

## Visual Self-Presentation Strategies of Political Candidates on Social Media Platforms: A Comparative Study

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This study investigates the visual self-presentation of political candidates on different social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) in seven Western democracies (Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Drawing on Grabe and Bucy's visual framing approach, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of visual social media posts ( $N = 2,272$ ) of the top two candidates who ran for the chief executive governmental office in the respective election campaigns. The results reveal that candidates are more likely to use the ideal candidate frame than that of the populist campaigner. The use of visual frames differs significantly among countries, but those differences are limited. It seems that differences among candidates within countries are more pronounced than among countries. The results also indicate that Instagram is the preferred platform for visual self-presentation. This study provides insights into the strategic use of visuals in social media campaigning.

*Keywords: comparative research, election campaigns, political candidates, self-presentation, social media platforms, visual framing*

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in investigating the role of visuals in election campaigns (Coleman & Wu, 2015; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Veneti, Jackson, & Lilleker, 2019). Because visuals are ubiquitous in politics, voters are confronted with an enormous number of visuals of political candidates in news coverage, in political advertising, and, more recently, on social media platforms (Bucy & Grabe, 2007; Esser, 2008; Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Visuals are an excellent source of political information; they are processed quickly, are more memorable than textual materials, and are able to affect political judgments. Based on a variety of studies, it is now well established that voters rely on visual cues, such as physical attractiveness, when evaluating political candidates' character traits and making voting-related decisions (Ahler, Citrin, Dougal, & Lenz, 2017; Banducci, Karp, Thrasher, & Rallings, 2008; Verhulst, Lodge, & Lavine, 2010). Given that visual representation has become increasingly important in election campaigns, candidates try to portray themselves positively and use visual frames to mobilize and convince voters to support them (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Marland, 2012).

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With the advent of social media platforms, candidates have new opportunities to visually present themselves and communicate directly with voters without journalistic intervention. Although there has been an increasing amount of literature on political candidates' visual self-presentation in recent years (Cmeci, 2014; Farci & Orefice, 2015; Filimonov, Russmann, & Svensson, 2016; Goodnow, 2013; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017; Muñoz & Towner, 2017), more attention has been paid to the analysis of textual elements (Colliander et al., 2017; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Meeks, 2016). Studies that have investigated political candidates' visual self-presentation are generally limited to a single country, specifically the United States, and a single social media platform. Consequently, there is a lack of cross-national comparative studies analyzing candidates' visual self-presentation across different platforms during election campaigns. On the one hand, this is important because countries have different political systems, media systems, and social media penetration rates. On the other hand, social media platforms have their own characteristics and differ significantly regarding their audiences, digital architecture, and genres of communication (Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2018). The present study therefore tries to fill this gap by applying Grabe and Bucy's (2009) visual framing approach and investigating the official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter profiles of the top two candidates who ran for the chief executive governmental office in national election campaigns of seven Western democracies: Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

This study adds to the existing literature in several ways. First, it provides insights into the strategic use of visuals on social media platforms by political candidates in electoral campaigns. Second, by taking a comparative perspective, the study finds it possible to identify transnational similarities and nation-specific differences in candidates' visual self-presentation. Finally, the study sheds light on how candidates use different social media platforms in a variety of ways to visually present themselves. Thus, it contributes to cross-platform social media research on political campaigning.

The article proceeds as follows: In the first part, the literature on political candidates' self-presentation in election campaigns, which often focuses on textual elements, is reviewed. The second part of this article reviews the concept of visual framing and describes in greater detail Grabe and Bucy's (2009) analysis of visual character frames, which is central to this study. The third part is concerned with the methodology used for this study. The fourth part presents the results of the quantitative content analysis, focusing on the use of visual frames in general and the differences among countries and social media platforms. Finally, the implications of the results, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

### **Political Candidates' Self-Presentation in Election Campaigns**

In election campaigns, candidates are particularly motivated to project an appealing image of themselves and maximize the impact on voters. Researchers have therefore provided several concepts to explain candidates' self-presentation in politics. The theory of self-presentation was first articulated by Goffman (1959) and popularized in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Self-presentation refers to how individuals attempt to create and claim a desired image in social interactions. Goffman (1959) regarded the setting of social interaction as a stage and distinguished between "front stage" and

“back stage” behavior. The front stage is what is visible to an audience, whereas the back stage is what is hidden from others.

