

Image types *revisited*. A texto-material approach for creating image types

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Abstract

In visual communication research there are already several methodological approaches for creating image types. These approaches work with creating typologies based on the representational features of visuals/image motifs, reducing the complexity of extensive visual material. However, we argue that in everyday visual communication, the meaning of images depends largely on the practices in which they are embedded and not on the motif. This paper's aim is to propose a methodological design for an image type analysis that considers both the representational and the artifact-related component of images, following a texto-material understanding of images. We illustrate the procedure step by step through an empirical study that explores visuals in couple relationships in Switzerland. The method enables a qualitative analysis of a large number of visuals that combines a) the creation of image types and b) a dynamic approach to in-depth visual analysis. Image types resulting from this procedure are more heterogeneous in motifs compared to previous traditions of image type analysis but allow for considering both the visual and the material dimensions of visuals, e.g., practices in which images are embedded. The approach builds on existing methods and contributes to the advancements of methods within visual communication research.

Keywords

visual methods, visual analysis, image type analysis, texto-materiality, close social relationships

1 Introduction

In a highly mediatized and “visualized” world, research on visual communication is faced with the challenge of adequately examining large numbers and flows of images without losing the analytical depth that is required for deconstructing the meaning-making processes of images (Brantner, Götzenbrucker, Lobinger, & Schreiber, 2020; Gómez Cruz & Ardèvol, 2013; Hand, 2012; Lindley, Durrant, Kirk, & Taylor, 2009). Typification is, in general, a well-established and proven method of knowledge reduction and often used for bundling extensive data material in social research (Collier, LaPorte, & Seawright, 2012; Käßplinger, 2011). Also researchers in visual communication have proposed theoretical reflections on “image types” or “image clusters” and suggested methodological approaches for creating image types, e.g., quantitative image type analysis (Grittmann & Ammann, 2009), image card sorting tech-

niques such as Q-sort (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015), visual metaphor analysis (El Refaie, Payson, Bliesemann De Guevara, & Gameiro, 2020), automated image sorting (Mooseder, Brantner, Zamith, & Pfeffer, 2023) and visual cluster analysis (M.R. Müller, 2020). However, still pending is an approach that goes beyond the representational level of visuals and that allows for building image types based on a texto-material understanding of images (Gómez-Cruz & Siles, 2021; Lobinger, 2016a; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). We argue that when examining visual everyday communication and the visuals exchanged by individuals, it is beneficial to create image types based not only on image motifs but also based on the visuals' material dimensions and the practices in which they are embedded. Creating these image types, then, requires additional material, such as the verbal explanations of the individuals who use the images or observations of these visual practices. Against this background, the pres-



ent paper proposes an image type analysis that is based on a text-material understanding of visuals. The methodological procedure will be explained step by step using a research project that explores the role of visuals and visual practices in couple relationships in Switzerland as sample material. This paper begins by defining visuals from a text-material perspective and by discussing the concept of types and typology construction in qualitative social research. Subsequently, existing approaches to creating image typologies within visual communication research will be discussed, (Grittmann, 2007; Grittmann & Ammann, 2011) as our methodological reflections are built upon these. What follows is an outline of our suggested methodological approach, based on a brief introduction of the empirical data material. Finally, advantages and limitations of the presented methodological approach will be discussed.

2 A text-material perspective on visuals

There is more to visuals than what we see on a visual representation level. According to a text-material understanding of images, which is adopted in the present paper, visuals are understood as “doubly articulated artefacts” (Lobinger, 2016a, p. 475), as both objects and texts, with both symbolic and material dimensions that are inextricably intertwined (Lehmuskallio & Gómez Cruz, 2016; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). We follow Gómez-Cruz and Siles (2021, p. 4548) in “explicitly considering the visual as supplement to the centrality of the text metaphor” in our understanding of text-materiality. Previous research has contributed to (visual) communication research on text-materiality, e.g., in the realm of personal photography (Lobinger, 2016a), interpersonal communication (Gómez-Cruz & Siles, 2021), news research (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2021; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018) or platforms and websites in general (Siles, 2017; Winkler & Wehmeier, 2015). Nevertheless, a methodological image-analytical approach from a text-material perspective on visuals is still pending. Most importantly, the text-material-

