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Erstveröffentlichung in / First published in:

Communications. 2016, 41(1), S. 47– 69 [Zugriff am: 30.01.2020]. De Gruyter. ISSN 1613-4087.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2015-0025>

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Different ways of seeing political depictions: A qualitative–quantitative analysis using Q methodology

DOI 10.1515/commun-2015-0025

Abstract: Visual depictions of politicians play an essential role in the impression formation of the audience because they convey visual cues and attributes related to, for example, likeability or competence. This study examines the subjective audience evaluations based on the visual portrayals of a politician by using Q methodology, a qualitative–quantitative approach of audience research. Q-sorts of 33 different pictures showing a high-ranking European politician, along with personal interviews, were used to probe the audience's perception of a favorable or unfavorable picture. Q factor analysis yielded four groups of participants. The audience groups differ regarding their expectation toward favorably depicted political behavior and the involved balance of professional political leadership competences, social competences, and personality. In addition, technical and formal representation strategies were identified as important visual cues, but not for all audience groups.

Keywords: visual communication, Q methodology, Q-sort, political representations, audience perceptions

1 Introduction

Visual media images play an essential role in constructing political images (e.g., Haumer and Donsbach, 2009; Schill, 2012). They convey visual cues and attributes supporting or contradicting a politician's truthfulness, credibility, trustfulness, or suitability. Moreover, visuals are particularly suitable for evoking positive or negative feelings about the politicians represented (e.g., Grabe and Bucy, 2009). At the same time, images are considered to be highly polysemic and particularly open to subjective meanings.

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Compared to textual and verbal political communication, empirical studies focusing on the role of visuals are scarce (e.g., Grabe and Bucy, 2009; Nagel, Maurer, and Reinemann, 2012). And even though in recent years the number of analyses that incorporate the visual mode has grown, political communication scholars still tend to disregard the advances of visual theory and of visual studies (Barnhurst and Quinn, 2012; Liebhart, 2014). Moreover, research on visual political communication mostly concentrates on visual campaigning strategies and the depiction of candidates in the context of election campaigns, thereby neglecting the visual portrayal of politicians in periods of the more routine politics. With reference to his concise literature review on visual political communication, Schill (2012) argues that the question of how political visuals are received by audiences is one important area on which future research in visual political communication must focus: “Audiences process messages differently, and further research is needed addressing how various audiences respond to diverse visual messages” (p. 134).

Responding to this prompt, we examine subjective audience evaluations of visual media portrayals showing José Manuel Barroso, at the time of analysis president of the European Commission. We consider visual political representations related to the European Union (EU) a particularly intriguing research field. On the one hand, the EU is a highly important economic and political partnership involving 28 countries, and a political sphere relevant to a population of over 506 million inhabitants. On the other hand, the EU is generally said to have a communication deficit, which is related to deficits regarding the European public sphere and European citizenship (e.g., Brantner, Dietrich, and Saurwein, 2005; van Noije, 2010).

The overall aim of the paper is thus twofold: First, we want to address a research gap in visual communication by examining visual representations outside election campaigns and by focusing on the visual representation of EU politics that have largely been neglected so far (for exceptions see, e.g., Bernhardt, Hadji-Abdou, Liebhart, and Pribersky, 2009; Cmeciu, Cmeciu, and Pătrut, 2014; Liebhart, 2014).

Second, we present a methodological setting that we consider promising and particularly suitable for the analysis of audience perception related to visuals. In the study we employ a mixed-methods approach, including the qualitative-quantitative Q methodology and open-ended interviews. The methodological design aims to identify different audience roles or audience perspectives. Moreover, it seeks to link the long tradition of qualitative visual research in examining different readings and different ways of seeing visual media texts (e.g., Berger, 1973; Rose, 2007) to quantitative visual approaches.

In the first part of the paper previous empirical research on representations and visual attributes in political communication mostly stemming from election campaign coverage is discussed, putting particular emphasis on the role and valence of single visual cues as identified by experimental research. Based on these findings, the paper takes an audience perspective on how the valence of these visual cues and composition elements in the depiction of politicians is interpreted by participants. In this regard we aim at the identification of audience groups/types with similar evaluations of the favorability of visual portrayals of Barroso. It is of particular interest on which visual attributes and traits those groups base their evaluation. Four groups with different expectations toward favorable depictions of a politician in the EU context and the balance of professional political leadership competences, social competences, and personality involved are identified. Concluding, we discuss these different audience perceptions in more detail and link our findings to previous research regarding the visual portrayal of politicians.

1.1 Visual representation and visual attributes in political communication

Moriarty and Garramone (1986, p. 728) noted that the visual images we associate with political candidates “are determined both by how the candidates present themselves and by how they are re-presented by the media”. Although politicians use impression management techniques (e.g., De Landtsheer, De Vries, and Vertessen, 2008; Jones and Pittman, 1982) to control their own self-representation (e.g., choice of clothes, posture, and gestures), the media representation is of course influenced by routines of media production (e.g., Thompson, 2005) as well as by the medium and its affordances (e.g., Moriarty and Popovich, 1991; Lundell, 2010).

