



OPINION¹

from Prof. Andreana EFTIMOVA, DSc, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
(*scientific position, academic degree, name, surname, educational / scientific institution*)

for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) in professional field 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications - Manipulation in Communication).

with a dissertation on the topic: "Manipulative Techniques in the Language of Photography (Photographic Signs and their Visual Impact in Non-verbal Communication)",

presented by Ivan Aleksandrovich ZAHARIEV, full-time doctoral student in the Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

with supervisor: Prof. Dr. Venceslav BONDIKOV

I. Evaluation of the qualities of the text of dissertation

In the scope of interest of the PhD student are the photographic techniques of depicting non-verbal cues for a purposeful impact on the psyche (by activating data, stereotypes, memories and representations in the mind and pre-planned emotional reactions and behavior) of the audience serving manipulative strategies in the mass media. Emphasis is placed on the possibilities of altering or distorting the relationship between the photograph and its referent, which underlies the development of an entire industry for the manipulation of public opinion. The object, the subject, the purpose, the methods and the tasks of the research are defined extremely correctly. The specific research approach is innovative, in which a correlation is sought between the selected non-verbal signs (from the tactile modality) in the photographs and their manipulative use in the social networks (Facebook) of 12 political leaders. I would like to note here that in the process of his research work, Ivan Zahariev has always pleasantly surprised with specific angles and ideas in his publications, which shows not only a strong motivation and interest in the topic, but also a creative approach to it.

It is normal in the chapters with a realized theoretical overview that the author looks for interdisciplinary connections when clarifying concepts such as communication, manipulation, media photography, etc. It would be interesting for the reader if Ivan Zahariev allows us to follow the thought process of accepting and rejecting the various statements, which leads him to an otherwise well-formulated working definition of the concept of communication. The presence of the sub-chapter dedicated to the goals of communication (p. 24-28) is very adequate, as it brings out the subject of the study - the impact on the recipient through photography. The presentation of basic communication models and elements (p. 28-43) could emphasize not on the description of already well-known and overexposed communication models, but on their comparison and their role in understanding communication interaction and

¹ Note: The text in italics offers reference points for evaluating the research results. Recommended volume of the opinion - 2-3 standard pages



impact. I welcome the explanation (pp. 42-43) which makes it clear how some of the models are used in the thesis with analytical and explanatory value.

In the sub-chapter devoted to the types of communication, quite motivatedly are outlined (1) the differences between the concepts of image and picture based on the staging and model of J. T. Mitchell, (2) the structure of the photographic message according to R. Barth, U. Eco and K. Metz, (3) the specifics of reading the visual photographic code. In view of the research problem, the views of A. Sokolov on the communicative interaction between the subject and the object, as well as the statements of a number of authors on the essence and functions of mass communication, are presented quite appropriately, and again their mechanical arrangement in the exposition is not avoided. A good impression is made by the interdisciplinary connections made in the theoretical review, which lead to the introduction of effective metaphors, thanks to the transfer of terms from one scientific field to another - for example, *visual speech* (a terminological combination of the Russian linguist Maxim Kronhaus, p. 93), *photographic language* and *utterance without syntax* (Marshall McLuhan, p. 93), etc.

As part of the research plan, the second chapter of the dissertation deals with manipulation as a social phenomenon. Here, to the greatest extent, the doctoral student has managed to homogenize the theoretical review by typologizing the notions of manipulation and drawing the generalization "that in visual communication, photography affects the human psyche in a non-violent way by evoking artificial subconscious associations in the memory of the manipulated object, with which changes his mental reactions and behavior" (Diss., p. 117). Investigating the specifics of photography and the media in terms of their possibilities for manipulation, the doctoral student is committed to clarifying more concepts - lies, deception, falsification, disinformation, propaganda. The examples with which he illustrates photography's involvement in these manipulative technologies are impressive. The author's comparative table of the four aspects of the message - disinformation, propaganda, PR and advertising, based on the model of F. Schulz von Thun, is also a contribution. It attempts to explain the differences in the messages of the four technologies of influence and to create a model for recognizing and distinguishing the type of manipulative function of photographic images in the media.

