play in business contexts? How do practitioners design and deploy graphics to support organisational goals? What theoretical lenses best account for the effectiveness of these graphics?

Understanding the role of social media graphics is important for both scholars and practitioners. For scholars, the visual turn in media studies and communication scholarship necessitates rigorous frameworks that integrate semiotic, rhetorical, and media-theoretical approaches. For practitioners—marketing managers, corporate communicators, designers—the insights can inform graphic strategy, content planning, and performance evaluation.

This paper contributes to the literature by developing a conceptual framework that situates social media graphics at the intersection of visual rhetoric, social semiotics, and media richness theory. Empirically, it presents findings from qualitative research involving interviews with communication professionals and document analysis of graphic artefacts. The results illuminate design rationales and strategic uses across varied business contexts (e.g., B2B and B2C, nonprofit, retail, professional services), offering transferable lessons for organisations seeking to optimise their visual communication.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on visual communication, social media, and business messaging. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the qualitative research methodology. Section 5 presents findings, Section 6 discusses the implications of these findings in relation to the theoretical framework, and Section 7 concludes with practical recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Visual Turn and Business Communication*

Scholars across communication, marketing, and design disciplines have documented a “visual turn”—a growing emphasis on images, icons, and multimodal texts in both interpersonal and mass-mediated communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Business communication, historically dominated by text-based documents, reports, and presentations, increasingly leverages imagery to condense complex information and evoke affective responses (Miller & Birkner, 2013). Visual artefacts are treated as integral to corporate identity: logos, colour

schemes, and typographic choices serve as semiotic markers of brand personality (Henderson & Cote, 1998).

2.2 Social Media's Role in Shaping Visual Strategies

Social media platforms impose unique constraints and opportunities. Platform affordances—character limits, aspect ratios, algorithmic preference for certain media types, and affordances for interactivity (likes, comments, shares)—shape how organisations design graphics (boyd, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). Instagram's emphasis on square and mobile-first visuals, Twitter's real-time conversational ethos, and LinkedIn's professional milieu encourage distinct graphic strategies. Platform algorithms that prioritise engagement incentivise visually salient content that prompts reactions and sharing (Bucher, 2018).

2.3 Visual Rhetoric and Persuasion

Visual rhetoric studies how images function persuasively. Scholars argue that visual elements have rhetorical capacities distinct from verbal messages: they operate through entanglement of denotation and connotation, composition, salience, and visual metaphor (Foss, 2005). In advertising and branding contexts, images can activate associative networks in consumers' minds, triggering memories and emotions that influence attitudes and behaviours (Micu & Plummer, 2010).

2.4 Social Semiotics and Multimodal Discourse

Social semiotics extends semiotic analysis by situating signs within social practices. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose that visual grammar—composition, salience, framing—carries meaning akin to syntax in language.

From a multimodal perspective, social media graphics are part of ensembles that include caption texts, hashtags, emojis, and user interactions; meaning is constructed through the interaction of these modes (Bezemer & Kress, 2008).

2.5 Media Richness and Channel Theory

Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) posits that communication channels vary in their capacity to convey equivocal information. Visuals can increase a channel's richness by providing cues (facial expressions, spatial arrangements) not available in plain text. Social media graphics, when combined with text and interactivity, may achieve higher richness and support complex organisational messages, such as crisis communication or brand storytelling.

2.6 Image Metrics and Performance Evaluation

Recent scholarship emphasises the need for empirical metrics that capture visuals' performance—engagement rate, click-through, shareability, and conversion. However, scholars caution that metrics can be platform- and context-dependent and might incentivise sensationalism over authenticity (Gillespie, 2014). Effective evaluation, therefore, blends quantitative engagement measures with qualitative assessments of brand alignment and audience sentiment.

2.7 Gaps in Existing Research

Although existing literature recognises the importance of visuals, empirical studies that examine practitioners' reasoning, design workflows, and strategic trade-offs—especially in small to medium enterprises and nonprofit settings—remain limited. This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding

practitioners' perspectives and connecting their accounts to theoretical constructs.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three theoretical strands to explain how social media graphics operate within business communication: visual rhetoric, social semiotics, and media richness theory. Together, they provide a layered account of meaning-making, persuasive effect, and channel affordances.