The literature generally distinguishes three clusters of visual attributes contributing to the mediated representation of politicians: (1) visual imagery relating to human interaction, (2) visual imagery relating to photographic setting and appearance, and (3) visual imagery relating to photographic production values (e.g., Verser and Wicks, 2006).

Visual attributes relating to human interaction are closely intertwined with the depicted nonverbal behavior of a politician. Here, activity, posture, gesture, facial expression, and dress as well as interaction with other people are of particular interest. Previous research on person perception identifies three dimensions of nonverbal behavior: the “positiveness dimension”, the “responsiveness dimension”, and the “potency or status dimension” (Haumer and

Donsbach, 2009; Mehrabian and Ferris, 1967). In other words, politicians can use their gestures, body movement, and voice to be perceived as “friendly”, “interested”, or “superior” (Haumer and Donsbach, 2009). For example, a politician that touches a person or smiles demonstrates his friendliness (“positiveness dimension”), whereas by nodding or keeping eye contact with a conversational partner, he or she shows interest on the “responsiveness dimension” (Burgoon, Dunbar, and Segrin, 2002). In political communication, the “potency or status dimension” is of particular importance. Potency and power is demonstrated by, for example, expanding oneself, taking up a lot of space, being more facially expressive, making larger gestures and body movements, and showing active behavior (Burgoon, Birk, and Pfau, 1990; Haumer and Donsbach, 2009; Verser and Wicks, 2006).

Moreover, vast empirical evidence indicates that physical attractiveness leads to more positive evaluations (e.g., Dion and Berscheid, 1972; Verser and Wicks, 2006). At the same time, “it is impossible to separate the intellectual aspects of argumentation from the nonverbal influences accompanying it” (Butler, 1984, p. 12). These findings highlight the importance of the visual dimensions of person perception for politics and political communication and underscore that visual aspects are not perceived in separation from the verbal political message (Holsanova, 2012; Jakob, Roessing, and Petersen, 2011; Kress, 2010; Nagel, Maurer, and Reinemann, 2012).

The cluster of visual attributes relating to photographic setting and appearance is concerned with the visible context within the picture frame, such as the presence or absence of family members, the depicted time (historical vs. current photographs), the formality or informality of the depicted situation, and the presence or absence of patriotic elements, such as flags or symbols (Moriarty and Garramone, 1986; Moriarty and Popovich, 1991; Verser and Wicks, 2006).

Visual attributes related to photographic production values are a result of the photographer’s and the editor’s choice of representational techniques (such as camera angle, photo size, camera focus, light direction, and light angle). Kepplinger (1982, 2010) referred to these representational strategies as a kind of “visual commentary” that can add a certain tone to a depiction. Often, below-eye-level camera shots are coded as more favorable, whereas above-eye-level shots are considered less favorable (Moriarty and Garramone, 1986; Moriarty and Popovich, 1991; Verser and Wicks, 2006). However, visual commentary is a highly complex matter, and the perceived valence is also related to the actual degree of the camera angle (Kepplinger, 2010; Mandell and Shaw, 1973). Furthermore, the shot distance affects the perceived valence of a visual portrayal (Mullen, 1998). According to Hall’s (1966) social distance theory, the perceived social distance in visual depictions creates a feeling of either intimacy

or distance (Grittmann and Lobinger, 2011; Mullen, 1998). Close-up shots signal a higher intimacy, whereas long shots highlight the context and thus provide a more distanced view.

In previous research, experimental designs were often used to measure the effects of single visual attributes. However, the fact that a single visual attribute never occurs in isolation but interacts with many other visual attributes within a picture makes the analysis of visual person depictions exceptionally challenging, in particular when inferences regarding the meanings audiences make of them are to be made. An overall consensus exists that media texts are polysemic or polyvalent and foster quite different interpretations and readings. Given their associative logic, media images are considered particularly open media messages that additionally challenge analysis. Moreover, images are perceived in a nonlinear, holistic way. In this regard, scholars continuously argue that the visual experience obtained from images might not be fully explicable using the verbal mode and that images should thus be analyzed differently from verbal textual messages (e.g., Baetens and Surdiacourt, 2012; Mitchell, 2005). This can be considered a true methodological challenge for visual audience research.

With this study, we thus tried to limit the task of verbalization and focus on the associative and intuitive aspects of meaning-making related to visual messages. Therefore, we used a card-sorting procedure that asked the respondents to put images in relation to each other (see also Lobinger and Brantner, 2015b). In a second step, we conducted open interviews to enrich the sorting data and to relate the findings gained by the two methods.

1.2 Research focus

This study examines how the valence of visual cues and the composition elements in the depiction of politicians are interpreted by an audience. We are particularly interested in both the commonalities and the differences between the subjective viewpoints of the audience groups. The following two research questions (RQs) are addressed:

- [RQ1] Which types of audience perspectives can be identified, and how do they differ regarding the evaluation of depictions of politicians as favorable or unfavorable?
- [RQ2] On which attributes do the recipients in the different groups base their interpretation?