Regarding politics, the theory of self-presentation was first applied to face-to-face communication (Fenno, 1978) and traditional media (Schütz, 1993), but then expanded to digitally mediated communication such as candidate websites (Gulati, 2004; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013; Stanyer, 2008) and, more recently, candidate social media profiles (Colliander et al., 2017; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Meeks, 2016). Using Goffman’s notion of self-presentation, Fenno (1978) examined how members of the United States Congress present themselves to their voters and distinguished between a “home style” and a “Washington style.” The former represents candidates’ self-presentation when they are interacting with voters in their districts, and the latter describes candidates’ behavior when they are on Capitol Hill. Similarly, Gulati (2004) found two different presentation styles in his analysis of congressional websites: “Washington insiders” and “Washington outsiders.” Insiders convey the impression that they are influential and powerful, whereas outsiders communicate the impression that they have not lost touch with ordinary people. In a study investigating online self-presentation by politicians in the United States and United Kingdom, Stanyer (2008) reported that members of the U.S. House of Representatives promote their private life more often on their websites than members of the British Parliament (MPs). Stanyer (2008) argued that U.S. politicians, in contrast to British politicians, cannot rely on voters’ party loyalty and therefore must focus on their personal qualities. Another comparative study conducted by Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2013) has revealed that members of the European Parliament (MEPs) predominantly pursue a home style strategy on their official websites. To a lesser extent, MEPs have made use of a personalized impression management strategy, whereas a participatory communication strategy was pursued primarily by young MEPs. In recent years, researchers have shown an increasing interest in candidates’ self-presentation on social media platforms generally, and on Twitter specifically. For instance, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) demonstrated in their analysis that British MPs use Twitter as a tool for political marketing and image control. The authors found that MPs tweeted about personal preferences, their everyday lives, and their political positions. In an experimental study investigating the effects of different self-presentation styles, Colliander et al. (2017) reported that Swedish candidates whose tweets combine aspects of their professional and private lives increase voters’ interest in the candidate’s party and the likelihood that they will vote for that party, when compared with tweets that include professional content only.

Together, these studies provide important insights into the campaign communication strategies of candidates. However, all the studies reviewed here focus primarily on verbal statements or textual elements. So far, less attention has been paid to the role of visuals, although social media platforms encourage visual content; that is, images and videos receive increased visibility in the newsfeed (Bucher, 2012). As social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly dominated by visual content (Towner, 2017), research on candidates’ self-presentation needs to go beyond the textual level and consider visuals. Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in investigating political candidates’ visual self-presentation on social media platforms. For instance, Farci and Orefice (2015) found that candidates use selfies as a strategic self-promotion tool and that selfies are the latest way of “crafting the self” through the use of digital technology. Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) demonstrated that candidates in election campaigns use Instagram to visually present themselves as legitimate office

holders. With regard to the visual level, however, one has to consider that a clear separation between front stage and back stage behavior is rarely possible. For instance, numerous visual social media posts of Justin Trudeau show the Canadian prime minister together with his wife and children at official events such as state receptions (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Even though a state reception takes place in a professional context, the boundaries between the professional and private life of the politician become blurred. Candidates have the ability to select and emphasize some aspects of their character, while neglecting others. By using visuals, those "character frames" (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 101) build candidates' social identity. Visual framing is therefore a useful concept to analyze candidates' visual self-presentation on social media platforms. This study relies on Grabe and Bucy's (2009) visual-framing approach. Grabe and Bucy's theoretical framework is appropriate because their study of political candidates' depiction in television coverage focuses also on image management strategies, which promote desired candidate qualities. It can be assumed that campaign strategists aim to exercise control over the visual-framing process—in news coverage and on social media platforms. Recent studies have shown that their theoretical framework can be adapted to social media (Cmeci, 2014; Goodnow, 2013; Muñoz & Towner, 2017). By applying Grabe and Bucy's theoretical framework in the social media context, the present study can facilitate comparisons with future studies and therefore contributes to visual political communication research.

### **Visual Framing**

Traditionally, research on framing has predominantly concentrated on texts even though visuals play an important role in media communications. However, in recent years, a considerable literature has grown around the theme of visual framing (Brantner, Geise, & Lobinger, 2013; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Visual framing can be understood as a process of highlighting certain aspects of a perceived reality to promote a particular interpretation of a specific issue, event, or person (Coleman, 2010; Entman, 1993).

Reviewing the existing literature on visual framing, Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) identified four approaches to visual framing: (1) the denotative approach, (2) the stylistic-semiotic approach, (3) the connotative approach, and (4) the ideological approach. The denotative approach refers to the persons or objects and discrete elements actually depicted in the visual. The stylistic-semiotic approach refers to the stylistic choices (e.g., camera angle, camera distance, and color) and pictorial conventions (e.g., social distance) in the visual. The connotative approach refers to the analysis of figurative symbols and visual metaphors, whereas the ideological approach takes into account the latent meanings of the visual frames. Recently, researchers have combined several approaches to visual framing (Dan, 2018; Wozniak, Lück, & Wessler, 2015). For example, Hellmueller and Zhang (2019) combined denotative, stylistic-semiotic, connotative, and ideological approaches in their visual framing analysis of the coverage of refugees on CNN and Spiegel Online. Given that the present study derives two visual frames (i.e., the ideal candidate frame and the populist campaigner frame) deductively from Grabe and Bucy's (2009) visual framing analysis and investigates the extent to which these visual character frames appear in the sample, I follow a denotative deductive approach. Although some researchers also suggest applying a stylistic-semiotic perspective and including structural features in visual framing analyses (Coleman, 2010; Dan, 2018), this study focuses on the content of visual frames and investigates *what* is depicted in candidates' visual social

media posts. Because this study draws on Grabe and Bucy's (2009) visual framing analysis, a more detailed account of their visual character frames and the state of research regarding the application of these frames for social media analyses is presented next.