al perspective on visuals allows for acknowledging the importance of (communicative) practices in which visuals are embedded (Gómez-Cruz & Siles, 2021; Lobinger, 2016a; Schreiber, 2017). Following practice theory (Schatzki, 2016), practices are here understood as social and routinized physical activities with “things” and “objects” (Reckwitz, 2003); here these things or objects are the visuals and their symbolic and material dimensions. In communication research, practice theory has been particularly advanced by Couldry (2012) who suggests examining what people “do” with media (Couldry, 2012, p. 37); with respect to visuals this can be, for example, taking photographs (e.g., Schwarz, 2010), organizing (e.g., Pauwels, 2008) or sharing them (Venema & Lobinger, 2017). Previous studies in visual communication research examining photographic practices in everyday life have identified important social functions and uses of images, such as constructing memory, maintaining and creating social relationships, as well as self-presentation and self-expression (Gómez Cruz & Ardèvol, 2013; Gye, 2007; Pauwels, 2008; Van House, Davis, Takhteyev, Ames, & Finn, 2004; Van House, Davis, Takhteyev, Good, et al., 2004). Researchers in the tradition of practice theory argue that methodological approaches for analyzing visuals must look beyond the image motif in connecting visuals and practices (Edwards, 2012; Schreiber, 2020), taking visuals “as objects seriously” (Lobinger, 2016a, p.476). In this paper, we thus ponder how image types can be formed when a text-material understanding of images is taken as a basis. In order to describe how types can be created, it is first necessary to discuss what constitutes a type in social scientific analysis.

3 The concept of types and typology construction in visual communication research

Creating typologies for grasping complex phenomena is a common approach in qualitative social research (Haas & Scheibelhofer, 1998; Käßplinger, 2011; Kelle & Kluge, 2010; Kuckartz, 2006). Typologies are particularly suitable for analyzing extensive data material (Käßplinger, 2011), as the primary goal

is to reduce information while at the same time gaining and structuring knowledge (Käpplinger, 2011). Thus, typologies allow for pattern recognition and generalization (Kuckartz, 2006), based on the classification of empirical data material along certain characteristics (Kluge, 2000). A type generally refers to the totality of the bundled objects within a group (Käpplinger, 2011; Kelle & Kluge, 2010; Kluge, 2000).

In general, typologies strive for the greatest possible similarity of characteristics within the same type, *internal homogeneity*, and the greatest possible difference between the respective types, *external heterogeneity* (Kluge, 2000). This also applies to image typologies (M. G. Müller & Geise, 2015).

There are already several approaches to creating image types in visual communication research. For example, the quantitative image type analysis (Grittmann, 2007) which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches by linking the qualitative iconographic-iconological approach as developed by Erwin Panofsky (1979) and Aby Warburg with standardized content analysis (Grittmann, 2007). It allows for the identification of specific visual patterns, as well as for an in-depth analysis of selected images (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011). This approach focuses on recurring and typical visual representational traditions in order to capture the image content on a more abstract symbolic level (M. G. Müller & Geise, 2015) assuming that image content follows representational conventions related to certain themes instead of being freely composed. In other words, image types are mostly created relying on the level of representation, the so-called “textual” level according to the concept of *texto-materiality*. Previous research has used quantitative image type analysis particularly for examining news media coverage and journalism, carving out visualization strategies in the context of photojournalism in newspapers and on social media (Ammann & Grittmann, 2013; Ammann, Krämer, & Engesser, 2010; Drüeke, Peil, & Schreiber, 2022; Finger, 2021; Grittmann, 2007; Grittmann & Ammann, 2009, 2011). Also visualization patterns of politicians (Bernhardt & Liebhart, 2017; Klumpp, 2023), and in advertisement (Thiele & Atteneder, 2019) have been previ-

ously examined. Further, image type analysis has been adapted to audiovisual content (e.g., Grimm, 2018). There are several valuable proposals for extending the method, e.g., in multi-method designs. Grittmann (2019), for example, combines quantitative image type analysis and grounded theory, and Gerth (2012) aims at gathering insights into interactions between recipient and image content, and adds participatory image sorting to image type analysis. Participatory image sorting methods are generally useful approaches for creating image typologies from a user perspective, enabling the analysis of topics where verbalization is difficult (Lobinger & Brantner, 2020). For example, card sorting, and Q-sort have been used to assess user engagement, audience perception, as well as subjective and hidden meanings of different kinds of imagery, e.g., climate imagery (O’Neill, Boykoff, Niemeyer, & Day, 2013; O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009), and visual representations of politicians (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). Alongside the image sorting results, participants’ reasoning is often gathered in the form of qualitative interviews and included in the analysis. Verbal narration and meaning making are then included in typology creation. Furthermore, card sorting evaluations can then also be quantified in a next step, if needed.

Similarly, in visual metaphor analysis, image type creation can include verbal narrations of participants, depending on the research aim. Visual metaphor analysis is particularly important for enabling the assessment of “metaphorical thoughts or concepts” expressed as visuals (El Refaie, 2003, p. 78). When the aim is to assess thoughts and emotions of participants, e.g., about sensitive health topics, visual metaphor analysis is used in a participatory setting, e.g., participants creating drawings of infertility experiences, which were discussed in focus groups (El Refaie et al., 2020). For analysis and when creating typologies of these drawings, not only the drawings, but also women’s comments and explanations were considered for understanding the visual metaphors and overarching topics. Similarly, Krstić, Aiello, and Vladislavjević (2020), who analyzed visual metaphors in cartoons, combined the visual representation level with verbal data when

creating typologies. Also, Grant and Hundley (2008), looking at metaphors in press photos, considered the visuals, as well as verbal information (e.g., captions, titles), for coding categories and clustering into subthemes. Further approaches of creating image types are also computational (i.e., [semi]automated) methodological approaches of image clustering, that are becoming increasingly popular for dealing with large numbers of visuals. Most criteria for image type creation are content-related (e.g., Mooseder et al., 2023) and the main aim is to identify similarities in terms of motifs and visual representations for achieving internal homogeneity.

