VISUAL FORMS IN GRAPHIC COMMUNICATION ON THE INTERNET LANGUAGE

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Abstract. The language of the Internet is a dynamic and hybrid mode of communication that fuses textual, visual, and symbolic elements. Among these, visual forms play a pivotal role in enhancing, replacing, or transforming traditional verbal messages. This article explores the typology, functions, and cultural dimensions of visual forms in graphic communication within Internet discourse. It identifies key trends such as emojis, memes, stickers, infographics, and typographic stylizations, analyzing their role in constructing meaning, emotional expression, and community identity.

Keywords: sign, communication, graphic, internet, emoji, typographic stylization.

Introduction. The development of digital communication has significantly altered how people interact and express themselves. Visual forms ranging from emojis and memes to gifs and stickers have emerged as integral elements in the language of the Internet. These visual units are not merely accessories but perform linguistic, emotional, and social functions. The study of such elements is essential for understanding the transformation of human communication in digital spaces.

Literature Review. Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the **multimodal nature** of Internet discourse. Crystal [1] introduced the concept of *Internet linguistics*, arguing that the Internet has given rise to a new linguistic environment that blends writing, speech, and visuality. He notes the growing prominence of visual cues in structuring meaning and interaction. Kress and van Leeuwen [7] advanced the theoretical foundation for **visual communication**, emphasizing that images, like language, have their own grammar. Their framework for reading visual design is now widely used in the analysis of digital media. Danesi [3] explored emojis as a form of **visual language**, arguing that they are not merely symbolic additions but fulfill linguistic roles similar to phonemes and morphemes in spoken language. He regards emojis as markers of the new "visual turn" in communication. Tagg [9] highlighted the **interpersonal functions** of graphic elements in mobile communication. She pointed out that emojis and emoticons often serve phatic functions, helping maintain relationships and soften discourse. Milner [8] studied Internet memes as cultural units of communication. He argued that memes are not just humorous images but are laden with **ideological and socio-political meanings**, often operating as visual narratives. These studies collectively support the view that visual forms in digital communication have matured into semiotic systems with linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions.

Typology of Visual Forms in Internet Communication

Emojis function as linguistic signifiers and emotional cues. As Danesi [3] suggests, they are "ideograms" that represent mood, emotion, or abstract concepts.

They often serve syntactic roles, appearing at the end of sentences to alter tone or standing alone as complete utterances.

Milner [8] emphasizes that memes operate on intertextual logic. They are created and understood within shared cultural frameworks and often require contextual literacy. Memes blend humor with critique, serving as vehicles for satire, resistance, and identity construction.

Animated gifs and stickers express affective states and are commonly used in chat applications. These forms, while often underestimated, fulfill **paralinguistic roles**, functioning much like gestures in spoken language [9].

In educational, scientific, and journalistic contexts, infographics translate complex information into digestible visuals. Kress and van Leeuwen's [7] model of visual grammar explains how color, layout, and design guide the reader's understanding.

Functions of Visual Forms in Online Discourse. Visual forms have become a central component of digital communication, performing a variety of linguistic, pragmatic, and socio-cultural functions. Their increasing ubiquity in Internet discourse reflects a broader shift toward multimodality, where meaning is not constructed solely through verbal language but through the interplay of image, symbol, color, and spatial arrangement. Below are the primary functions these visual forms fulfill in online settings:

1. Emotive Function

The most widely recognized role of visual forms especially emojis, gifs, and stickers is to express emotion. As Crystal [2] argues, one of the challenges of digital communication is the absence of **paralinguistic cues** such as tone of voice, facial expression, and body language. Visual forms act as compensatory tools, allowing users to simulate emotional nuance.

- Emojis such as 😁 or ☹ communicate joy and sadness, respectively.
- Animated gifs often express more complex affective reactions like sarcasm or exasperation.
- Stickers, especially in messaging apps like Telegram or LINE, provide highly stylized, culture-specific emotional icons.

These elements not only **humanize online interaction** but also serve to **regulate interpersonal distance** and mitigate the risk of misinterpretation in text-based communication [3].

2. Phatic Function

Drawing on Jakobson's [4] model of communication, the **phatic function** refers to utterances that serve to establish, maintain, or end communication rather than to transmit information. In the context of online discourse, visual forms often fulfill this role:

- A simple 👍 or ❤ can acknowledge receipt of a message or express agreement.

- Reaction emojis on platforms like Facebook or Discord serve as **low-effort feedback mechanisms**, preserving social bonds with minimal textual output.
- Repetitive or ritualistic use of certain gifs (e.g., applause gifs, welcome stickers) reinforces community norms and fosters inclusion.

As Tagg [9] notes, these forms are crucial in maintaining **relational coherence** in fast-paced or asynchronous online interactions.

3. Conative Function

Visual elements also have a **directive or persuasive function**—the conative function. These signs are often used to prompt action or influence behavior:

- Infographics and call-to-action buttons ("Donate Now," "Swipe Up") use color, typography, and layout to elicit user responses.
- Memes may use satire to subtly nudge public opinion, especially in political or social discourse.
- Visual cues in advertisements or social campaigns (e.g., the strategic use of red to signal urgency) engage the viewer's attention and encourage action.