2 Method

We used Q-sort, a qualitative research method that aims at revealing subjective and hidden-meaning structures in audience interpretations. Q-sort is a particular kind of interview technique using card-sorting procedures. Participants are asked to sort visual or verbal statements in relation to each other (Rugg and McGeorge, 1997). The sorting results are then examined using statistical Q factor analysis. Since the introduction of Q methodology by William Stephenson (1953), the Q-sort technique has been widely used, for example, in psychology or personality theory (Rugg and McGeorge, 1997) and recently also in audience research (Davis and Michelle, 2011). Q-sort is a particularly useful tool for phenomena that are difficult to verbalize, such as the associative impressions gained from images (e.g., Bleuel, Scharkow, Suckfüll, and Marks, 2010; Davis and Michelle, 2011).

Q Methodology provides insight into audience subjectivities in a much richer way than that provided by conventional surveys, while at the same time providing more structure and better replicability than purely qualitative approaches such as focus groups or ethnographic observation. (Davis and Michelle, 2011, p. 559)

In this regard Dennis and Goldberg (1996) argued that Q methodology “combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research traditions by enabling the dimensions of subjective phenomena to emerge from the data in a manner that reflects a perspective intrinsic to the individuals” (p. 104). To sum up, Q methodology combines a particular data collection method (Q-sort) and an analytical technique (Q factor analysis). It aims to study subjectivity in human behavior, which distinguishes Q factor analysis from R factor analysis, the latter being interested in objectivity (Brown and Good, 2010). The selection of the concourse, that is, the “universe of subjective communicability surrounding any topic” (Brown and Good, 2010), is at the heart of Q methodology. The first important step of any Q study is thus the reduction of the usually voluminous concourse to a manageable number of statements or pictures.

The present study uses Q-sort in an “intensive analysis” setting. Post-sorting open interviews are used to increase the richness and quality of the data (Gallagher and Porock, 2010; Watts and Stenner, 2012) and to explore differences and similarities between ‘visual’ and ‘verbal’ evaluations. We used the finished sorting results as a stimulus for visual elicitation (Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2012; Lobinger and Brantner, 2015a). Notably, the visual presence of the sorting pattern helped the participants to discuss their sorting decisions and the (un)favorability of the single visuals. We argue that this combination of approaches

enriches Q methodology. Although the intuitive visual sorting remains the primary data source, the verbal interviews provide additional valuable insights into the sorting structures and results.

2.1 Materials

For the Q-sort study, a so-called structured Q-set design (Stephen, 1985) was chosen. The structured Q-sets consisted of items that reflect theoretic propositions, in this case, the theoretic propositions found in the literature (e.g., Moriarty and Garramone, 1986; Moriarty and Popovich, 1991; Verser and Wicks, 2006). To allow for a selection of items that correspond to these theoretic assumptions, three researchers independently coded the same selection of photographs depicting José Manuel Barroso, at the time of analysis president of the European Commission, according to 26 attributes used by Verser and Wicks (2006).¹ It was evaluated whether each visual attribute was favorable, unfavorable, or neutral. Holsti's intercoder reliabilities were in the acceptable range for all attributes (from 0.84 [*portrayal*] to 1 [*family*]). For each picture, a "favorability" index was calculated to provide a range of favorable, unfavorable, and neutral photographs to be used in the subsequent Q-sort study.

The study was conducted in Germany and Austria, both member states of the EU. The EU thus represents a political entity with equal relevance for participants from both countries. We selected photos of Barroso, its most famous representative, for the Q-sort study. By using photos of one politician only, the influence of individual attractiveness on the evaluation (Dion and Berscheid, 1972; Verser and Wicks, 2006) was excluded.

The Q-set, the set of pictures presented to the participants, was then used in a forced-choice Q-sort design, which asked respondents to assign a specific number of items to a fixed number of categories (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Thirty-three different images were sorted into nine categories on the continuum from -4 (*not favorable at all*) to +4 (*very favorable*). In addition, the distribution of the items among the categories was forced, demanding for a quasi-normal distribution. The number of items allowed for each of the nine categories was 1-2-4-6-7-6-4-2-1. Hence, in each of the Q-sorts, only one picture could be

¹ Twenty-six attributes: activity, hands, interaction, leadership, posture, arms, distance, domination, expression, seriousness, dress, speech, attention, eye contact, issue versus image (all relating to human interaction); time, family, props, setting (all relating to photographic setting); camera angle, color, portrayal, camera focus, light direction, background, and light angle (all relating to production values).

Figure 1: Examples of finished Q-sorts.

ranked as ‘very unfavorable’ and one picture as ‘very favorable’, whereas, for example, seven items were placed in the neutral middle category. This sorting procedure results in a Q-sort with nine columns and seven rows. While the columns from left (*very unfavorable*) to right (*very favorable*) represent the different categories of interest, the rows are irrelevant.

Block (1961, p. 45) suggested a 1:2:1 proportion of positive, neutral, and negative items for forced Q-sets with a quasi-normal distribution. Accordingly, eight photographs that had yielded negative valence indices in the pretest, eight photographs with positive valence indices, and 17 neutral photos were included (Figure 1 shows exemplary finished Q-sorts).

2.2 Procedure

The 33 picture cards were presented to each participant in random order. Prior to the sorting process, we asked the participants (a) if they had ever seen the depicted person before, (b) if they knew who the person was, and (c) if they knew which political position he held. Participants who were not able to identify the depicted person were informed that he was José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission. The information that Barroso is a high-ranking European politician was important for the subsequent sorting process because it is assumed that the evaluation of visual representations of a person is influenced by his or her role.