3.1 Visual Rhetoric

Visual rhetoric supplies tools for analysing how images persuade. It draws attention to composition (foreground/background), salience (what is made visually prominent), and visual tropes (metaphor, metonymy). In the context of business communication, visual rhetoric helps explain why certain design choices—colour palette, image cropping, focal objects—enhance message salience and influence perception (Foss, 2005). For example, a product photograph shot with shallow depth-of-field foregrounds the object, reducing cognitive load and increasing aesthetic appeal; rhetorically, this communicates product importance.

3.2 Social Semiotics and Multimodality

Social semiotics emphasises that visual signs are embedded within social practices and that meaning emerges from semiotic resources in context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The multimodal ensemble of an Instagram post (image, caption, hashtags, emojis, comments) must be interpreted holistically. This framework foregrounds the interaction between graphic elements and textual modes, highlighting how juxtaposition and sequencing create narratives that extend beyond single posts.

3.3 Media Richness and Strategic Channel Use

Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) offers an account of why organisations choose visual formats. Graphics can increase message fidelity and provide affective cues that text alone cannot. However, richness is bounded by platform constraints and organisational resources. Graphics that are too complex for mobile consumption may reduce comprehension; conversely, overly simplistic visuals can underleverage the medium's capabilities.

3.4 Integrative Model

The integrative model proposed here synthesises these strands: social media graphics are strategic communicative acts that combine visual rhetorical techniques (composition, metaphor) with semiotic resources (icons, colour, typography) and are deployed via channels whose affordances determine reach and engagement. The model predicts that the effectiveness of a social media graphic depends on: congruence with brand identity, alignment with platform affordances, clarity and salience of visual rhetoric, and integration with textual and interactive elements. The research tests and refines this model through qualitative data.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at exploring practitioners' experiences and interpretations. Qualitative methods are appropriate because they capture the situated reasoning, tacit knowledge, and contextual decision-making that quantitative metrics often overlook (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research design comprises semi-structured interviews with communication

practitioners and document analysis of social media graphic artefacts.

4.2 Research Questions

- What roles do social media graphics play in organisational communication strategies?
- How do practitioners design, evaluate, and adapt social media graphics across platforms?
- How do theoretical constructs from visual rhetoric, social semiotics, and media richness manifest in practitioners' reasoning?

4.3 Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy targeted communications managers, social media strategists, graphic designers, and content marketers from a variety of organisations: retail ($n = 6$), professional services ($n = 5$), nonprofit organisations ($n = 4$), B2B technology firms ($n = 4$), and higher education institutions ($n = 3$). The total number of participants was 22. Participants were recruited through professional networks and LinkedIn; selection prioritised individuals with at least two years of experience managing organisational social media.

4.4 Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases. Phase 1 comprised semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes) conducted via video conference. An interview guide covered topics such as design workflow, brand guidelines, platform tailoring, performance evaluation, crisis communication, and collaboration with other departments. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Phase 2 involved document analysis. Participants were invited to share a purposive sample of social media graphics they

considered representative of their practice (3–6 artefacts per organisation). Artefacts included static images, carousels, infographics, and animated GIFs. Each artefact was accompanied by metadata (platform, posting date, engagement metrics where available) and a short practitioner commentary explaining the intent and rationale for the design.

4.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided the analytic process. Transcripts and artefact commentaries were coded iteratively using an open-coding approach in the first cycle, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between codes. NVivo software supported the management of qualitative data. The coding scheme combined inductive themes (e.g., "brand authenticity," "platform tailoring," "resource constraints") with deductive codes drawn from the theoretical framework (e.g., "salience," "multimodal integration," "richness cues").

To analyse the visual artefacts themselves, a multimodal discourse analysis was conducted, focusing on composition, framing, colour use, typography, and the relationship between image and caption. Where available, engagement metrics were used illustratively rather than as inferential statistical evidence.

4.6 Credibility, Transferability, and Ethical Considerations

Credibility was enhanced via methodological triangulation (interviews + document analysis) and member-checking: participants reviewed, synthesised findings and offered clarifications. Transferability was addressed by sampling across industry types and organisational sizes.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics board. Participants provided informed consent and could withdraw at any time. Artefacts containing sensitive or proprietary content were anonymised; organisations were assigned pseudonyms in the analysis. Where permitted, specific artefacts were quoted and reproduced with permission.