In studying the visual coverage of U.S. presidential election campaigns from 1992 to 2004, Grabe and Bucy (2009) identified three visual frames: the ideal candidate, the populist campaigner, and the sure loser. The ideal candidate frame refers to characteristics that are crucial for the exercise of the office and consists of two dimensions: statesmanship and compassion. Depicting as a statesman and compassionate leader is based on the assumption that voters have "a mental picture of specific characteristics that an ideal presidential candidate should have" (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 102). Previous research has indicated that characteristics such as statesmanlike traits and compassion are relevant criteria for assessing candidates (Kinder, 1986). Statesmanship is depicted through visuals of "power, authority, control, and active leadership" (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 102), and compassion is represented through visuals of "children and families" (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 104). The populist campaigner frame builds "on the idea that ordinary people, a noble troupe, stand in opposition to an aristocratic and self-serving elite" (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 105). By depicting as a populist campaigner, candidates demonstrate closeness to the people. They portray themselves as an average person who understands the needs of ordinary people. Populist framing comprises the dimensions of mass appeal and ordinariness. Whereas the former is visually depicted through linkages to celebrities or massive, approving audiences, the latter displays candidates wearing informal attire (casual or sports clothing), interacting with ordinary people, and performing physical work. Finally, the sure loser frame depicts candidates in unfavorable situations, highlighting missteps in the campaign. Loser framing is visually represented through small or disapproving audiences or defiant gestures. Grabe and Bucy (2009) demonstrated in their analysis that Republicans were more often framed as ideal candidates, whereas Democrats were typically shown in a populist frame.

Although Grabe and Bucy (2009) examined candidates' depiction in television coverage, several researchers have applied their approach to candidates' visual self-presentation on social media platforms. However, these studies did not consider the loser frame because it is unlikely that candidates would purposefully present themselves in a negative light on their social media profiles. For instance, Goodnow's (2013) semiotic analysis of Obama and Romney's Facebook photos during the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign revealed that both men framed themselves as ideal candidates, although they used different strategies. Regarding mass appeal, no differences among the candidates could be found. Cmeciu (2014) analyzed Facebook photos of Romanian candidates running for the 2014 European Parliament elections and found that they were using the ideal candidate frame more often than that of the populist campaigner. The author further found that the statesmanship dimension was more visible than the compassion dimension within the ideal candidate frame and that the ordinariness dimension dominated the populist frame. Similarly, Muñoz and Towner (2017) demonstrated in their analysis of U.S. presidential primary candidates' Instagram profiles that the ideal candidate frame was preferred to the populist frame and received the most likes and comments from users. Based on this research, I hypothesize the following:

*H1: Political candidates are more likely to use the ideal candidate frame than the populist campaigner frame on their official social media profiles.*

Most research on candidates' visual representation on social media is based on single-country studies, particularly data from the United States. Though these studies clearly contribute to an increase in knowledge, their results cannot be easily generalized to other countries (Vaccari, 2013). Contextual factors such as the political and media system, political culture, technological developments, campaign professionalization, incumbency advantage, or economic resources might affect political campaigning in general, and candidates' social media campaigning in particular (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012). One exception is Lee's (2016) comparative study of website photos of U.S. President Obama and South Korean President Lee. The study demonstrated that the visual representation of the two presidents differed significantly. Whereas the South Korean president framed himself visually as a statesman, Obama not only relied on the statesmanship frame, but also emphasized populist frames such as mass appeal and ordinariness. Studying political candidates' visual representation from a comparative perspective therefore may extend our understanding of social media campaigning. However, given the paucity of relevant research regarding the influence of country characteristics on candidates' use of visual frames on social media platforms in election campaigns, I ask the following research question:

*RQ1: To what extent does the use of visually constructed frames differ among countries?*

Usually, studies on candidates' visual self-presentation in election campaigns are single-platform studies. In hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017), however, candidates use a multitude of social media platforms. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have their own characteristics and differ significantly in terms of audience, digital architecture, and genre of communication (Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss et al., 2018). Facebook (2019) for instance, has 1.6 billion daily active users and is a particularly attractive and important platform for political campaigning because of its potentially wide reach. Candidates may use Facebook as a tool for partisan-, mass-, target group-, and individual-centered campaigns to address different audiences (Magin, Podschuweit, Haßler, & Russmann, 2017). Compared with Facebook, the photo and video-sharing platform Instagram is particularly popular among young users. Instagram (2019) has more than 500 million daily active users worldwide, and more than two thirds are aged 34 years and younger. In view of its visual nature, Instagram is per se a suitable platform for candidates' visual self-presentation and may be used to address young voters. Twitter (2019) has 139 million daily active users, a significantly smaller audience than Facebook and Instagram. However, the platform is primarily used by political and journalistic elites. Within it, candidates release campaign details, promote themselves, and interact with other politicians or journalists (Jungherr, 2016). By addressing journalists, candidates aim to set the agenda and influence campaign coverage.

It has been argued that candidates create their own content for different social media platforms to reach and influence specific target audiences (Kreiss et al., 2018). Whereas some studies (Stier, Bleier, Lietz, & Strohmaier, 2018) have suggested that candidates tailor their content to any one particular platform, Bossetta's (2018) research questioned this assumption. The author found, rather, "an overlap in campaign messages across all of the platforms studied" (Bossetta, 2018, p. 491) and concluded that "scholars should not assume that political content issued on a social media platform is necessarily specific

to it" (p. 486). This raises the question of whether candidates share the same images across platforms, or whether differences can be identified in candidates' use of visual frames. Therefore, I formulate the following second research question:

*RQ2: To what extent does the use of visually constructed frames differ among social media platforms?*

### **Methods**

To test the hypothesis and answer the research questions, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of visual social media posts by 14 political candidates from seven Western democracies: Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The countries were selected by the following criteria: (a) political system characteristics, (b) media system characteristics, and (c) social media use.