After these initial questions, the category continuum and the ranking procedure were explained. The participants were given the instruction to arrange the cards intuitively, and they were assured that their subjective views were of interest and that there was no correct or incorrect answer. We conducted open

post-sorting interviews in the tradition of visual elicitation with nine participants to capture their reasoning for ranking the various pictures the way they did. Furthermore, all participants completed a questionnaire on basic demographic information, including age and gender, as well as on their interest in politics in general and their attitude toward the EU, and the EU's performance. For all items, a 9-point scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 9 (*totally agree*) was used. These details about the respondents are important, as they can be used as additional resources for factor interpretation.

2.3 Participants

A total of 40 respondents (17 men and 23 women), 20 in Bremen, Germany, and 20 in Vienna, Austria, aged between 22 and 57 years ($M = 35.5$, $SD = 8.8$) participated in the study. Representativeness is neither the precondition nor the aim of qualitative Q-sort studies; instead, we chose participants with different backgrounds following the requirements of theoretical sampling to include a maximum of varying attitudes and positions. The sample consists of technicians, secretaries, engineers, business administrators, journalists, communication scientists, and students. Nevertheless, persons with a high education level are overrepresented.

3 Results

We used PQMethod (Schmolck and Atkinson, 2012) to conduct a Q methodological factor analysis in the tradition of exploratory factor analysis. The Q factor analysis was performed using varimax rotation with automatic flagging of the defining sorts. The best solution of the statistical analysis yielded four different factors, or shared perspectives, based on the patterns of image evaluation in the Q-sorts.

The four identified types of participants (RQ1) differ regarding their expectations and evaluations as regards the favorability of visual depictions of politicians. Overall, 54 % of the total study variance is explained by the four factors: Factor 1 explains 20 % of the total variance; Factor 2, 16 %; Factor 3, 7 %; and Factor 4, 11 % (see Table 1). For an in-depth interpretation of the four factors, we decided to use the crib sheet system suggested by Watts and Stenner (2012). Corresponding to the qualitative tradition of Q methodology, it sustains holism during analysis and interpretation by considering all items in a factor array instead of just looking at the most typical item evaluations in each factor.

Table 1: Factor arrays for the four factors.

No.	Item Description	Factor arrays			
		F1	F2	F3	F4
1	B.'s contours merging with the black background, friendly facial impression	3	1	4	-2
2	B. behind a microphone, face partly hidden by his hand, wearing a dark suit, dark background	-3	-2	0	-3
3	B. shown from the side, slightly out of focus, together with another politician shown in focus in the background	-1	-1	-1	0
4	B. wearing headphones (for translation) with his eyes closed, smiling brightly about something, camera angle slightly from below, only head and shoulders visible	-2	3	3	-3
5	B. sitting at a round dinner table, among a larger group of other politicians, not at the center of attention, his eyes closed, smiling	-1	0	-3	-2
6	B. sitting behind computer screen, listening attentively, in focus, other people in the background out of focus	2	0	-1	1
7	B. together with another politician, looking at the creation shown by a carpenter, B. in the background	0	0	-4	0
8	B. sitting at a desk behind a microphone, photographed in a moment of uncontrolled facial expression, looking exhausted/annoyed	-4	-2	0	-4
9	B. depicted in a close-up shot showing his face only in front of a blue background, touching his temples, presumably concentrated	-1	-3	3	4
10	B. together with a group of other people, talking to each other	-1	-1	-2	1
11	B. walking down a corridor together with another politician, both shown from behind	-2	-1	-3	-2
12	B. together with two other high-ranking politicians, photographed in front of the UNO logo	1	1	-1	0
13	B. together with other people looking at art objects shown to him by a female person	0	0	-2	-1
14	B. together with two other high-ranking politicians, all three shaking each other's hands	3	2	-1	1
15	B. sitting behind a microphone, talking and gesturing with both hands at chest height, presumably defensive/clarifying, blue background	1	-2	1	1
16	B. and another person sitting in armchairs, small table between them, shelves in the background	2	2	0	0
17	B. shown from above, standing behind a microphone, speaking with clenched fists, looking somewhat aggressive/concentrated	1	-1	2	2
18	Close-up of B.'s head and face, gesturing with one hand at height of head (slightly out of focus due to movement)	0	-1	2	1
19	B. bending smilingly toward a high-ranking female politician to give her a kiss, both partly covered by a bouquet of flowers, shown at close distance	-1	3	1	0
20	B. shaking the hand of a (much taller) politician, in the background flags and the lettering of the European Commission	0	1	-2	0
21	B. with his wife at a public reception, friendly facial impression, oriented toward interaction	1	1	0	2
22	B. embracing another high-ranking politician, both smiling, shown at close distance	1	2	0	-1
23	B. wearing a funny hat in the colors of the European Union (blue and yellow) with two little hands on it. B. is touching these hands and laughing.	-2	4	1	-2
24	B. putting both hands on his mouth with eyes closed, gesture of sending a kiss, dark background	-2	2	1	2
25	B. standing behind a lectern, talking, camera angle from below, dark background	2	-3	0	3
26	B. talking with expansive gestures, hands at height of head, people sitting in the background (parliament setting)	0	-2	1	-1
27	B. behind a lectern, smiling, shown from greater distance, left half of the picture shows flags	0	1	-1	2
28	B. and another politician, both standing behind lecterns. B. talking, hands at chest height, flags and lettering of the European Commission in the background	1	0	-2	-1
29	B. behind a lectern with microphones talking to a (presumably large) audience, below-eye-level camera angle, friendly facial impression, oriented toward interaction	4	1	2	0
30	B. shown with another politician, both standing in front of flags and lettering of the European Commission, B. gesturing, both hands stretched out to his sides, both smiling	0	0	-1	-1
31	B. standing behind a lectern, logos on lectern and in the background, expansive gestures, both hands at height of head	-1	-1	2	1
32	B. shown from the side, standing behind a lectern, talking, with a concentrated facial expression, gesture signaling precision	2	0	0	3
33	B. shown at close distance with doubtful or unsatisfied facial expression. Logo of the EU in the background out of focus	-3	-4	1	-1