While the previously presented approaches rely on similarities on the level of representation, Müller (2020, para. 3) adopts a broader approach to bundling images and calls them “image clusters,” referring to images that are “compiled to form a greater whole, however this may be achieved [...]”

The term cluster [...] denotes a distinct structural characteristic which on the one hand makes analyzing these image compilations more complex than the classical analysis of individual images, yet on the other is also constitutive of the appearance of these particular symbolic forms. (Müller, 2020, para. 3)

Image clusters, according to Müller can be, e.g., albums, or exhibitions also on social media. Often, these clusters are already “found” or provided by participants, e.g., a photo album. These clusters are means of expression in their entirety, e.g., allowing participants to accentuate overarching topics and themes. Müller’s approach focuses on the essential role of image interplay within the cluster and how to examine them.

4 A texto-material approach for creating image types

Understanding images as texto-material artifacts requires a different approach to creating image types that does not only rely on the representational dimension of visuals. The methodological approach that we propose in this paper is based on creating image types based on both visual content, as well as

verbal information (i.e., participants’ narration *about* the images and respective visual practices), considering both the symbolic level and materiality of visuals in acknowledging visuals’ embeddedness in visual practices. This perspective results in proposing a multi-method approach for creating image types that uses both visual content analysis and qualitative interviews. Furthermore, our methodological approach allows for a qualitative approach despite a large visual data set, and a dynamic assessment of which image types should be further subjected to in-depth visual analysis. In the following, the methodological design of our approach will be briefly introduced. Before outlining it step by step on the example of an empirical study on visuals in close social relationships, the data material gathered in the sample study is explained.

4.1 Methodological design of the proposed approach

Against the backdrop of the concept of texto-materiality, we propose that image types can only be created by taking both the representational, content dimension as well as the material dimension of images into account, foregrounding the artifact-character of visuals. Although the resulting image types will be more heterogeneous in terms of image motifs (i.e., images with different motifs can be included in the same image type), material dimensions and practices in which the images are embedded are considered. Different types of data are combined: The identification of image types relies on the image contents as well as the participants’ narratives *about* the images, as obtained in qualitative interviews. We argue that this is very advantageous for two main reasons. First, in the field of personal photography and photo sharing, motifs are *not always* as clearly traceable to certain well-known motif traditions as, e.g., in the case of news journalism, even though early research on personal photography has identified certain conventions of visual representation (see e.g., the concept of Kodak-culture; Chalfen, 1987). In addition, however, we argue that there is much more to personal photography than visual representation, e.g., visual practices, contributing to the complexity of data in audience studies.

Second, depending on the research interest, what images *mean* to people can be more important than what is *shown* on the visual representation level and could be carved out with visual analysis. We see this quite clearly, e.g., in the field of ephemeral photography (e.g., Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). Consequently, a multi-methodological approach to image analysis leads to more comprehensive results and allows for dynamic decisions in terms of depth of analysis, which is especially important in large visual data sets, also in terms of research resources and time. As such, the analytic depth of each image type (i.e., whether it is necessary to follow-up with an in-depth visual analysis) is dynamically assessed during the creation of image types, based on all available information about the images (image contents, verbal narrations about images) resulting in an in-depth visual analysis of *selected* image types only. Our methodological approach aims at contributing to analyzing large numbers of visuals qualitatively and to solving the problem that not every image can be analyzed in-depth, based on a certain concept of visuals, i.e., a text-material perspective on visuals. Even though we have a quantitative component (i.e., large numbers of visuals), we propose a qualitative methodological approach to analyze them.

The following example of an empirical research project illustrates how our proposed approach can be applied. For the sake of understanding, the project will first be briefly outlined.

4.2 Data material

The research project focused on couple relationships and friendships in Switzerland¹ and explored the role and meaning of visuals and visual practices, as well as rules, norms and conflicts regarding visual communication, in communication repertoires of these relationships.