Comprising a presidential government system (the United States), a semipresidential government system (France), and five parliamentary government systems (Austria, Canada, Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom), the sample provides sufficient variation regarding the *political system*. The countries also differ significantly in their electoral systems: Whereas some employ majoritarian electoral systems (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and France), others use proportional electoral systems (Austria and Norway). Germany's mixed-member proportional electoral system allows two votes: one for a constituency candidate and the second for a party list. Further, the countries have different party systems: The United States has a two-party system; the United Kingdom has a two-and-a-half-party system; and Austria, Canada, France, Germany, and Norway have multiparty systems.

With respect to the *media system*, the countries also exhibit considerable variation. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada belong to the liberal model; Germany, Austria, and Norway have democratic corporatist models; and France is part of the polarized pluralist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Moreover, the countries differ significantly in terms of social media use: Norway has the highest active social media penetration (71%), followed by the United States (70%), and the United Kingdom and Canada (67% each). Austria has a significantly lower active social media penetration rate (50%), and Germany shows the lowest level (46%; Statista, 2019). Finally, the country selection was guided by candidates' active use of different social media platforms in their respective election campaigns. Each candidate included in the sample had to be simultaneously active on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Altogether, the selected countries are similar in some respects, but they provide sufficient variation with regard to political and media system characteristics as well as social media use.

For each country, I selected the following top two candidates who ran for the chief executive government office: Christian Kern and Sebastian Kurz (Austria); Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau (Canada); Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron (France); Angela Merkel and Martin Schulz (Germany); Erna Solberg and Jonas Gahr Støre (Norway); Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn (United Kingdom); and Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (United States).

The content analysis covers the last four weeks of the election campaign in each country. The visual social media posts (i.e., images and infographics) for the content analysis were collected in October 2018. I selected visual social media posts that were distributed on the official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter profiles of the candidates mentioned earlier. In line with previous studies (Muñoz & Towner, 2017), videos were excluded. Units of analysis were visual social media posts in which the candidate was depicted. Of the 2,833 visual social media posts collected in the period under investigation, 2,272 posts display the candidate. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample, including candidates, time period, candidates' post by social media platform, and a total of candidates' posts.

**Table 1. Samples.**

Countries	Candidates	Time Period	Candidates' Posts by Social Media Platform			Candidates' Total Posts
			Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	
Austria	Christian Kern	09/18/2017–10/15/2017	51	21	3	75
	Sebastian Kurz		25	39	88	152
Canada	Stephen Harper	09/21/2015–10/19/2015	275	73	17	365
	Justin Trudeau		78	6	4	88
France	Marine Le Pen	04/10/2017–05/07/2017	75	25	224	324
	Emmanuel Macron		27	39	3	69
Germany	Angela Merkel	08/28/2017–09/24/2017	185	8	18	211
	Martin Schulz		30	31	46	107
Norway	Erna Solberg	08/14/2017–09/11/2017	47	7	1	55
	Jonas Gahr Støre		62	7	1	70
UK	Theresa May	05/11/2017–06/08/2017	35	26	39	100
	Jeremy Corbyn		54	40	166	260
U.S.	Hillary Clinton	10/11/2016–11/08/2016	59	43	68	170
	Donald Trump		75	73	78	266
Total			1,078	438	756	2,272

The coding of the visual social media posts was conducted by four trained coders. To assess intercoder reliability, a randomly selected subsample of 227 posts was coded. By using Krippendorff's alpha for calculating intercoder reliability, I found satisfactory reliability scores (see Appendix).

To measure the visual frames, I used Grabe and Bucy's (2009) coding schema originally developed for the visual framing analysis of U.S. presidential candidates in television coverage. As alluded to previously, the authors identified three visual frames: the ideal candidate, the populist campaigner, and the sure loser. In accordance with previous studies (Cmeci, 2014; Goodnow, 2013; Muñoz & Towner, 2017), I did not consider the sure loser frame in this analysis because it is unlikely that candidates choose to present themselves negatively on their own social media profiles. The ideal candidate frame consists of the dimensions statesmanship and compassion. Statesmanship was measured using the following set of binary variables (0 = absence, 1 = presence): (a) elected officials, (b) patriotic symbols, (c) symbols of progress, (d) identifiable entourage, (e) campaign paraphernalia,



(f) political hoopla, and (g) formal attire. Compassion was measured using seven binary variables: (a) children, (b) family associations, (c) admiring women, (d) religious symbols, (e) affinity gestures, (f) interaction with individuals, and (g) physical embraces. The populist campaigner frame consists of the dimensions mass appeal and ordinariness. Mass appeal was measured using the following four binary variables: (a) celebrities, (b) large audiences, (c) approving audiences, and (d) interaction with crowds. Finally, ordinariness was measured by using the following five binary variables: (a) informal attire, (b) casual dress, (c) athletic clothing, (d) ordinary people, and (e) physical activity.

For the analysis of the data, I first created an additive index for each visual frame. Second, I tested whether there were significant differences among the seven countries on the use of the visual frames by using analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni post hoc tests. I used the countries as factor and the visual frames as dependent variables. Third, I conducted ANOVAs for each social media platform to test significant differences between the platforms on the use of visual frames.