Note: The table describes the pictures used and shows the factor arrays for the four factors, indicating the rank of the items in the factor (9-point scale ranging from -4 (*not favorable at all*) to +4 (*very favorable*)).

Figures 2 to 5 additionally illustrate the defining pictures for each factor. The open interviews are used to describe and interpret the factor results in more detail. Each factor is further compared with other factors discussing the differences in the evaluation of depictions of politicians (RQ1). Moreover, the attributes on which the respondents base their interpretation (RQ2) are discussed.

3.1 Factor 1, expectation: The professional, friendly, and responsive politician in his working environment

Of the 40 respondents, 15 are associated with this factor. Seven are men and eight are women, between 23 and 50 years ($M = 36.3$). Factor 1 represents the largest group in the study. When asked about their familiarity with the depicted person, 13 respondents answered that they had seen the depicted person before; two had not. Eight were able to name Barroso spontaneously; five of them knew that he was the president of the EU Commission. Further, three were not sure about his exact position but mentioned the larger EU context. When we revealed the name of Barroso to those who had not recognized him in the first place, two participants answered that they had never heard of Barroso. On the 9-point scale, the respondents are interested in politics in general, with a mean of 6.4. Their attitude toward the EU is also rather positive ($M = 6.5$, $SD = 2.2$); they are satisfied with the accomplishments of the EU ($M = 6.0$, $SD = 1.6$) and consider it an important institution ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 2.1$). However, the mean evaluation of the EU's capacity to solve problems is evaluated with a lower mean of 4.9 ($SD = 2.4$).

The respondents in this factor are in favor of the classic repertoire of political activities. They consider those depictions in which Barroso is shown in typical political settings as favorable (see Figure 2). Personal elements are missing in these photos. In this group, favorable depictions show Barroso at medium distance, often together with other politicians. Thus, favorable depictions represent a politician in typical working situations, such as standing behind a lectern and speaking to a (presumably) large audience (29: +4)² or shaking hands with other high-ranking politicians (14: +3). Generally, to yield positive impressions within this group, politicians should present themselves in formal situations, that is, in working environments, such as parliament meetings or press conferences, but not in private or semiprivate environments. In the pictures ranked higher than by other factors, Barroso displays a friendly or con-

² Explanation: In Factor 1 array, Picture 29 was sorted as the most favorable picture and thus evaluated with +4 (maximum).

Figure 2: Defining pictures for Factor 1.

centrated ‘professional’ facial expression and interacts with other politicians. Thus, the participants in this group favor both the aforementioned positiveness and responsiveness dimensions (Haumer and Donsbach, 2009), appreciating the professional politician who is oriented toward interaction, not toward power (31: –1). Moreover, they consider images in which politicians partly reveal their emotional side by showing emotional expressions (8: –4; 24: –2; and 19: –1), humor (23: –2), or uncertainty (2: –3) as unfavorable and unprofessional. For example, participants in this group dislike when Barroso’s personal emotions shine through and also when he is obviously acting for the cameras. In addition, they do not want to see him interact too jovially and intimately with other politicians or to show his funny side (e.g., with a funny hat in EU colors in Picture 23). Thus, the respondents in this factor judge Barroso regarding his role as a friendly but professional interacting politician.

We conducted interviews with two respondents of this factor. Sigrid,³ a secretary, aged 50, thinks that the picture showing Barroso behind a lectern speaking to an audience (29: +4) signals that he is a man “that is able to help” and to make a difference. Referring to his arm gestures, which in her view express competency, she argues that “if he [a politician] explains something and he knows what he is talking about – and yes, at the same time he seems open and friendly to me – then you suppose that he wants it and that he is competent”. She also stresses that these pictures present Barroso as open, cooperative, and interactive, and thus likeable. Similarly, Sam, aged 40 years, summarizes: “Handshake, friendly smile, politician. Confidence-inspiring.” Contrariwise, as indicated by the sorting results, gestures and attributes related to the potency dimension are rejected. Regarding the picture that shows Barro-

³ All names are made anonymous.

so behind a lectern with expansive gestures and both hands at head height (31: -1), Sigrid reckons: “Yes, well, this gesture or this posture, it seems to me he wants to give the impression that he somehow, well, can have a divine function. Like ever the help-all.”

