PolarVis Guidelines

For navigating online visual communication
communication
about contentious issues in
polarised times

Foreword

These guidelines are based on previous research and work conducted in the PolarVis project.

The project studied the workings of online visual communication in and around movements for and against progressive climate action in Europe. The aim was to understand how, why and with what consequences visual content can be a mechanism of integration or polarisation in digitalised societies.

This document offers key take-aways. We list project links and academic publications on the last page for those wishing to know more.

Key take-aways:

1 Efficacy
2 Emotions
3 Anger
4 Trust
5 Visual echo chambers
6 Icons
7 Context

Efficacy

What it means

Visual content works. It spreads faster and more widely than other types of content. Visual content is used to gain attention, but also to build a shared identity and cue credibility and trust among social media audiences.

Recommendation

Be aware that no matter what visual strategy you pursue, your profile and content play an important role in your communication. Adopt visual strategies that are appropriate for the technical skills and resources in your organisation, and your expected audience.
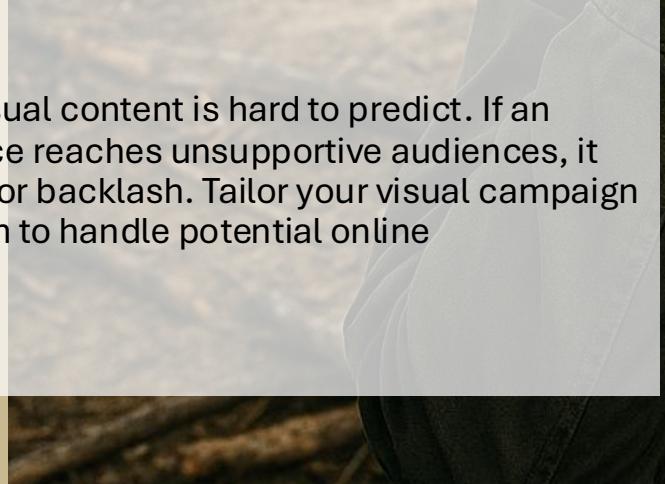
Emotions

What it means

Visual content triggers more intense emotional reactions than other types of content. These can be both positive and negative emotions. The type of emotion that is generated is largely defined by audience predisposition.

Recommendation

Be aware that emotional reaction to visual content is hard to predict. If an image tailored for a supporting audience reaches unsupportive audiences, it can be met with emotional subversion or backlash. Tailor your visual campaign to match the ability of your organisation to handle potential online controversies.

Anger

What it means

Anger travels impressively online. However, it is more effective in getting attention and shares among some audiences than others. In fact, for some of those other audiences, anger and combative communication depresses sharing.

Recommendation

Do not assume that anger is always a winning strategy for algorithmic visibility. Know your audience.
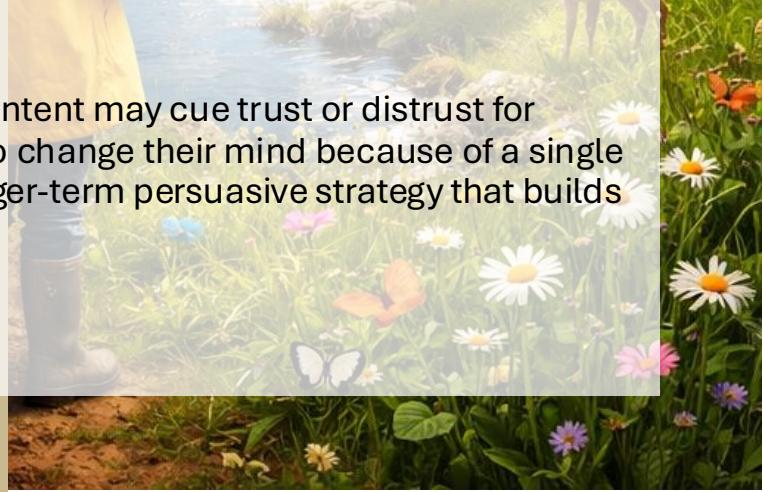
Trust

What it means

Visual content can cue emotions that build or undermine trust. But visual content is itself not uniformly credible, trustworthy and shareable for all audiences. Polarised groups have strong beliefs that will rarely be challenged by a single communicative effort.

Recommendation

Be aware that the look of your visual content may cue trust or distrust for different groups. Do not expect users to change their mind because of a single piece of visual evidence. Plan for a longer-term persuasive strategy that builds on common ground.

Visual echo chambers

What it means

Visual content is highly shared, but sharing is mainly confined within ideologically homogeneous groups. Most communication, visual or not, ends up *preaching to the choir*.