The collected visual material consisted of more than 1300 visuals in total. Visuals were obtained by a combination of quali-

tative interviews (i.e., pair and individual interviews) and creative visual methods (Lobinger, 2016b) of 21 couples and 9 friendship dyads in Switzerland. Creative visual methods, in particular network drawings (Gamper & Schönhuth, 2019) and participatory photo-elicitation (Harper, 1986, 2002; Kolb, 2008; Lapenta, 2012; Lobinger, 2016b), were applied in all interviews. Participants selected and brought three to five significant and/or typical visuals of the relationship to the interviews. Such visuals are laden with particular meanings for the couple. Not only the images themselves (Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2005), but also talking *about* these images (Awan & Gauntlett, 2011) gave insights into the role and meaning of the image for the couple.² Interviews were transcribed verbatim and examined with thematic analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) using both deductive and inductive categorization (Schreier, 2014). Case summaries of each case were created (Linke, 2010) providing an overview of the main characteristics and specifics of each couple regarding (visual) communication practices and picture overviews. Case summaries included picture descriptions for every picture discussed during the interviews. This facilitated the construction of the image types decisively as researchers had the participants' narration about the images directly at hand when examining the visuals.

In the following, we will outline the proposed image analytical methodological approach in detail.

4.3 Methodological procedure along the example study

We will use different examples from the empirical data material to show how we created image types within different steps. Generally, in the first step (*step 1*), the material is viewed, and first image types are created using a portion of the data material. Subsequently (*step 2*), the image types are revised and refined, while including further data material. Subsequently, (*step 3*), the image types are put in relation to each other, and common denominators are carved out. To visu-

1 For the merit of this paper, couple relationships are put at the center of analysis. The research project consists of 21 couples' cases and nine friends' cases. For more information on the participants see Lobinger, Lucchesi, & Tarnutzer (2024a).

2 The narrations often elicited further visual examples during the interviews, which were then often shown and discussed.

Figure 1: Images assigned to the image type “Classical dyadic pictures”



Note: Selected images of the image type. Source: Compilation by the authors.

alize these relationships between the image types, creating an overview scheme can be useful (*step 4*). In the next step (*step 5*), the image types and their characteristics are described. In a final step (*step 6*), certain image types can be subjected to an in-depth visual analysis. As image types are created in step 1, which is the most relevant part of our method, we will outline this step in more detail, while the other steps (*steps 2–6*) are briefly described.

4.3.1 Step 1: Viewing material and formation of first image types

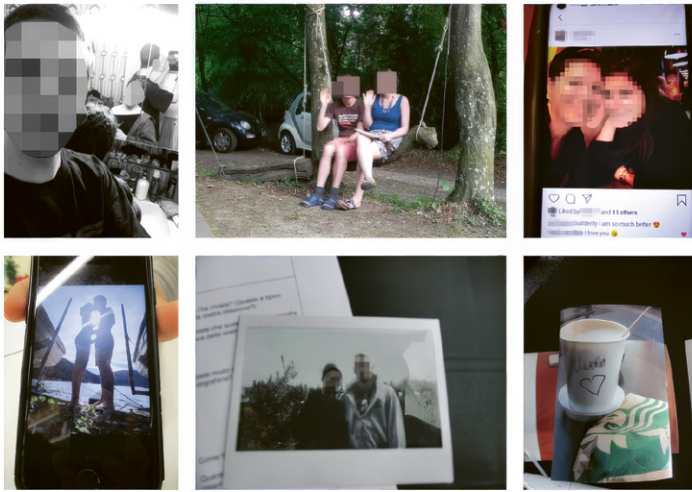
In step 1, a first portion of the data material was explored by discussing the single images with the whole research team, in this case among three researchers involved in the project. We started by printing obtained visuals, together with picture descriptions that were created based on participants' verbal narration in the interviews. Later, we moved to creating the types digitally by assigning tags and categories to the images, again, accompanied by image descriptions, on a secure data platform. Thus, visual and verbal material was examined together throughout the analysis. Following a text-to-material perspective on images, image types were constructed

alongside three classification criteria: (1) the image *motif*, (2) the role of the visual *object* within the practice, and (3) the overall *meaning* of the image for the couple. In some cases, we learned more from the visual level of the image, and in others, from the verbal information *about* the image. Images that were mentioned in the interviews but that participants did not show us, were also included in the image typology. We consider this an advantage of the proposed method as it allows the “unseen” to be taken into account as well (Thomson, 2021).

This approach of creating image types complicated the procedure in terms of achieving internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Kelle & Kluge, 2010; M.G.Müller & Geise, 2015), because for each image, researchers had to decide what was to be emphasized, the image motif, the role of the visual object within the practice, or the overall meaning of the image for the relationship (Lobinger, 2022). Of course, all three criteria are important and are entangled. However, usually, one characteristic is particularly protruding.

In the following, we illustrate our approach and our decision making with several examples.

Figure 2: Images assigned to the image type “First picture / early pictures of the couple”



Note: Selected images of the image type. Source: Compilation by the authors.

An example where images were combined into an image type based on *similar motifs* (Figure 1),³ similar to content-based approaches to image type creation (e.g., quantitative image type analysis or visual content analysis), are what we called “Classical dyadic pictures.”