In the third chapter, photographic techniques for psychological impact with manipulative purpose are presented. I really like the PhD student's sophisticated perspective on the form and content of photographic material. The specific technological specifics of shooting in the part explaining how to shoot for the purposes of manipulative impact are comprehensively presented - framing and sectioning, shooting plan, in-frame editing, composition, background, perspective, lighting and color, focus, defocus and blur, etc. (Here I find an opportunity to parallel the techniques not only with the cinema, but also with those of the television image). The possibilities of the lenses according to their focal length are discussed, as well as the selection of photos, which is part of the manipulative strategy. My curiosity was awakened by Pavel Levitsky's experiment and Roland Barthes' typologies of the intellectual, the pretty, etc., as years ago I did an experiment on the influence of the directed and stereotypical photographic image of public figures on the decoding of their characteristics and their perception by people of different nationalities (here Eftimova, A. Photography and the stereotypical public/private image of the Balkans in foreign language learning // Balkanistic Forum. Blagoevgrad: YuZU "Neofit Rilski", 2006, №1-2-3, pp. 244-253). I pay special attention to the sub-chapters devoted to photographing non-verbal elements of Spectrum behavior, which are illustrated by two stereotypical gestures captured in media photographs – a raised index finger or fist and a waving hand.



The own study of non-verbal cues of 12 political leaders, already requested in the introductory part, is separated into a fourth independent chapter according to my recommendation and to highlight the availability of own research tools and the work with the empirical material. I fully accept the imposed limitation – to consider only one gesture (the hug) from the tactile modality in non-verbal political communication (photos from politicians' public Facebook profiles in 2019). It is quite appropriate to divide the leaders into two groups depending on their cultural affiliation - the SOUTH group and the NORTH group. This is a prerequisite to adequately evaluate the reactions of the audiences belonging to the relevant types of cultures. The extract is sufficient and correctly prepared to make comparative analyzes and interpretations of their manipulative potential. The quantitative results, summarized in a table, confirm the theories of cross-cultural differences in the behavioral stereotypes of individualistic and collectivist societies. Priming theory enriches the qualitative analysis of hug photos. I consider that, compared to the previous version of the text, a balance between quantitative and qualitative analysis has been achieved. Considering the media context in the interpretation would enrich it.

In the conclusion, the results of the theoretical and empirical parts are systematized.

II. Contributions of the dissertation research

Some of the more important achievements of the dissertation text are:

1. The discovery of original and specific aspects of the problem of the manipulative impact of the photographic image in the media;
2. Correct and disciplined conduct of quantitative and qualitative research of photographs reflecting a gesture from the tactile modality in political communication in a social network;
3. The analysis of an impressive corpus of over 8,000 reportage photographs from around the world, which have been categorized for the purposes of the various chapters in the dissertation;
4. Making sense of a large array of bibliographic sources and presenting them in a systematic presentation.
5. Conducting interdisciplinary connections that consider the problem within a wealth of scientific discussions.

III. Notes and recommendations

The PhD student has followed my recommendation and removed the part devoted to trying to distinguish the meanings of communication and communion, as he probably agreed that the discussion of the distinction between the two concepts does not lead to clear and usable results. The sub-chapter "Media impact of photos with shocking and depressing content", which did not fit into the subject of the dissertation, was also dropped. With this decision, Ivan Zahariev has shown research maturity. I would add that the same maturity is the reason why the extremely interesting article "Visual suggestions through photos with hunting trophies", which was published in the scientific journal "Media and Language" (issue 9/2021), did not find a place in the text. Apart from discipline and self-demanding, however, with these texts outside the dissertation project, Ivan Zahariev shows the richness and diversity of his research invention and an undiminished "appetite" for new and unconquered research territories.

The recommendation remains to standardize the spelling of the authors' names in the dissertation text (in one place the first name is written with an abbreviation, in another - without an abbreviation).



IV. Publications and participation in scientific forums

Doctoral student Ivan Zahariev has presented three printed articles in Bulgarian and international journals.

According to the minimum national requirements art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of ZRASRB and, respectively, according to art. 24, para. 1 of the Regulations for the implementation of the ŽRASRB (for the educational and scientific degree "doctor"), 50 points are required under Indicator 1 of group A, which is fulfilled in the presence of a dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" and 30 points under Indicators 4-10 of group G, which require the presence of publications, valued according to the type of publication in which they were published. Ivan Zahariev has fulfilled the requirements.

V. Conclusion

I strongly recommend the respected members of the scientific jury to support the decision of Ivan Aleksandrovich Zahariev to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the scientific field 3.5. Public communications and information sciences (Media and communications - manipulation in communication).

Jury member: Prof. Andreana EFTIMOVA, DSc

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