In this way, visual forms act as **digital imperatives**, guiding user behavior in subtle yet powerful ways.

4. Referential Function

Visuals are often used to **convey information or denote external reality**, fulfilling a referential or ideational function. This is especially prominent in educational, scientific, and news contexts:

- **Infographics** visually summarize data, providing clarity and accessibility.
- **Maps, charts, and timelines** serve to spatialize information and enhance comprehension.
- **Screenshots, photographs, or visual quotations** anchor online discourse to real-world events or sources.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen [7], the **visual grammar** employed in such representations choice of layout, perspective, color, and salience guides how viewers interpret the information.

5. Metalingual and Aesthetic Functions

In addition to their communicative functions, visual forms sometimes reflect on the nature of communication itself. This **metalingual function** can be seen in memes that parody Internet language or emojis used to comment on digital culture.

Moreover, visual forms often carry an **aesthetic function**, providing stylistic or humorous enhancement to online communication. Examples include:

- Elaborate **text art**, stylized fonts, or kinetic typography.
- The deliberate design of Instagram carousels or TikTok captions for visual appeal.
- Artistic use of color and symmetry in profile layouts, especially in curated online personas.

These aesthetic choices signal identity, community affiliation, and digital literacy.

6. Poetic Function

In creative or playful digital discourse, visual forms fulfill a **poetic function**, foregrounding the medium itself. This is common in:
- Visual puns or meme remixes.
- Emoji poetry or stories told entirely through images.
- Experimental posts that bend the norms of form, such as alternating case or glitch aesthetics.

Such practices demonstrate the **expressive potential of visual language**, transforming everyday interaction into an art form.

Table 1. Functions of Visual Forms

Function	Description	Example
Emotive	Expresses feelings or tone	☹ for anger, 😂 for laughter
Phatic	Maintains or initiates contact	👍, ❤, □
Conative	Directs or influences user behavior	"Click Here" buttons, protest memes
Referential	Conveys factual or real-world content	Infographics, data visualizations
Metalingual	Comments on language/communication itself	Emoji explaining emoji use
Aesthetic/Poetic	Focuses on form, design, or visual play	Emoji poems, text art

Conclusion. The exploration of visual forms in online discourse reveals a complex and evolving semiotic landscape, where language is no longer confined to text but is instead enacted through a rich interplay of multimodal elements. From the emotive use of emojis to the ideological potency of memes and the cognitive clarity of infographics, visual forms fulfill a multitude of communicative functions. These forms are not simply embellishments or accessories; they are integral to how users navigate meaning, identity, emotion, and social connection in digital environments.

The shift toward **multimodality** represents a fundamental transformation in human communication. Visual language operates with its own grammar, capable of expressing ideas that might be inefficient or impossible to convey through text alone. Online discourse, especially in social media, messaging apps, and collaborative platforms, exemplifies this shift. The user becomes not only a reader or writer but also a **designer of discourse**, selecting from a diverse array of semiotic resources to craft messages that are emotionally resonant, culturally specific, and socially strategic.

Importantly, the **functions** performed by visual forms emotive, phatic, conative, referential, metalingual, aesthetic, and poetic demonstrate the versatility of these elements. Each function contributes to the overall coherence of online communication. Emojis soften statements, gifs punctuate tone, memes convey critique, and infographics condense complexity. Together, they contribute to what might be termed a **visual pragmatics** a mode of communication where signs are interpreted not only for their content but also for their social, psychological, and cultural significance.

However, this new paradigm is not without its challenges. Visual signs are **highly contextual**, and their meanings are shaped by platform-specific cultures, demographic variables, and algorithmic dynamics. For instance, an emoji may carry affectionate meaning in one culture but be perceived as sarcastic or inappropriate in another. Memes, while often humorous, can become vehicles for disinformation or ideological manipulation. The rapid evolution and diversification of visual codes also present **barriers to communication across generational and linguistic lines**, complicating the development of shared meaning.

Moreover, the increasing reliance on visual forms raises critical questions about **literacy in the digital age**. Visual literacy the ability to read, interpret, and produce visual messages must now be considered a core component of communicative competence. Educators, content creators, and platform designers must consider how users are socialized into these visual norms and how accessibility and inclusivity can be ensured in increasingly image-centric spaces[12].

Looking ahead, the study of visual forms in Internet language points toward the need for an **interdisciplinary approach**. Linguistics, semiotics, sociology, digital media studies, and even cognitive science must converge to fully understand the implications of visual communication. Such convergence may give rise to new subfields such as **visual linguistics**, **digital semiotics**, or **multimodal pragmatics**, each dedicated to mapping the structures and functions of language beyond the alphabetic and the spoken.

In practical terms, the findings from this inquiry have far-reaching implications. For marketers, understanding visual discourse means more effective audience targeting. For educators, it entails integrating visual elements into literacy programs. For developers, it informs the design of intuitive, expressive digital interfaces. And for scholars, it offers a window into how culture, cognition, and communication are reshaped by the visual turn of the digital era.

In conclusion, visual forms are not peripheral but central to the fabric of online discourse. Their functions span the spectrum of human expression emotional, informational, persuasive, aesthetic making them indispensable tools in the digital communication toolkit. As our modes of interaction continue to evolve, so too must our understanding of language, in all its visual, verbal, and virtual forms.

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