Usually, these are photographs of couples taken by other people. Couples are shown in traditional poses in non-everyday situations (e.g., vacations, celebrations) and little experimentation in front of the camera, evoking references to socio-cultural traditions of depicting couples and friends (Schreiber, 2015). Usually, the couple performs “being a couple.” In this image type, the visual representation level is central, which is why an in-depth visual analysis proves useful for gaining further insights on image motifs, aesthetics, and conventions as briefly outlined in step 6. Also, materiality is a particularly important aspect of classical dyadic pictures; these visuals are kept in different material forms, e.g., often as tangible

printouts, as well as integrated in analog photo albums.

The image type “First picture/early pictures of the couple,” as a second example, particularly highlights advantages of our methodological approach. Pictures in this image type are highly different on a motif-level but have important commonalities (Figure 2).

For example, these images do have similar meanings for the couple. In fact, our couples emphasized the special value of these first or early pictures in the relationship as important visual evidence of the relationship’s initiation phase (Tarnutzer & Lobinger, 2022). Our findings have shown that *having* “first pictures” is particularly important, especially in a material, tangible form. Couples like to keep and revisit their first visual proof of the relationship, e.g., by touching these visuals, looking at them (together), and (re)sending them to each other (Tarnutzer & Lobinger, 2022). In fact, previous research has emphasized the importance of communicative remembrance of relationship initiation throughout the relationship (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). However, we only learn about the special meanings and material uses of these pictures in

3 All pictures included in this paper are anonymized (i.e., all identifiers are eliminated) and reproduced with the permission of the participants.

participants' verbal narration; looking at the image motif alone would not suffice for creating or assigning to an image type. An example is the Starbucks-picture of Cara and Mike (Figure 2, bottom right), that illustrates these decision-making processes of how we created our image types. We assigned this image to the image type "First picture/early pictures of the relationship." Based on the motif level, this picture would have been assigned to an image type in "Sharing the moment," which is unsurprisingly an important image type in our study as well.⁴ However, we learn from the verbal narration that it is actually their first "couple picture," or rather, a substitute for the first picture together. As Cara and Mike were having an affair during their first year of relationship, taking "official" couple pictures was not yet possible, which again underscores the conventions and norms with respect to couple photographs (Figure 1). Instead, Mike took a picture of their coffee cups at Starbucks, where they had their first date(s). As Mike underlines, this picture fulfils important memory functions of their very first steps toward a relationship. Similar to other "first picture/early pictures of the couple," we learn from the couple's verbal narration that the image gained importance retrospectively (e.g., Mike sent this picture to Cara much later than it was taken, differently to images that are used for "sharing the moment"). As the relationship proliferated, this placeholder image became an "official" first couple picture and allowed for referring back to where it all started, fostering collective remembrance of relationship initiation.

M: [...] Or, that (*laughs*).
 C: Starbucks.
 M: Well, not only Starbucks. She just likes latte macchiato, and we started off //
 C: // always Starbucks //
 M: // often, often met there.
 C: Yep.
 M: And I always kept the mug as a souvenir, I don't know (*laughs*). I always had the feeling, that maybe I won't see her anymore, but I'll have

the cup instead. And the picture. I took a picture of it and sent it to her.
 (Cara & Mike, pair interview)⁵

In addition to creating image types based on the visual material obtained, image types were also created based on verbal information only. Participants *talked* about certain important images but did not show them in the interviews. Nevertheless, we argue that these images are important images within relationships and should be considered when creating image types, even though we do not have detailed insights into e.g., the motif level of these images (e.g., aesthetics). In the image type "Sexting practices," used here as a third example illustrating our approach to creating image types, all information stems from the verbal narration, except for two placeholder pictures that Cara and Mike showed as substitutes for sexting pictures. Nevertheless, we know that sexting *is* an important image type, even if we did not actually *see* or *have* the images. Cara and Mike, for example, mentioned sexting pictures in all three interviews but brought placeholder-images as they did not want to show their own nude pictures. Thus, we learn that sexting images are important in their relationship. Also, we get many insights about the visual representation level of these pictures, social functions, visual practices, (changes in) frequencies of exchange, etc., as the following quote illustrates:

M: // I still have the pictures she sent me from when we had an affair and I always look at them.
 (.) For me.
 IS: Why?
 C: Body part/ that is, during intercourse //
 M: // Longing.
 C: // we didn't have any photos. No, we didn't, did we?
 M: // longing.
 C: No. Just one at a time, just body parts that we've sent.
 IS: Mhm (*affirmative*). In what kind of situations?
 M: Um //

⁴ For an overview and descriptions of all image types created in the project see Lobinger, Lucchesi, & Tarnutzer (2024b).

⁵ All quotes included in this paper have been translated by the authors from the original Swiss German into English, participants' names are pseudonymized, and are reproduced with permission.

Figure 3: Images assigned to the image type “Functional images”



Note: Selected images of the image type. Source: Compilation by the authors.