### Results

Before testing the hypothesis and answering the research questions, I will present the descriptive analyses of individual variables and visual frames. As Table 2 indicates, the mean scores for both variables and frames varied widely. Within the dimension of statesmanship, the variable formal attire scored the highest mean, followed by the variable campaign paraphernalia. Higher means were also recorded for the variables identifiable entourage and patriotic symbols. The variables with the lowest means were elected officials, political hoopla, and symbols of progress. Within the dimension of compassion, the variables admiring women, physical embraces, children, and interaction with crowds showed the highest means. Variables with lower means were affinity gestures and family associations. The variable religious symbols exhibited the lowest mean. Within the dimension of mass appeal, the variable large audiences scored the highest mean, followed by approving audiences. The variable interaction with crowds scored relatively low values, and the variable celebrities scored the lowest mean. Within the dimension of ordinariness, the variable ordinary people had the highest mean. The variable informal attire had the second highest mean score. In contrast, the variables casual dress, physical activity, and athletic clothing had the lowest means.

Comparing the use of the statesmanship dimension and the compassion dimension, a paired  $t$  test showed significant differences between the two dimensions of the ideal candidate frame,  $t(2,271) = 35.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . Political candidates presented themselves more as statesmen than as compassionate leaders. Within the populist frame, the mass appeal dimension was significantly more salient than the ordinariness dimension for the candidates studied,  $t(2,271) = 11.43$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Next, I turn to the formal test of the hypothesis. H1 stated that political candidates are more likely to use the ideal candidate frame than the populist campaigner frame. A  $t$  test revealed that there was a significant difference in the scores for the ideal candidate frame and the populist frame,  $t(2,271) = 10.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . Political candidates presented themselves significantly more often having ideal attributes than populist traits. Thus, H1 is supported.

**Table 2. Visual Frames in Seven National Election Campaigns.**

Frame	Dimension	Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	
Ideal Candidate	Statesmanship		2.62 (1.47)	
			1.83 (1.11)	
		Elected officials	0.05 (0.21)	
		Patriotic symbols	0.23 (0.42)	
		Symbols of progress	0.02 (0.15)	
		Identifiable entourage	0.29 (0.45)	
		Campaign paraphernalia	0.44 (0.50)	
		Political hoopla	0.05 (0.22)	
		Formal attire	0.76 (0.43)	
		Compassion		0.79 (0.93)
			Children	0.14 (0.34)
			Family associations	0.07 (0.26)
			Admiring women	0.18 (0.34)
			Religious symbols	0.02 (0.12)
			Affinity gestures	0.10 (0.30)
Populist Campaigner	Mass Appeal	Interaction with individuals	0.13 (0.33)	
		Physical embraces	0.16 (0.37)	
			1.37 (1.20)	
			0.76 (1.00)	
		Celebrities	0.04 (0.19)	
		Large audiences	0.38 (0.49)	
		Approving audiences	0.25 (0.43)	
		Interaction with crowds	0.10 (0.30)	
		Ordinariness		0.61 (0.70)
			Informal attire	0.21 (0.41)
Casual dress	0.04 (0.19)			
Athletic clothing	0.00 (0.06)			
Ordinary people	0.33 (0.47)			
Physical activity	0.03 (0.17)			

Note.  $N = 2,272$ .

Comparing the ways that visual self-presentation strategies are used in the countries studied, I now turn to cross-national differences in the use of visual frames on candidates' social media platforms. In the first stage, I show differences in the use of visual frames among candidates within countries, and in a second step, I then examine variations among countries.

First, in the United States, Donald Trump framed himself significantly more often as an ideal candidate than Hillary Clinton,  $F(1, 394) = 12.21, p < .001$ . Particularly, the statesman score was higher for Trump than Clinton,  $F(1, 394) = 32.44, p < .001$ . This can be traced back to his frequent use of

patriotic symbols and campaign paraphernalia in his visual social media posts (Figure 1). Moreover, Trump was always dressed in a suit and tie, which added to his ideal candidate image. However, a closer inspection of the compassion dimension did not reveal significant differences. Regarding populist framing, Trump and Clinton used the dimensions of mass appeal and ordinariness almost equally. Interestingly, both candidates avoided depictions of themselves as “ordinary.” What is striking is the discrepancy between Trump’s visual self-presentation on social media platforms and his public image and rhetorical strategy. Although Trump is often characterized in the traditional media and in political communication research as a “populist” who makes use of populist discourse (Oliver & Rahn, 2016), he relied rather heavily on the ideal candidate frame and did not present himself as having populist traits.