4.7 Limitations of Methodology

Qualitative methods do not aim for statistical generalisation; rather, they prioritise depth of understanding. The purposive sample, while diverse, is not exhaustive. Also, artefacts and metrics were self-selected by participants and may reflect successful examples. Future research could complement these findings with larger-scale content analysis or experimental designs to test causal claims.

5. Findings

Analysis produced four primary themes: Graphics as Clarity and Attention Tools, Graphics as Brand Narrative and Symbolic Resources, Platform Tailoring and Tactical Variation, and Resource Constraints and Workflow Negotiations.

5.1 Graphics as Clarity and Attention Tools

Participants consistently described graphics as essential for capturing fleeting attention and simplifying complex information. For example, a communications manager at a nonprofit described a campaign infographic as a “way to condense a ten-page report into a scrollable post that people actually read.” Designers used data visualisation principles—hierarchical typography, contrast, white space—to guide viewer attention. Several participants highlighted that graphics enabled “one-glance” comprehension, helping audiences to

understand offers, deadlines, or calls to action within seconds.

5.2 Graphics as Brand Narrative and Symbolic Resources

Graphics were not merely informational; they functioned as carriers of brand personality. Colour palettes, image style (e.g., candid vs. staged photography), and recurring visual motifs (e.g., geometric frames, mascot illustrations) formed a semiotic system that communicated organisational values. A brand director for a B2B technology firm explained how a consistent set of icons and colour coding across posts created “an invisible thread” that made disparate content feel cohesive. Participants emphasised authenticity: visuals needed to align with the organisation’s voice or risk undermining trust.

5.3 Platform Tailoring and Tactical Variation

Practitioners described adapting graphics to platform affordances. Instagram posts emphasised aesthetic cohesion and high-resolution imagery; LinkedIn assets favoured professional, data-driven infographics; Twitter graphics were optimised for quick readability and mobile viewing. Story formats (Instagram/Facebook Stories) enabled ephemeral, behind-the-scenes visuals that fostered intimacy. Participants discussed A/B testing variations—different headlines, colour treatments, or CTAs—to refine performance.

5.4 Resource Constraints and Workflow Negotiations

Smaller organisations faced resource constraints that shaped graphic strategy. Several participants reported balancing quality with frequency: daily posting required templated designs that could be

updated quickly, while flagship campaigns received bespoke visual treatments. Freelancers and cross-functional teams were common; many participants described a negotiation between designers' creative instincts and managers' need for brand consistency and measurement.

5.5 Additional Observations

- Crisis communication: Visuals were used strategically to convey empathy and action steps during crises. Participants emphasised clarity and readability—plain language overlays on high-contrast backgrounds.
- Metrics and meaning: While engagement metrics guided iteration, participants warned against overreliance on superficial metrics (e.g., likes) and advocated for measuring conversion-related outcomes when possible.

6. Discussion

The findings align with and extend the theoretical framework. Visual rhetoric explains practitioners' attention to composition and salience; social semiotics illuminates how visual systems (colour, icons, motifs) construct brand narratives; media richness theory helps account for channel selection and multimodal integration.

6.1 Theoretical Synthesis

Visual rhetoric's emphasis on composition and salience is visible in practitioners' descriptions of design tactics that create "one-glance" comprehension. The rhetorical functions of metaphor and focalization are apparent: a product shot foregrounded against a minimal background rhetorically signals quality and focus. Social semiotics is a powerful lens for understanding brand systems: recurring

semiotic resources (e.g., iconography, illustrative style) were used intentionally to create intertextual coherence across time and platforms.

Media richness theory is particularly instructive in explaining why organisations pair graphics with textual and interactive elements. Richer messages—announcements that contain both cognitive and emotional components—benefit from graphics that provide affective cues (e.g., human faces, emotive colour) and textual clarification (captions, CTAs). Practitioners' platform-tailoring strategies (e.g., LinkedIn for thought leadership infographics; Instagram for lifestyle imagery) demonstrate sensitivity to differing channel richness and audience expectations.