C: // Shower. After the shower, or //
 M: // Or sometimes/ yes. (...) But just when we haven't seen each other for a long time, that she sends it, or that she/ or at that time, it was like this.
 C: "That's what you're missing out on" (*laughs*).
 M: Yes.
 C: "You haven't had that for a long time, unfortunately."
 M: // "I miss that." //
 C: "I miss that."
 M: Yes. But that's //
 C: // And now we just write it from time to time, like that. But also, not every day anymore
 (Cara & Mike, pair interview)

Thus, in contrast to other approaches, e.g., visual content analysis, our methodological approach also looks at what is *not* "there," allowing for grasping image types of images that were not shown in visual form during the interview, but that participants talked about. Considering also often "unseen" pictures is an important aspect that previous research on visuals and visual practices underlined (see, e.g., Thomson, 2021).

A fourth example of image type creation based on our methodological approach are "Functional images." In this image type, visuals' embedment in practices is particularly

important for the relationship. Images can be easily assigned to this image type, even though image motifs are highly heterogeneous (Figure 3).

In the verbal narration, participants emphasized that these images were shared to communicate something to the absent partner that was relevant for decisions in the very moment. For example, Raul wanted to let his partner Tobias know that the party venue and hotel venue where they planned to spend New Year's Eve were very close. Instead of telling Tobias in a lengthy text message, Raul screenshotted Google maps showing the spatial proximity of those venues and sent the image via WhatsApp:

IS: Yes. Is this the last picture/ or what is the last picture we sent you via WhatsApp?

R: Via WhatsApp it is [...], that is/ we are going to a party on New Year's Eve in [city 1 in French-speaking Switzerland] and I just sent it "Hey listen, the hotel is just next to the club" //

T: // Mhm (*affirmative*).

R: // So to speak. We didn't know that, and he said "Ah, that's super cool."

(Raul & Tobias, pair interview)

In fact, the visual modality, rather than verbal descriptions, is particularly suitable for

explaining spatial relations (Lobinger, 2012; M. G. Müller & Geise, 2015). Thus, the image serves as a quick substitute for extensive verbal descriptions. These images lose the significance for the dyad after fulfilling the purpose, e. g., communicating spatial proximity as in the example mentioned before (Lobinger, 2022). The image itself is not considered important anymore afterwards or treasured as an important visual artifact. Rather, these functional images are often deleted, contrary to other images, e. g., in the image type “First pictures,” that are kept and cherished. Accordingly, an in-depth visual analysis of this image type would not be very fruitful for our research aim. However, this is not to say that these images do not have importance within the relationship. On the contrary, functional photography was found to be a frequent and relevant form of visual communication for simplifying the micro-coordination of the couple’s everyday life (Hepp, Berg, & Roitsch, 2011; Ling & Yttri, 2002).

Following the procedure indicated by these four examples, all data material was assigned to a corresponding image type. Already in this first step, a multitude of different image types was created. Some of the image types were not yet fully developed in terms of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Käpplinger, 2011; M. G. Müller & Geise, 2015), but some of them were already clear-cut, such as “Functional images.”

4.3.2 Step 2: Refinement loop(s) and inclusion of further data material

In a second step, the image types were discussed. All images assigned to an image type were examined again by the researchers, discussed and, if necessary, assigned to another image type. Additionally, further data material was included to test the image types’ functionality and saturation. Saturation means that no new image type emerged, i. e., that all images could be assigned to an already existing image type. This collaborative categorization process was done until the entire data material was assigned. Image type refinement and inclusion of further data material can be repeated as often as necessary.

4.3.3 Step 3: Relations between image types

In a third step, an attempt was made to relate the image types to each other and to

find common denominators. We saw, for example, that visuals of and visual practices with children and animals were quite similar, which is why these image types were summarized in the category “Children and Animals.” Also, differences in image types and categories were important for finding relations; While some image types were found to point to the future (e. g., in “Inspo”), others clearly showed a strong reference to the past (e. g., in “Memory”). Also, we have seen that some image types are important in the very moment (e. g., in “Sharing the moment”), while in others, visuals are rather important retrospectively (e. g., in “Firsties”).⁶ Thus, in this step, similarities, and differences of image types were carved out. At the same time, image types were revised by rediscussing each image type. In the process, image types became increasingly clear-cut.

4.3.4 Step 4: Creation of overview scheme of image types (typology)

In a fourth step, the aim was to visualize the relations and common denominators of the image types. Therefore, an overall typology of image types was created (Kelle & Kluge, 2010). In total, we created 13 categories with 43 image types. Due to space constraints, we zoom into the image types in “Firsties” (Table 1), rather than presenting the whole typology (Lobinger et al., 2024b).

Table 1: The image types in “Firsties”

“Firsties”
First picture / early pictures of the couple
(First) trips together
The ‘paparazzi’ picture
The ‘hidden’ couple

Note: Overview of the image types in “Firsties” as a part of our typology.