Recommendation

Your communication will primarily stay within a community of like-minded individuals. Be aware that although sharing within-bubble content may contribute to strengthening group identity, when visuals move outside the bubble, there may be oppositional reactions and significant re-framing.
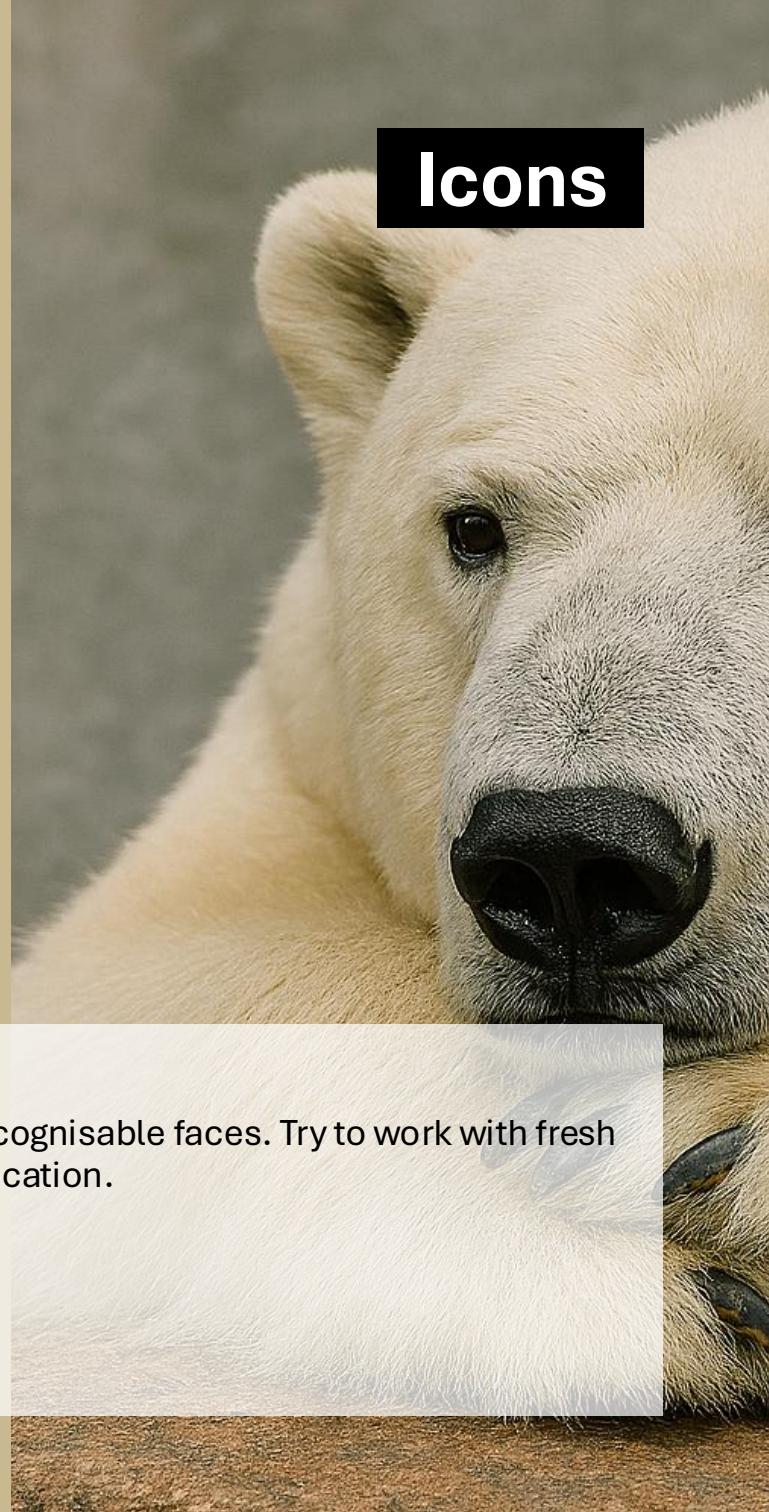
Icons

What it means

Recognisable figures and tropes can be useful as visual shorthand to offer inspiration and common ground. However, they easily become clichés or targets in oppositional communication. When they do, much of their propulsive power in online communication is lost.

Recommendation

Do not overuse impactful images or recognisable faces. Try to work with fresh and locally connected visual communication.

Context

What it means

Audiences in different cultural and political contexts assess contentious visual content differently. The perceived line between what is productively polemical or dangerously polarising varies significantly. This includes images of protest.

Recommendation

Be aware that cultural and political context can shift the impact of your visual messages. The strategies and support networks that are a resource in one context can turn out to be a liability elsewhere.

More about the PolarVis project:

Website: https://polarvis.github.io/

Podcast: PolarVis Podcast

Funded by

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