

Visual Framing During Crisis: A 10-year Systematic Review

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Abstract: A 10-year systematic literature review (SLR) on the visual framing of crises to identify the priorities, theories applied, and trends in scholarship on visual framing during crises. This SLR investigates the use of all types of visuals used during all types of crisis typologies. The gaps are analyzed to provide evidence-based recommendations for advancing future research. 269 articles published in 156 peer-reviewed communication journals between January 2014 to December 2023 were reviewed. The proportion of visual framing of crises has remained the same in the last 10 years – there is significantly more research on the visual framing of non-crises. Overall, research on the visual framing of crises is largely exploratory/descriptive and could benefit from a research agenda that is more theory driven. Additionally, there is a skewed focus for research on North America compared to other regions, and for political communication and climate compared to other themes. Environmental sciences and engineering are the most widely investigated journal fields, while disaster is the most common typology studied when looking at the visual framing of crises.

Keywords — crisis communication, framing, systematic literature review, visuals, visual framing

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change. Health emergencies. Geopolitical conflict. Population displacement. Conflict. Scandals. These are just some of today's global crises confronting governments and organizations. Though they vary in blame and severity, crises present consistent experiences for people and organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, provided a good picture for how the public experiences crises. It is a mixture of panic, fear, uncertainty, and message fatigue. The salience of social media, a globalized media and technology environment, an increasingly visual environment, and new digital technologies increase the probability of governments and organizations facing risks that can lead to crises. One of the strategies for governments and organizations meeting the information needs of the public during a crisis is through effective risk and crisis communication (RCCE). However, RCCE in the context of visual framing is yet to be fully explored. In this current environment, the use of visual assets is no longer a good-to-have, they are a central strategy in communication. In the last decade, while there is an array of strategies for RCCE (textual, verbal, and visual) scholarship, it has been skewed towards models and frameworks for verbal and textual narratives and too little focus has been placed on the contribution of visual communication during crises [1].

This systematic literature review (SLR) addresses this gap by evaluating relevant literature and derive conclusions about the emerging field's depth of research connecting visual framing and RCCE. This paper endeavors to address this gap in crisis communication by: (1) highlighting the state of scholarship about visual framing during crises; (2) developing a better understanding of the current priorities, theories applied, and trends; (3) and offering insights and evidence-based recommendations to close any gaps in the future research agenda.

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FRAMING THEORY AND VISUAL FRAMING IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Visual communication is about how we use our eyes to interpret images and graphics on mass media [2]. Framing, on the other hand, is a well-established approach to researching mass communication, with seminal studies on framing tracing back to Entman [3] who highlighted text in communication and define how particular aspects are made more salient than others in order to influence audience perception and understanding of an issue. Visual framing goes beyond semiotics to interrogate frame construction, to understand logic behind what is included and excluded and why some aspects in a frame are made more salient than others [4] and therefore contributes to sensemaking, which is the process of unpacking the unknown and the complex in order to drive comprehension and action especially during crises [5]. Visual framing is a part of visual communication strategy that emphasizes some aspects of a situation at the expense of others to promote particular attributions and interpretations over others and therefore potentially guide audience interpretation of information. Visual framing should be conceptualized as *the pre-determined selection, emphasis, and strategic use of illustrative visual content in public-facing communication to support audiences in decision-making and to meet an organization's communication objectives*.

Visual framing research lacks the development and application that textual framing in academic scholarship attributed to challenges in the methodology of visual framing research [6]. Additionally, while computational methods and big data hold potential for studying visual framing in social media contexts, they often have restrictive application programming interfaces (APIs) and lack the required nuanced in-depth frame-by-frame interpretations of visuals beyond engagement and identifying whether there is a visual message or not.

Separately, communication theories applied in crises expose two conceptual gaps –they do not yet fully integrate visual framing models and instead draw heavily from theories of behavioral decision-making, marketing, consumer research, and social psychology [7]. Second, they tend to have a skewed focus towards the design of text- and data-based messages and little reference to the relationship between visuals and crises. In cases where visual framing has been researched, the focus is overwhelmingly focused on the type of visuals that were used, the type of frames, how the visual frames are portrayed, and less to do with the impact of the content. From an academic and professional practice perspective, this shows opportunities to deepen understanding of best practice for visual framing for effective public engagement during a crisis, and a good place to begin is to understand the current state of the field.