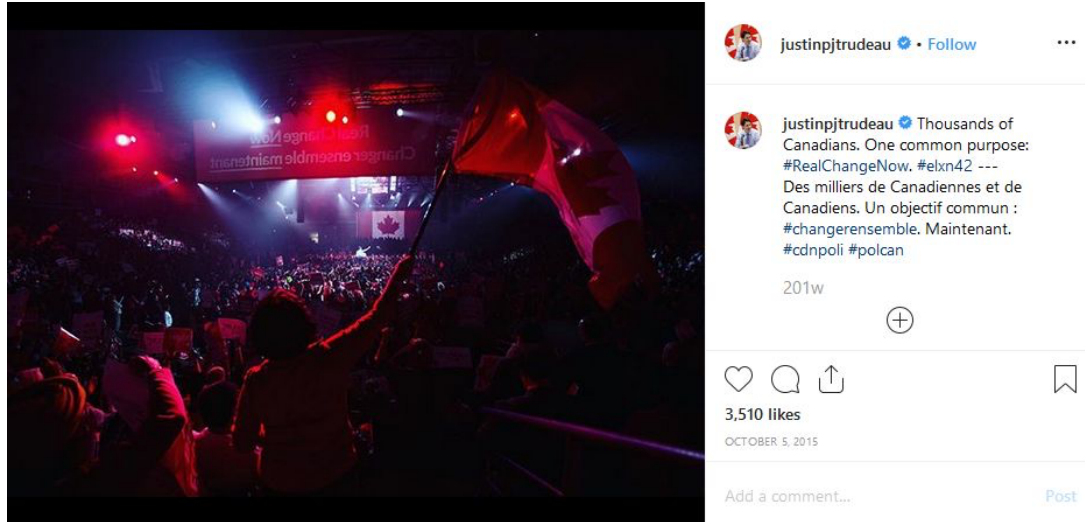
**Figure 1. Screenshot of a tweet by Donald Trump illustrating ideal candidate framing (statesmanship dimension).**

In Germany, Martin Schulz, the chancellor candidate of the Social Democratic Party, relied significantly more often on the ideal candidate frame than Chancellor Angela Merkel,  $F(1, 316) = 6.37, p < .01$ . Even though the statesman score was higher for Merkel than Schulz, the difference was not statistically significant. Depicting herself as a statesman emphasized Merkel's powerful and influential role in world politics. In her images, she always wore a pantsuit, and she often appeared with other elected officials and her political entourage. In contrast, Schulz appeared significantly more compassionate than Merkel,  $F(1, 316) = 27.20, p < .001$ . Interacting with children and voters added to his image as an ideal candidate (Figure 2). Moreover, Schulz showed significantly more populist traits than Merkel,  $F(1, 316) = 8.34, p < .01$ . For instance, he was linked to large and approving audiences significantly more often than Merkel. However, there were no significant differences between Merkel and Schulz regarding ordinariness. Of all the candidates studied, Schulz scored the highest in terms of ideal qualities and populist traits.



**Figure 2. Screenshot of an Instagram post by Martin Schulz illustrating ideal candidate framing (compassion dimension).**

In Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper presented himself as significantly more statesmanlike,  $F(1, 451) = 15.03, p < .001$ , and as possessing more ideal qualities overall than his challenger Justin Trudeau,  $F(1, 451) = 4.22, p < .05$ . This visual strategy lines up with Harper's role as president. No significant differences were found among the candidates regarding the compassion dimension. Trudeau, however, displayed significantly more populist traits than Harper,  $F(1, 451) = 9.30, p < .01$ . He further outscored his contender on all mass appeal variables (Figure 3). Specifically, Trudeau had focused more on large and approving audiences. Considering Harper's and Trudeau's depictions as ordinary people, there were no significant differences in how the candidates presented themselves visually on social media platforms.



**Figure 3. Screenshot of an Instagram post by Justin Trudeau illustrating populist framing (mass appeal dimension).**

In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Theresa May and her challenger Jeremy Corbyn preferred similar ideal candidate framing. This is somewhat surprising because May's campaign emphasized her leadership abilities (Prosser, 2018). Corbyn presented himself as more ordinary,  $F(1, 358) = 7.20, p < .01$  (Figure 4), and he embraced more depictions of himself in a populist frame than May,  $F(1, 358) = 6.94, p < .01$ . Contrary to May, Corbyn is an enthusiastic and energetic campaigner who has few qualms about addressing large audiences and interacting with ordinary people (Dorey, 2017).



**Figure 4. Screenshot of a Facebook post by Jeremy Corbyn illustrating populist framing (ordinariness dimension).**

When comparing ideal candidate framing and populist framing, I found no statistically significant differences between Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg and her challenger Jonas Gahr Støre. Likewise, there were no significant differences in the frames used by Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern and his challenger Sebastian Kurz. Last, the French presidential candidates Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen used the ideal candidate frame almost equally. Nevertheless, there were notable differences with regard to the statesmanship dimension and the compassion dimension. Interestingly, the statesman score was higher for Le Pen than Macron,  $F(1, 391) = 7.57, p < .01$ . In particular, Le Pen used campaign paraphernalia and patriotic symbols such as the national flag in her visual social media posts. By doing so, she visually emphasized the nationalism on which her policies are primarily based. Presenting as statesmanlike can be seen as a part of Le Pen's "detoxification" strategy (Durovic, 2019, p. 6), which aimed to create a softer and more reputable image of herself and her party. Macron, however, focused more on appearing compassionate than Le Pen,  $F(1, 391) = 6.26, p < .05$ . Even though there were no statistically significant differences between Macron and Le Pen in terms of populist framing, Le Pen appeared significantly more often with large audiences. The reader may ask whether certain candidate characteristics (e.g., gender, age, ideology, and incumbent status) affect the use of the ideal candidate frame and the populist campaigner frame. Therefore, I ran additional statistical analyses. However, I did not find any significant effects.