The image types within “Firsties” have in common that they include pictures that were taken in the relationship initiation phase or refer to this beginning phase of the couple, which marks an important turning point for

6 For an overview and descriptions of all image types created in the project see Lobinger et al. (2024b).

the relationship. These image types include first pictures or early pictures in the relationship (“First picture/early picture of the relationship”), but also pictures of first/early trips (“(First) trips together”), and images stemming from the dating phase where couples were not yet in an “official” relationship (“The ‘paparazzi’ picture,” “The ‘hidden’ couple”). These pictures from relationship initiation were found to be retrospectively integrated into the visual chronology of the couple as important visual artifacts and early traces and visual evidence of the relationship and therefore bundled within the category “Firsties.”

4.3.5 Step 5: Description of image types

In a fifth step, all image types were described in detail. Information on all three classification criteria, i.e., the motif (i.e., what was shown on the image), the practice (i.e., what the image was used for), and the overall meaning of the image for the couple, were taken into account, according to the adopted text-material understanding of visuals (Gómez-Cruz & Siles, 2021; Lobinger, 2016a; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012).

4.3.6 Step 6: In-depth visual analysis

In a final step, we analyzed *selected* image types for a further detailed visual analysis. As explained previously, neither *all* image types nor all images *within* an image type were analyzed. We have seen that for some image types, such as “Functional images,” an in-depth visual analysis would not make sense with respect to our research aim, as in these pictures, the motif is only secondary, and the picture loses its value after sending. For other image types, however, such as “Classical dyadic pictures,” where the representation level is highly relevant, an in-depth analysis is fruitful, and prototypical images for the respective image type were analyzed in more detail.

Even though we cannot go into detail regarding in-depth visual analysis within the present paper, we would like to briefly present two examples illustrating the benefits. In-depth analysis of images in the image type “Classical dyadic pictures” has shown that couples perform in a traditional, normatively acceptable way in front of the camera without experimenting, producing traditional dy-

adic pictures that are aesthetically pleasing, and used for relationship presentation (e.g., in photo albums, social media profiles). The motifs follow conventional patterns and gender stereotypes regarding the poses and repeat and reconfirm conventions of everyday photography (e.g., getting close to the other person in the picture, standing still, posing, looking at the photographers/camera, often smiling into the camera). On a more general level, the image type combines images of couples that present themselves as couples and thus perform accordingly, suggesting that agreement on the character of the relationship has been reached. Quite differently, in the image type “The ‘paparazzi’ picture,” there is very little or no posing by the couples, especially not like “classical” dyadic pictures. “Paparazzi”-pictures are typically taken with low photographic quality because of great spontaneity in taking the pictures usually with the smartphone, often from hidden positions and with much zooming. Photographers’ aim is teasing the couple in the sense of “Look how cute you are” in a time where the relationship is not yet considered “official.” Only through couples’ verbal explanation it gets clear that these pictures are similarly treasured as early, if not first visual evidence of the couple relationship even though they look very differently on a visual representation level. In fact, “paparazzi”-pictures gain importance in retrospective, as the relationship progresses, and the couple can look back at their “cute” first steps as a couple, when “officially posing” together might not even have been possible from a normative point of view. “Paparazzi”-pictures are taken out of their original context (i.e., photographed in a random situation) and transferred to a new, couple-specific context of use (i.e., visual evidence of relationship initiation as an important part of couples’ visual chronology) where they are treasured as important visual artifacts. These two examples, “Classical dyadic photos” and “The ‘paparazzi’ picture” show that by in-depth analyzing pictures within some of the types, we get important insights into relationship performance, image aesthetics, normative assumptions and expectations, relationship presentation, agents in creating visuals, photographic devices etc., and ultimately, about the role of visuals in couple relationships.

If the motifs within an image type were heterogeneous, additional contrasting images were chosen for analysis. Many approaches to qualitative image analysis are suitable for this last step of detailed visual analysis (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Rose, 2014; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001), such as the iconographic-iconological approach (Grittmann & Ammann, 2009; Panofsky, 1979). We based our in-depth analysis on various approaches (Breckner, 2007; Grittmann & Lobinger, 2018; Mayrhofer & Schachner, 2013), considering visual design features, as well as contextual information, e.g., context of production and use.

5 Discussion

In the present paper we have shown that looking beyond the motif is indispensable when assuming a text-material perspective on images. Carving out which component (motif, practice, or overall meaning) of the image is protruding within the relationship is one of the main strengths of our approach. Using the example of the image type “First picture / early pictures of the couple,” it became clear that due to the heterogeneity of the motifs, a corresponding image type could not be created based on the motif level alone. The contextual information obtained in the interviews, and the narrations the participants created about the picture, were essential for identifying image types. Images in this image type are perceived as “real couple pictures” by the participants and thus, considered very precious and meaningful. At the same time, these images do not follow representational conventions of couple representations as partners are neither necessarily depicted in their roles as partners nor depicted at all. Our findings show that couples seek to create a visual chronology or biography of the relationship, and the first images of the couple constitute an essential component of this chronology (Tarnutzer & Lobinger, 2022).