PREVIOUS SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS ON VISUAL FRAMING

Despite the previously mentioned challenges in methodology, there is a growing interest in research on visual framing conducted to broaden the understanding of the field. For example, Branter et al. [8] analyzed 29 studies by looking at factors such as the application and definition of (visual) framing theory and the operationalization of visual frames, and found that all framing scholars are contributing to the general discourse in the field, therefore debunking the perception that visual framing is a fractured paradigm. Bock's [4] literature review proposes a three-part visual framing model for media researchers that encourages emphasis of the interrogative and critical potential of visual communication instead of focusing only on literal depictions. While these two studies provide important reflections on the field, they are limited by age, scope, and purpose.

Present research typically does not directly connect visual framing and crises nor provide a cross-sectional analysis of crises; rather they focus on specific case studies, a gap the present study fills. The study sets out to answer the following four research questions:

RQ 1: What are the critical trends in visual framing research during crises?

RQ 2: How has time influenced the study of visual framing?

RQ 3: How does discipline influence the study of visual framing?

RQ 4: To what degree is visual framing research in crisis theoretically driven versus descriptive/exploratory?

METHODS

This SLR focuses on a pre-determined criteria for article inclusion and exclusion. The data were collected from journals published by Taylor and Francis between January 2014 and December 2023 with a search on their database for "visual framing". This yielded 269 articles in 156 journals after book reviews, reports, forum/conference proceedings, and editorials were excluded, indicating a broad but shallow interest in the topic. Data were first analyzed thematically then followed by open and axial processes to identify and classify emergent themes and then transferred to SPSS for descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

Results indicate an almost static state of the priorities, theories applied, and trends in the field of visual framing of crises. While there is a positive trend in scholarship from regions such as the Middle East and emerging growth in methods using experiments, opportunities remain for the research to reflect more of the ubiquity of crises and the increased focus on the

use of visuals in crisis communication in the last decade.

RQ1: CRITICAL TRENDS IN VISUAL FRAMING DURING CRISES

Results of the qualitative analysis indicate a critical trend in the increasing development of new frameworks/typologies in visual framing for crises over time. Six new visual framing frameworks/models are proposed from the 269 articles. The development of new models and frameworks indicates a clear empirical approach to contribute to the interpretation and analysis of visual frames to orient visual framing research.

To offer a richer understanding of the critical trends in visual framing, the quantitative findings reveal that the proportion of visual framing of crises has remained the same in the last 10 years. Specifically, there is significantly more research on visual framing in non-crisis contexts ($N = 181$) compared to visual framing during crises ($N = 88$, $C^2(1) = 32.15$; $p < .00$). Only 34.5% of the articles studied connected visual framing to crises. There is a higher likelihood of finding research on visual framing of crises in a non-visual journal compared to a visual-focused journal ($p = .03$). Overall, the most common crisis typology researched is disasters ($p < .00$), the most common visual type studied are photographs in newspapers ($N = 68$, $C^2(15) = 54.35$; $p < .00$), while the most common theoretical framework applied in studying visual framing of crisis is media framing ($N = 34$, $C^2(13) = 31.38$; $p < .01$).

RQ2: INFLUENCE OF TIME ON THE STUDY OF VISUAL FRAMING

Over time, the priorities, theories applied, and trends in scholarship on visual framing during crises have not evolved in tandem with both fields of study. There is no significant relationship between time and the amount of research on visual framing of crises or time and crisis types studies – these remained the same in the 10 years analyzed. The data shows hardly any research connecting visual communication to the visual portrayals of different crisis types including: organizational transgressions (illegal corporate behavior, technical breakdown accident, etc.), organizational events, reputational attacks, and technological impact (that contributes misinformation, disinformation, fake news) crisis typologies despite the salience of these crisis types in global discourse in the last decade.

Research on the visual framing of crises shows limited change over time – there is more research on the visual framing of non-crises ($N = 181$, $C^2(9) = 24.98$; $p < .00$). Time did not influence the geographical focus of research – scholarship consistently investigates North America ($N = 68$) more compared other regions. There is increasingly more research combining framing and other non-framing theories compared to other theoretical frameworks ($N = 163$, $C^2(13) = 31.38$; $p < .01$). Additionally, the most common method in visual framing of crises research is qualitative content analysis compared to quantitative, experimental, and mixed method approaches ($p < .00$).