3.2 Factor 2, expectation: The emotional, likeable social guy

Factor 2 is dominated by women. Of the 40 respondents, nine are associated with the factor, seven being women and two men, aged between 22 and 40 years ($M = 28.7$). On average, the respondents are younger than those in Factor 1. Five declared that they had seen Barroso before. Four were able to name Barroso's position or at least referred to the EU context. However, another four respondents, and thus a considerable part of the group, had not heard of Barroso before or were not sure whether they had or had not. With a mean value of 6.67 ($SD = 1.5$), their interest in politics is comparable with and even slightly higher than that in Factor 1. The respondents' attitude toward the EU is also rather positive on average ($M = 6.22$), but varies considerably within the factor ($SD = 2.54$). The respondents are less satisfied with the accomplishments of the EU ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.67$) and consider it less important than the respondents in Factor 1 did ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 3.14$, again with very high variance), although the mean evaluation regarding the EU's capacity to solve problems is evaluated higher than that in Factor 1 ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 2.12$). The fact that only half of the respondents know Barroso suggests that their knowledge regarding the EU might be lower than that in Factor 1.

Emotional depictions were considered unfavorable in Factor 1, whereas emotions and ‘human touch’ increase the favorability of the depiction in Factor 2 (see Figure 3). This group has a positive view of politicians that display their emotions and interact socially and even amicably with other politicians. Hence, pictures in which Barroso embraces other politicians (19: +3; 22: +2), makes fun of himself (23: +4), displays his emotions, or sends kisses (24: +2) are rated better by this factor. Depictions that were considered quite unfavorable in Factor 1 are an essential part of the favorable image repertoire in Factor 2. Moreover, images showing Barroso among a group of other politicians – mostly photographed from greater distance – are evaluated as more favorable by respondents in Factor 2 than by respondents in other groups. Similarly to Factor 1, expansive gestures as well as depictions suggesting authority and power are rated as rather unfavorable. In these pictures, Barroso is giving speeches and is the center of attention, mostly depicted from closer distance, showing expansive gestures, with no situational background visible (15: -2; 17: -1; and 31:

Figure 3: Defining pictures for Factor 2.

–1). Overall, this shows that in the subjective views of the respondents in Factor 2, favorability in visual political communication is strongly associated with emotions, human touch, and social interaction, whereas depictions highlighting the power and statesmanship of politicians are considered unfavorable.

The importance of emotions is highlighted by Miriam, aged 34. For her, favorability is associated with smiling politicians depicted in a positive atmosphere. She thereby refers to the depiction of Barroso wearing headphones smiling brightly about something (4: +3). As already mentioned, respondents in Factor 2 also consider funny or ironic and even ‘self-mockery’ imagery very favorably. The picture in which Barroso is wearing a funny hat (23: +4) was ranked best. According to Miriam, a politician that poses with such a hat has to have humor. She adds: “I think, people always consider it positive if a politician is willing to act a bit like a buffoon.” This sentence can be read as a perfect summary of the importance of human touch for Factor 2 evaluations. By contrast, this group dislikes depictions of power. An image in which a politician clenches his fists might be emotional, but it rather represents a “martial attitude”, which “is never of advantage” (Miriam).

3.3 Factor 3, expectation: The individualistic, authentic lone warrior

Three respondents, two men and one woman, aged 35, 42, and 49 years, are associated with Factor 3. All three have a university degree. This factor is defined by the smallest and oldest group in the study. All three had seen Barroso before and were able to name his position, or at least the context of the EU.

Figure 4: Defining pictures for Factor 3.

With a mean of 8.67, their interest in politics is higher than that in the other factors ($SD = 0.58$). They have a positive attitude toward the EU ($M = 7.33$, $SD = 1.53$) and consider it very important ($M = 8.33$, $SD = 0.58$). However, they are less satisfied with the accomplishments of the EU ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 0.58$) and estimate the EU's capacity to solve problems to be quite low ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.58$).

Pictures that show Barroso alone are rated as more favorable than by other factors (see Figure 4). If other people are present, they are passive listeners in the background. Interestingly, this group takes another view of the favorability of depictions of politicians. The respondents evaluate photos in which Barroso displays facial expressions indicating exhaustion or uncertainty (33: +1; 8: 0; and 32: 0) as noticeably more favorable than the respondents in other factors did. The results show that for this group, favorability is related to visual depictions that focus on the single politician and his characteristic appearance, which does not have to correspond to professional political impression management techniques. The individuality of the politician seems important for the respondents in this factor. This is underlined by the most favorable depiction (1: +4), which shows Barroso in a dark suit, his clothes and hair virtually melting with the black background. Only his smiling face and his shirt are silhouetted against the background. Any context is removed from this portrait; it solely focuses on Barroso and his facial appearance. Favorability for this factor means that the unique character of a politician and his authentic feelings are expressed, even if they are not positive and active. Conversely, the group of three evaluated the standard repertoire of daily political depictions that show Barroso interacting with other politicians, and that were evaluated as favorable in Factor 1, quite negatively. Here, the focus is not put on the individual politician

but on the group and on daily political routines. Hence, the analysis of the images that are evaluated as being more unfavorable than by other factors underscores the importance of the individual and authentic personality and character traits in depictions of politicians for this group. Personality is more important than interaction and action.