With respect to RQ1, the ANOVA results showed that the use of the ideal candidate frame differs significantly among countries,  $F(6, 2265) = 33.00, p < .001$  (Table 3). Though I found cross-national differences, Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that those differences are rather limited. These tests indicated that Germany had the highest use of the ideal candidate frame and differed significantly from Austria, Canada, France, Norway, and the United Kingdom (all  $ps < .001$ ). The United States had the second highest use of the ideal candidate frame and differed significantly from those countries (all  $ps < .001$ ). There were no significant differences between Germany and the United States. German chancellor candidates and U.S. presidential candidates presented themselves as having ideal qualities almost equally, and more often than candidates in the other countries. Moreover, I found that Austria, Canada, France, Norway, and the United Kingdom did not differ significantly from each other.

The ANOVAs further revealed that the use of the populist campaigner frame differed significantly among countries,  $F(6, 2265) = 22.18, p < .001$ . Bonferroni post hoc tests demonstrated that German and Canadian candidates relied significantly more often on the populist frame than candidates in Austria, France, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States (all  $ps < .001$ ). Candidates in the United Kingdom presented themselves significantly more often with populist traits than candidates in Austria ( $p < .05$ ) and France ( $p < .001$ ). There were no significant differences among Austria, France, Norway, and the United States with respect to the use of the populist campaigner frame.

**Table 3. Visual Frames by Country.**

	AT (n=227)	CA (n=453)	FR (n=393)	GER (n=318)	NO (n=125)	UK (n=360)	U.S. (n=396)		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F(df)</i>	<i>p</i>
Ideal Candidate	2.28 (1.40)	2.38 (1.38)	2.10 (1.31)	3.23 (1.50)	2.46 (1.37)	2.59 (1.26)	3.16 (1.61)	$F(6, 2265) = 33.00$	< .001
Populist Campaigner	1.08 (1.31)	1.71 (1.19)	1.05 (0.93)	1.76 (1.34)	1.26 (1.07)	1.39 (1.31)	1.15 (1.02)	$F(6, 2265) = 22.18$	< .001

Note. ANOVA with Bonferroni multiple comparisons test. AT = Austria; CA = Canada; FR = France; GER = Germany; NO = Norway; UK = United Kingdom; U.S. = United States.

Finally, I analyzed differences in candidates' use of visual frames among social media platforms (RQ2). Table 4 and ANOVA results showed that the use of the ideal candidate frame differs significantly among social media platforms,  $F(2, 2269) = 5.70, p < .01$ . Post hoc tests indicated that Instagram had the highest level of the ideal candidate frame and differed significantly from Facebook ( $p < .01$ ), but no differences were found between Instagram and Twitter. Facebook and Twitter did not differ significantly from each other, although Facebook was used less often for ideal candidate depictions. With regard to the populist campaigner frame, the ANOVA analyses demonstrated substantial cross-platform differences,  $F(2, 2269) = 10.40, p < .001$ . Post hoc tests showed that Instagram was used significantly more often for candidates' portrayals as populist campaigners than Twitter ( $p < .01$ ). The results further revealed that Twitter was used significantly less to illustrate the populist campaigner frame than Facebook ( $p < .001$ ). These results suggest that Instagram seems to be candidates' preferred platform for visual self-presentation.

**Table 4. Visual Frames by Social Media Platform.**

	Facebook (n = 1,078)	Instagram (n = 438)	Twitter (n = 756)		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F(df)</i>	<i>p</i>
Ideal Candidate	2.52 (1.44)	2.79(1.58)	2.66 (1.43)	$F(2, 2269) = 5.70$	< .01
Populist Campaigner	1.44 (1.24)	1.45 (1.21)	1.21 (1.16)	$F(2, 2269) = 10.40$	< .001

Note. ANOVA with Bonferroni multiple-comparison tests.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to investigate political candidates' visual self-presentation strategies on their official social media profiles in a comparative perspective. Drawing on Grabe and Bucy's (2009) visual framing approach, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of the visual posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter of the top two candidates who ran for the chief executive government office in election campaigns of seven Western democracies: Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Norway,

the United Kingdom, and the United States. The results of this investigation show that candidates are more likely to use the ideal candidate frame than the populist campaigner frame. This result concurs with previous studies indicating that candidates present themselves visually on social media platforms as ideal candidates (Cmeci, 2014; Goodnow, 2013; Muñoz & Towner, 2017).

The second major finding is that there are differences among countries in the use of ideal candidate and populist framings, but those differences are limited and nonsystematic. Ideal candidate framing seems to be the preferred visual self-presentation strategy in Germany and in the United States. The ideal candidate image appears a particularly good fit for Chancellor Merkel, who exhibits a presidential style in governing and campaigning. The use of the ideal candidate framing does not differ among Austria, Canada, France, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Populist framing is particularly prevalent among German, Canadian, and, to a lesser extent, UK candidates. Populist campaigner depictions are an excellent fit for Trudeau, who is popular among Canadians and who enjoys the image of a youthful, energetic, and likeable candidate, in contrast to his opponent Harper. The populist campaigner frame is used equally in Austria, France, Norway, and the United States. Although the countries studied differ significantly in terms of their political and media systems' characteristics and social media penetrations, it seems that the differences among countries are less pronounced than among candidates. Differences in the use of visual frames may instead depend on candidate characteristics. One of the most interesting results to emerge from this study is that populist candidates such as Trump and Le Pen are more likely to frame themselves as an ideal candidate than a populist campaigner. A possible explanation for this might be that populist candidates consider themselves the only ones able to adequately represent the people and therefore emphasize their statesmanship. By performing the role of a statesman, Trump aims to demonstrate to his followers and potential voters that he is a strong leader who is able to govern and to deliver on his campaign promises.