6.2 Practical Implications

Several practical implications follow. First, organisations should develop graphic systems—templates, icon libraries, colour guidelines—that preserve brand coherence while enabling rapid content production. Second, organisations must align graphic strategies with platform affordances: format, aspect ratio, and textual length influence comprehension and engagement. Third, evaluation frameworks should combine engagement metrics with qualitative measures of brand perception and conversion outcomes. Fourth, capacity building—training non-design staff to use templates, or investing in modular design systems—can help smaller organisations achieve both frequency and quality.

6.3 Contribution to Scholarship

This study contributes by centring practitioners' perspectives and linking practice to theory. It demonstrates how semiotic systems are operationalised in everyday communicative workflows and

how rhetorical design choices map onto measurable engagement practices. By combining multimodal artefact analysis with practitioner interviews, the study offers a model for future empirical investigations.

6.4 Critical Reflections

While the integrative theoretical model accounts for many observations, not all practices fit neatly. Some participants prioritised short-term engagement gains that sometimes conflicted with long-term brand coherence—e.g., using sensationalist thumbnails to boost clicks. This highlights a tension between platform incentives and organisational values. Additionally, the rapid evolution of platform features (e.g., emerging short-form video formats) suggests that any static model must be adaptable.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

Social media graphics play a multifaceted role in modern business communication. They act as attention-capture mechanisms, clarity-enhancers, brand-symbolic resources, and mediators of emotional connection. Effectiveness depends not only on aesthetic quality but on strategic alignment with brand identity, platform affordances, and intended communicative outcomes.

The integrative theoretical framework—combining visual rhetoric, social semiotics, and media richness theory—offers a robust conceptual apparatus for analysing these phenomena. Qualitative evidence from communications practitioners confirms that design choices are purposeful, context-sensitive, and frequently negotiated within organisational constraints.

7.2 Recommendations for Practitioners

- **Develop a Visual System:** Create a scalable visual system (templates, iconography, typography, colour palettes) to ensure brand coherence across posts while enabling rapid production.
- **Platform-Specific Design:** Respect platform affordances: optimise aspect ratios, message length, and interactivity features to match audience expectations on each platform.
- **Measure Thoughtfully:** Use a combination of engagement metrics (reach, engagement rate) and conversion-focused measures (click-through, sign-ups) as well as periodic qualitative assessments (audience surveys, sentiment analysis) to evaluate graphic performance.
- **Balance Frequency and Craft:** Allocate resources so that day-to-day content can be templated without undermining flagship campaign quality.
- **Train Cross-Functional Teams:** Provide basic visual literacy training for non-design staff and encourage collaborative processes between communicators and designers.
- **Ethical and Inclusive Design:** Ensure visuals reflect organisational commitments to diversity and avoid misrepresentation—the semiotics of imagery can perpetuate exclusion if not carefully managed.

7.3 Recommendations for Researchers

Future research should: (a) conduct longitudinal studies to examine how visual strategies change over time in response to

platform evolution; (b) apply experimental methods to test causal effects of specific visual features on comprehension and behavior; and (c) examine the role of short-form video and motion graphics—formats that were rising at the time of this study—in greater depth.

7.4 Limitations

The study's qualitative design provides depth but limits generalizability. Participants' artefact selections were purposive and may reflect best-practice examples rather than average practice. Future mixed-methods research could triangulate these findings with large-scale content analysis and engagement data.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Can you describe your role and responsibilities regarding social media graphics?

2. How do you decide when to use a graphic versus plain text?
3. What processes do you follow when creating a social media graphic (briefly describe workflow)?
4. How do you tailor graphics to different platforms?
5. What metrics do you use to evaluate graphic performance?
6. Can you provide an example of a graphic you consider particularly successful and explain why?
7. Have you encountered tensions between branding and short-term engagement metrics? How did you resolve them?
8. What resources (people, tools) are available to you for graphic production?
9. How do you ensure visuals are inclusive and ethically appropriate?
10. Is there anything else you think is important about social media graphics in business communication?

Appendix B: Coding Schema

- Visual Rhetoric:
 - Salience
 - Focalization
 - Visual Metaphor
 - Composition
- Social Semiotics:
 - Iconography
 - Colour System
 - Typographic Choices
 - Intermodal Relations (image + caption)
- Strategic Practice:
 - Platform Tailoring
 - Template Use
 - Resource Allocation
 - Measurement & Metrics