It seems that these features are especially conveyed with portraits or close-ups. For example, Phil (42) considers the photo that shows Barroso wearing headphones with a bright smile (4: +3) to be very positive because it “shows that this person does with very much passion for what he is called to do”. In line with the focus on Barroso’s individuality, the respondent uses the first person when discussing the picture in which Barroso is shown from a closer distance when giving a speech: “I think this is very positive with regard to his position. It demonstrates: I want to make a difference, I create.” Although, according to Phil, Barroso looks somewhat “clueless” on Picture 33, the respondents in Factor 3 rated this depiction more favorable than the respondents in the other factors did (+1). This corresponds to the finding that in Factor 3 photos depicting Barroso alone are rated better than by other factors, independent of his facial expression and gestures. This is the only group that seems to put more emphasis on the photographic production values than on the imagery related to human interaction and the depicted nonverbal behavior.

Photos in which Barroso is not the main focus are considered “arbitrary” pictures (11: -3). Phil argues in this context that “the depicted person could be anyone, because you hardly see him”. The respondents in this group consider it rather unfavorable if Barroso is “shown as one of many” (Phil).

3.4 Factor 4, expectation: The powerful statesman

Six respondents define Factor 4. Two of the respondents are men and four are women. The mean age of this group is 36.7, with a minimum of 23 years and a maximum of 45 years. Two were able to give Barroso’s name spontaneously; the other two knew that he was a European politician. When we mentioned his name, all respondents agreed that they had seen him or heard of him before. In general, the average interest of this group in politics is 6.83 ($SD = 2.1$). Their attitude toward the EU was also rather positive ($M = 6.5$, $SD = 1.9$), and the respondents consider it a rather important institution ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 2.1$). Similar to Factor 3, this group is less satisfied with the accomplishments of the EU than Factors 1 and 2 ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.33$). Still, they estimate the EU’s capacity to solve problems to be relatively high ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.67$).

The depictions rated most favorable by the respondents in Factor 4 all depict Barroso as a concentrated, powerful politician (see Figure 5). In the pic-

Figure 5: Defining pictures for Factor 4.

ture selected as the most favorable depiction (9: +4), he is shown in a close-up shot. Only his head and a small part of his shoulders are visible. He touches his temples with both hands, which might signal concentration. Generally, those visual representations that were rated as more favorable than by the other groups focus on Barroso and show him while talking. In other pictures, he is standing behind a lectern with a microphone, presumably using his gestures to underscore his arguments. The pictures depict him, for example, with a gesture that signals precision or with clenched fists (25: +3; 32: +3; and 17: +2). In terms of social distance, he is shown in close-up shots or medium shots. A commonality of all these pictures is that they signal power. Other pictures that were ranked more favorable than by other factors show him interacting with other politicians or together with his wife at a public reception. For this group, power is a very important aspect. However, a politician should also demonstrate his social abilities. Similar to Factor 1, depictions in which Barroso shows humor, uncertainty, or exhaustion are considered unfavorable. It seems that those expressions are not adequate for a powerful statesman.

In the interviews with two respondents of this group, the important aspect of power and the involved gestures that had been highlighted by the sorting results were also underscored in the verbal mode. Julia (35 years old) thinks that powerful “visionary gestures” are advantageous and correspond to a politician’s role. Hence, in her view, expansive gestures are favorable elements of visual political imagery: “You get the feeling that he knows what he is talking about.” Similarly, Ben (29) discusses the essential role of gestures, referring to

the image showing Barroso with clenched fists (17: +2). “It is a fierce depiction, a gesture typical for politicians.” He adds that gestures of this kind might be ambiguous, but the clenched fists seemed powerful to him. Both respondents often referred to power, statesmanship, strength of purpose, and vision when discussing the pictures. Too friendly depictions or pictures in which he displays uncontrolled facial expression (uncertainty as well as humor) are considered less favorable. Julia argues that the image showing Barroso smiling brightly could indicate that he is relaxed and close to the people, but with regard to his role as a politician, this is not a favorable depiction.

4 Conclusions

Politicians use impression management strategies to control their visual media portrayals. However, they cannot fully influence how they are actually perceived by the audience. On the one hand, their visual representation depends on representational techniques by the media, that is, on how images are selected and composed. On the other hand, different subjective ways of seeing and evaluating media portrayals influence what is considered likeable and competent.

In this study, we wanted to examine whether different factors that represent different perspectives regarding the favorability of portrayals of politicians can be identified. Our Q analysis yielded four groups that differently see and evaluate image attributes:

The respondents in Factor 1 consider pictures showing a professional, friendly, and responsive politician depicted in classic daily semiformal situations as favorable. The potency dimension (Haumer and Donsbach, 2009), however, is considered unfavorable. The same applies to pictures in which emotions and feelings shine through, which reduces the professionalism of the politician depicted. For this group, the gestures and the facial impressions used to signal friendliness and responsiveness are particularly important. However, the photographic setting is also of considerable relevance. Formal working settings (with institutional emblems and flags in the background) show that the depicted politician is interacting with others in his role and not as a friend, which would be seen as unfavorable.