Finally, this study identifies the differences that candidates use for their visual framing in the studied social media platforms. In particular, the results suggest that Instagram is the preferred platform for candidates' visual self-presentation in election campaigns. In contrast to Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is predominantly geared toward the distribution of visual content and is therefore well-suited for candidates' visual representations. Furthermore, this result broadly supports the work of other studies on cross-platform social media research in political campaigning, which have shown that campaign content differs among social media platforms (Kreiss et al., 2018; Stier et al., 2018).

Even though this study sheds light on how political candidates in seven Western democracies strategically use visuals in their social media campaigns, it has some limitations. The main focus of the present study lies on the question of what is made salient. Although the content of visual social media posts is important for visual framing analyses, this study did not analyze structural features such as camera angle, camera distance, and color, which are also relevant to the framing of political candidates (Banning & Coleman, 2009; Grabe, 1996). Some researchers therefore stress the importance of not looking only at the visual motifs (Coleman, 2010; Dan, 2018). By investigating structural features, researchers may draw conclusions about power and social distance (Coleman, 2010). For instance, low-angle shots are believed to attribute power and authority to the portrayed person, whereas high-angle shots attribute weakness to the portrayed person. Eye-level shots convey equality between the viewer and the person depicted (Grabe &



Bucy, 2009). It is also argued that variations in the camera distance may affect voters' evaluations of political candidates (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Kepplinger, 1982; Mutz, 2007). Given that the analysis of structural features represents an important aspect of visual framing, future studies should also examine the way in which visuals present political candidates. For instance, it can be assumed that the populist campaigner frame will use significantly more eye-level camera shots than the ideal candidate frame because eye-level shots convey equality between the viewer and the portrayed person. Combining the analysis of the content and structural features of visual social media posts may therefore offer insights into the strategic use of visuals by political candidates. Moreover, one has to take into account that this study follows a denotative deductive approach that theoretically derives two visual character frames from Grabe and Bucy's (2009) visual framing analysis. The present study has shown that these visual frames appear in the sample and that Grabe and Bucy's theoretical framework can be applied to several countries and social media platforms. The use of the two visual character frames has also provided important insights and interesting differences in political candidates' visual self-presentation. However, it should be noted that the deductive approach is limited to established frames. Thus, diverse and heterogeneous visual representations may be overlooked. To take into account the diverse visual material that can be found on social media platforms, future studies might combine different approaches to visual framing when investigating political candidates' visual representations. For instance, recent studies in other contexts have shown that the combination of denotative, stylistic, connotative, and ideological approaches provides a nuanced perspective on visual framing (Hellmueller & Zhang, 2019). Another limitation concerns data collection: I collected the visual social media posts in October 2018—in many cases, years after the elections. Collecting data in real time would help scholars to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter. In particular, the European Parliament elections that take place in 28 countries simultaneously offer a major opportunity to collect data in real time. Furthermore, this study does not acknowledge the increasing integration of videos and stories within Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. To fully explore the strategic use of visuals in social media campaigning, a greater focus on candidates' self-presentation in videos or stories is needed. By focusing on Western democracies, it was not possible to assess the situation in the non-Western world, and therefore, it is unknown how candidates in non-Western countries visually present themselves on social media platforms during election campaigns. While this study indicates that the use of visual frames is rather limited among Western countries, Lee (2016) found substantial cross-national differences between the United States and South Korea. Future research might explore differences among candidates' visual self-presentation in the Western and non-Western world. A further issue that was not addressed in this study was whether there is a relationship between a specific self-presentation style (i.e., ideal candidate frame or populist campaigner frame) and candidate evaluations (e.g., leadership abilities, competence, integrity, empathy, and likeability) with respect to voting behavior. Experimental studies could shed light on this question. Finally, future research might explore the extent to which candidates' visually constructed frames find their way into news coverage and the relationship between candidate images on social media platforms and in campaign coverage. In sum, this study offers some important insights into the strategic use of visuals by political candidates in social media campaigning.

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**Appendix*****Intercoder Reliability***

Frame	Dimension	Variable	Krippendorff's $\alpha$
Ideal Candidate	Statesmanship	Elected officials	0.85
		Patriotic symbols	0.80
		Symbols of progress	0.82
		Identifiable entourage	0.79
		Campaign paraphernalia	0.89
		Political hoopla	0.85
		Formal attire	0.87
	Compassion	Children	0.86
		Family associations	0.84
		Admiring women	0.78
		Religious symbols	0.86
		Affinity gestures	0.81
		Interaction with individuals	0.79
		Physical embraces	0.80
Populist Campaigner	Mass Appeal	Celebrities	0.86
		Large audiences	0.81
		Approving audiences	0.79
		Interaction with crowds	0.82
	Ordinariness	Informal attire	0.93
		Casual dress	0.86
		Athletic clothing	0.96
		Ordinary people	0.89
		Physical activity	0.80