RQ3: INFLUENCE OF DISCIPLINE ON THE STUDY OF VISUAL FRAMING

There is a relationship between the discipline and the type of research in the visual framing of crises. Discipline significantly influences these two fields of study. There is significantly more research on visual framing of crises in the field of environmental sciences ($N = 10$, $C^2(1) = 10.05$; $p < .01$) and engineering ($N = 8$, $C^2(1) = 16.95$; $p < .00$). Research focusing on climate and the environment is likely to be in the field of medicine ($p < .00$), environmental sciences ($p < .01$), and engineering ($p < .03$). Additionally, there is a relationship between discipline and the crisis type studied. Disaster typology dominates the field of arts and humanities ($N = 9$, $C^2(4) = 10.30$; $p < .01$) and environmental sciences ($N = 3$, $C^2(4) = 19.69$; $p < .00$). However, given the low number of studies on visual framing, nearly any discipline that had multiple studies on visual framing were significantly greater. Excluding multi-region and multi-country studies, geography also influences the discipline investigated in the visual framing of crises. Studies looking at visual framing of crises from an arts and humanities perspective focus on North America ($p = .04$) and engineering from Europe ($p = .01$). The most common unit of analysis studied in earth and planetary studies ($p < .00$), engineering ($p = .02$), and arts and humanities is photographs ($p = .03$). Disaster is the most common typology studied when looking at the visual framing of crises from the field of environmental science ($p = .03$) and arts and humanities ($p < .00$), and engineering ($p = .01$).

RQ4: THE DEGREE TO WHICH VISUAL FRAMING RESEARCH IN CRISIS IS THEORETICALLY DRIVEN

Theory building research is centered around providing conceptual definitions and domain limitations by meaningfully integrating and providing an explanation for the how, what, and why of a particular observation, with the objective of predicting or explaining a phenomenon. Theory-building in the visual framing of crises is important for advancing knowledge and scholarship in the field and for building understanding by explaining the relationship between various constructs. Data from this study indicates that research on the visual framing of crises is largely exploratory/descriptive and could benefit from a research agenda that is more theory driven.

Researchers mostly applied non-framing theoretical frameworks in their study of the visual framing of crises ($N = 39$, $C^2(13) = 31.38$; $p < .01$). Those that applied a combination of framing and a non-framing theory investigated crises in the field of chemical engineering ($p < .00$) and engineering ($p < .03$). Qualitative content analysis was the most applied method ($N = 47$, $C^2(5) = 25.19$; $p < .00$). A majority of the studies ($N = 262$) described aspects of visual framing of crises such as type of visual, location of study, and type of crisis but fall short of making connections to explain the descriptions. Finally, 6.3% of the articles ($N=17$) applied experimental methods for data analysis which indicates opportunity for more scientific studies to test theories connecting visual framing to crises.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this SLR was to understand the visual framing during crises. Using a quantitative content analysis approach, data shows that the priorities, theories applied, and trends connecting the two fields have remained relatively the same in the last decade. The field needs to evolve to match the current media and information environment that is crisis-prone and visually oriented, which is clearly demonstrated in these findings. Of course, the SLR has some limitations – most particularly that the sample was drawn from a single publisher, which may not be exhaustive enough to represent the full population of articles in the field of visual communication. However, it is a systematic review of the publications that are officially aligned with three of the major communication organizations – the International Communication Association, National Communication Association, and World Communication Association. However, future research considering the inclusion of an additional publishers, like Emerald, would further enrich scholarship in visual framing during crises. Second, manual coding of the articles could present potential differences in analysis and interpretation by other researchers.

Despite the limitations, the study also has some important insights regarding the present and future of the visual framing of crises. For example, only 34.5% of the articles, and generally published in non-visual focused journals, are connected visual framing to crises. Additionally, prolonged crises such as war/conflict and financial challenges received even less attention compared to event-based crises. Finally, whereas non-visual crisis communication often over emphasizes transgressions, events, and reputational attacks compared to other types of crises in visual framing there is hardly any research on them.

CONCLUSION

This study has contributed to understanding the crucial importance of expanding scholarship on visual framing for crisis typologies beyond specific events, building more understanding on the visual framing strategies by governments and organizations, increasing geographical diversity in the field, conducting cross-platform comparisons and comparative analyses of different visual types, including longitudinal and cross-country studies, and analyzing audience effects on the most effective visual framing strategies during a crisis. Addressing these gaps is important for extending theory in this relatively nascent field. Results highlight four critical unanswered questions in the literature on the visual framing of crises – (1) How should visual crisis communication strategies be designed? (2) To what extent is it possible to apply the same visual framing principles across crisis types? (3) How can the principles of visual framing be used to contribute to a unified model of visual crisis framing and community engagement? and, (4) What should be visual framing strategies of governments and organizations consider during crises? The answers to these questions will inform theory and professional practice and guide crisis visual framing strategies to mitigate uncertainty and panic, threats to stakeholder relationships, social vulnerabilities, and the visual framing of stakeholder-centric crisis responses.

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