Factor 2, by contrast, particularly wants to see a politician interacting with others just like friends do. The participants consider images highlighting the personal, human side of the politician as favorable, whereas they regard images that emphasize power and statesmanship as unfavorable. Correspondingly, a

politician can show his funny and even his ludicrous side. Thus, the “positiveness dimension” and the “responsiveness dimension” (Burgoon, Dunbar, and Segrin, 2002) are very important for respondents in Factor 2. However, the “potency and status dimension”, that is, pictures that signal dominance, are again (just like in Factor 1) considered unfavorable.

For Factor 3, favorability referred to the way Barroso was depicted. Thus, in addition to the high relevance of the depicted behavior, the attributes related to photographic setting and appearance (Moriarty and Garramone, 1986; Moriarty and Popovich, 1991; Verser and Wicks, 2006) are important for this group. Portrait-like pictures that focus on Barroso alone and underscore his unique character and individuality are considered favorable. Interestingly, neither the “positiveness” nor the “responsiveness dimension” comes into play in the subjective views of this group of people. Pictures in which Barroso displays exhaustion or uncertainty are ranked better than by the other groups. Furthermore, photos that show Barroso among other politicians are considered to be rather unfavorable. Thus, unique personality is more important than positiveness or interaction. For this factor, power was not a particularly favorable attribute of the depictions of a politician.

Factor 4 is the only factor in which respondents consider pictures that depict Barroso as concentrating and powerful as favorable. For this group, expansive gestures, which seem aggressive to the respondents in other factors, are favorable visual attributes of a powerful statesman (see Grabe and Bucy, 2007).

Due to the fact that in the present study visual attributes are not studied in isolation, and due to the thematic focus on European visual political communication in non-election campaign contexts, the results are only partly comparable with previous findings. Moreover, Europeans are less engaged with EU politicians than with nationally elected politicians (Tenscher, Mykkänen, and Moring, 2012). We thus encourage future research to examine whether these findings are rather related to the politician Barroso and his personality and political style, or whether this is an implication of the expectations towards the EU's political culture.

Notwithstanding, the results of the present study question the high degree of importance that is ascribed to visual ‘power’ attributes in political communication (see Burgoon et al., 1990; Haumer and Donsbach, 2009; Verser and Wicks, 2006). In fact, for three of the four factors, the display of power was not understood as favorable political behaviour.

Grabe and Bucy (2009) identified three different visual frames that operate on the level of candidate representation – the ideal candidate (showing statesmanship and compassion), the populist campaigner (highlighting mass appeal

and ordinariness) and the sure loser (showing, e.g., inappropriate facial expressions like frowning). Similarly, we found different audience types with respect to the favorability of depictions of politicians. From our study we can conclude that different representational frames, such as those identified by Grabe and Bucy (2009), are also interpreted and evaluated differently by the audience. While visual emphasis of statesmanship and power seems important for some recipients others even consider it favorable when a politician shows inappropriate facial expressions. Indeed, while very active behavior with large gestures is considered very positive in the reference studies that examine U.S. politics (e.g., Burgoon et al., 1990; Verser and Wicks, 2006), our results suggest that the behavior of representatives of the EU might be more ‘passive’, according to the definitions in the previous studies, without, however, being perceived as passive and thus unfavorable.

Q methodology reveals the various viewpoints extant among a group of participants and interprets them holistically (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Thus participants that share a common perspective, viewpoint or attitude about a topic are identified. In the present study these perspectives were identified based on the sorting results of multiple pictures. Q methodology allows for an *identification and interpretation of subjective viewpoints* with a high level of qualitative detail by interpreting the correlated sorting patterns of the individual factors. However, due to its qualitative nature in data collection, it is not possible to make informed assumptions about *why participants are associated with a certain factor*. Thus, for a valid explanation of how audience traits such as age, gender, party preference or political interest are associated with a factor, additional standardized research efforts are needed.

Moreover, audiences’ perceptions of politicians are not based on visual depictions alone. Elements of visual, verbal, audiovisual, and vocal communication together affect impression formation. However, what and how the single modalities, whether visual, verbal, and vocal, for example, contribute to the meaning made of multimodal media messages remains unclear. Further research that focuses on the complex intersemiotic relations in media messages is thus urgently needed (Holsanova, 2012; Kress, 2010). Furthermore, in future qualitative and quantitative studies depictions of different politicians from different parties and political entities and of different gender should also be used to analyze whether and how these variables impact perception.

One particular strength of Q methodology lies in the data collection method (Q-sort), which is an easy and even enjoyable task for most participants. This observation meets with Stephen’s (1985, p. 195) argument that “most subjects find Q-sorting novel, interesting, and game-like”. The participants enjoyed the sorting task and quickly gained a feeling about the (un)favorability of a picture

but had difficulties in translating their intuitive decisions into words. Visual communication theory explains this with the fact that the visual mode is of associative, simultaneous nature, more closely related to feelings than verbal text, and is experienced more intuitively (e.g., Müller, 2007). In visual Q-sorts verbalization is avoided, and the participants can intuitively arrange the pictures. We contend that this exactly makes the chosen methodology extremely valuable. Hence, card sorting and Q-sort are very promising approaches for visual audience research that merit closer examination.

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