Similarly, the image type “Functional images” could only be created by including contextual information. An analysis of the image motifs only would not have been

worthwhile, as image motifs are secondary, and lose significance after exchanging. Thus, against the background of our research interest, we did not analyze this image type by means of in-depth visual analysis.

Furthermore, we have shown that for some image types, no visual data material might be available. Thus, some image types were created based on verbal information only, as we have seen on the example of the image type “Sexing practices.” Still, these images are present in couple relationships and need to be considered even though we do not have any information on the visual representation level.

Our approach of creating image types necessarily leads to more heterogeneous image types in terms of motifs. However, we argue that the approach was beneficial and suitable for addressing our research question about the role and relevance of visuals and visual practices in couple relationships adopting a text-material perspective on visuals. The complexity notwithstanding, image types were coherent. In this regard, collaboratively constructing image types proved to be highly fruitful. The consistency of the image types was further confirmed by the fact that only few new image types needed to be created when the whole material was bundled in the image types. Hence, we argue that also image types that are heterogeneous on a motif-level with varying relevance of image motifs can be consistent and intersubjectively applicable.

There are also image types in which the image content and the motifs are essential. In the image type “Classical dyadic pictures,” for example, the way in which the couple is represented is important. In these cases, participants assume certain poses or follow representational conventions of couple depictions. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the visuals is highly important for examining habitualized representational conventions that are hardly verbalizable. In this case, an analysis of the verbal accounts about visuals would fall short. To give an example, almost all participants described selfies as something “stupid” that others do a lot and too often, and as something they do not do themselves. Looking at the visual data obtained, howev-

er, we found that in nearly all couples' visual repertoire selfies were not only present but considered important and meaningful (for more detail see Lobinger, 2023). Moreover, they followed representational conventions with typical poses and angles. Consequently, we argue for a combination of the analysis of the verbal accounts and visual analysis. Furthermore, in our methodological approach the individual image is analyzed in relation to other images within the couple as well as across couples for identifying additional information on representation conventions.

A further main strength of our approach is that the decision whether an image type will be subject to a detailed visual analysis is made when the image types are created, rather than in advance. In some cases, no further visual analysis is required, as shown on the example of the image type "Functional images." In other words, we propose a dynamic process that requires flexible decisions during the process of analysis itself, but ultimately facilitates handling large amounts of visual data.

6 Conclusion

In this paper we proposed an image type analysis that is based on a texto-material concept of images as both visual and material images. The detailed procedure of such a method was illustrated on the example of a study interested in the role and meaning of visuals and visual practices in close social relationships. Our method differs from other approaches to creating image types (e.g., quantitative image type analysis). Image types are created based on image motifs, the role of visual objects within practices, and the overall meaning of images for the participants, leading to more heterogeneous image types on a motif-level. Image type construction was achieved by analyzing different types of data material in combination; the images, as well as the verbal narratives *about* these images in the interview transcripts. We have provided a step-by-step guide for analyzing a large data set of visuals qualitatively with dynamic decisions for in-depth qualitative visual analysis.

Transferring the proposed method to other contexts is desirable. However, this certainly depends primarily on the research interest and concept of visuals used. We considered images as texto-material artifacts that, on the one hand, convey meaning symbolically and that, on the other hand, are considered (material) objects in visual practices. Following this understanding, it would not make sense to look only at the image motifs, thus considering the symbolic level alone. Also, studying material aspects alone would be insufficient. Our proposed approach is advantageous for analyzing visuals in their embeddedness in communication practices, taking into account the material dimension of visuals as well. Image motifs and visuals' material dimensions as objects are analyzed in combination, based on qualitative interviews. In future studies using our suggested approach for creating image types, relevant contextual information about how pictures are actually used could be provided, focusing directly on practices, for example with the help of ethnographic approaches or observations, rather than reported practices as in our study.

Despite its advantages, our approach also has several limitations. One limitation emerged based on the methodological approach, i. e., photo-elicitation and visual elicitation; some participants did not prepare the 3–5 typical and/or important images prior to the pair interview. Instead, these participants showed larger image clusters (M.R. Müller, 2020), e.g., photo albums, showing us one picture after the other, in the order predefined by the cluster. However, the information about the single images remained scarce and the role for the relationships was not clear, which is why we could not include these images in image types but kept them as contextual material in the image type "Picture after picture." A further limitation is that some steps are quite time-consuming. For example, creating all the picture descriptions, combining the visual and verbal information, as well as discussing the images one by one with the whole team was quite laborious. Nevertheless, the paper emphasizes several advantages of the proposed method, such as the increased informative value and density

of the results that are based on interviews *and* visual data (i. e., visual content, as well as what couples *do* with visuals and in what material form) and the dynamic assessment of analytical depth based on which dimension (i. e., image motif, the role of the visual *object*, or image meaning), which ultimately reduces the effort and the resources needed while not neglecting aspects that merit in-depth analysis. We hope that this proposal will contribute to methodological discussions and innovations in the lively field of visual communication research.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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