



## SOCIAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH THROUGH VISUAL METHODS An International Methodological and Instrumental Review

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a systematic methodological and instrumental review of research in social communication using visual methods. The main objective is to establish the current state of research involving this specific methodological approach. The study examines the international use of visual methods in articles indexed in WoS and Scopus, the leading scientific databases. It analyses mediated visual creation as a methodological lens for studying social communication, providing a guide for future research in the field. To achieve this, the article offers a detailed description of the visual techniques employed, their practical applications, and the research objects addressed across 30 studies. The findings indicate a growing adoption of visual methods in communication studies, a trend reflected in high-impact journals.*

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## 1. Introduction

Audiovisual records have long been used to study culture and society. Not least, the richness of audiovisual techniques for documenting or interpreting reality from a visual anthropological perspective has been more than demonstrated (Pink, 2012). The distinction between image-as-object and image-as-tool began to be established in visual sociology with Harper (2002). Subsequently, the visualisation of results was added as a third avenue, leading to the triad: sociology of the image, visual sociology, and sociology in image (Maresca and Meyer, 2013).

Visual methods draw directly from anthropology and visual sociology to become a multidisciplinary field characterised by the use of visual creation devices as a fundamental part of the various research stages. Consequently, the challenges of visual sociology and anthropology (related to the impurity of the image) are carried over by visual methods into other disciplines, which inherit not only the techniques and approaches but also their complexities. The extraction, extrapolation, transformation, and adaptation of these tools to research and analysis objects within the social sciences and humanities have given rise to this emerging methodological framework.

The existing consensus regarding the term visual methods points to the instrumental use of the image and the incorporation of visual creation (particularly mediated) as an essential part of the scientific process. Literature reviews and existing manuals exemplify the international interest in clarifying the use of these methods, as well as the need to compile experiences, systematise techniques, and unify terminology Catoir-Brisson and Jankleviciute, 2014; Gómez-Cruz et al., 2017; Ibanez-Bueno and Marín, 2021<sup>a</sup>; Pain, 2012; Pawels, 2010, 2016; Prosser and Loxley, 2008; Rose, 2001; Yvart et al, 2023). The dissemination of these reviews, the wide range of techniques employed, and the lack of standardised terminology largely explain this situation, which is understandable given that this is an emerging methodological field within communication.

The lack of studies analysing the use of specific methods in communication research has been noted by several authors (Gómez-Escalonilla, 2021; Martínez-Nicolás, 2020), Meta-research in this field has primarily focused on research output (Fernández-Quijada and Masip, 2013; Gómez-Escalonilla and Caffarel-Serra, 2022), while studies examining aspects such as theoretical frameworks or research methods remain scarce (Gómez-Diago, 2019). These difficulties stem from methodological and terminological divergences, a problem also identified by the authors.

Therefore, to fully understand the visual stimuli surrounding us, it is essential to develop methodologies that go beyond mere observation, as suggested by Pink (2012). Social research can harness visual creation tools to comprehend reality through its own representations. However, understanding technologically mediated visual creation as an epistemological tool requires daring to grasp a social phenomenon through the inherent complexity of the image.

Mitchell (2016 [1986]) highlights the undisciplined nature of the image and its practices as a means of breaking traditional disciplinary boundaries. In the same vein, visual studies emerge as a novel discipline at the crossroads of the fractures opened by all image practices, at the confluence of the indiscipline of its object itself. Focusing on the study of social and media communication, it seems particularly pertinent to put knowledge of visual mediation at the service of research. In this regard, the analysis of academic production is necessary for monitoring scientific advances and the evolution of research objectives and methods (Ioannidis, 2018; Piñeiro-Naval, 2019). Since this approach encompasses a set of tools rather than a method with a detailed protocol for technical application and execution, defining the scope of visual methods is no easy task. To provide clarity on this matter, this research is conducted based on an initial research question: How are visual methods applied to investigate social communication, and what techniques and tools are used?

Specific questions:

1. What are the predominant methods, techniques, and/or tools?
2. In what types of research are they used, and how are they applied?
3. Within what epistemological framework are they situated, if included?
4. Is there uniformity in the terminological usage?
5. What are the research objects addressed?
6. Do the studies obtain or present visual results?

Based on these questions, the following general objectives are proposed:

1. Explain the application of visual methods in the study of social communication at an international level based on research published in the leading scientific databases.
2. Identify the principal visual techniques and tools used in social communication research.

## 2. Methodology

This work combines a systematic literature review with the instrumental review approach proposed by Pain (2012) to examine the implementation of methods and techniques. To this end, a meta-research has been conducted based on the search and documentary analysis of scientific production in the field of social communication at an international level.

### 2.1. Systematised Searches

The systematic review of scientific literature in the field of visual studies and methods in communication was conducted following the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Prisma, s/f; Page et al., 2021). After preliminary explorations to identify the most relevant time frame and search terms, a focused systematic search was carried out in the WoS and Scopus databases, the primary sources of globally published high-impact articles with sufficiently sophisticated search engines to apply filters aligned with our objectives. The choice of these multidisciplinary databases is based on the interdisciplinary nature of communication research, as well as their international scope and the quality standards imposed by indices such as the Journal Citation Report (WoS) and the Scimago Journal Rank (Scopus).

Therefore, the work focuses on research employing visual methods within the field of communication at an international level and compiles studies published between 2011 and 2023 (inclusive) in Spanish and English. The starting year was selected due to the absence of articles found prior to this date in the databases used during preliminary exploratory searches. The search and selection process was carried out in several phases. Initially, the available database filters were used, supplemented by a manual review. This yielded a total of 104 preliminary results: 22 in the Social Sciences Citation Index of WoS and 82 in Scopus. Subsequently, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, focusing on the effective use of visual methods in empirical research. Articles whose use of images was limited solely to the research object, those that did not clearly specify the methodology, systematic reviews, and theoretical articles were excluded. Duplicates or articles not meeting the established requirements were also removed. As a final result, 30 studies applying visual methods in the field of communication were selected.

The details of the searches and terms employed were as follows:

1. The search in WoS was conducted using the following criteria: (AB=(visual-methods) AND WC=(Communication)) + AB=(métodos-visuales) AND WC=(Comunicación)<sup>1</sup>. The search yielded a total of 22 results, of which 4 were excluded for not actually employing visual methods (after reading) or due to duplication. This resulted in a final total of 13 texts.
2. The following search strategy was used in Scopus: TITLE-ABS-KEY (communication) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (visual-methods) + TITLE-ABS-KEY (comunicación) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (métodos-visuales). This generated 82 results, of which a manual selection was made based on the inclusion of journals in the communication category or the relevance of the topic addressed. Finally, 24 articles were selected, reduced to 17 after verifying that they indeed used visual methods through a cross-reading of the abstract and text.

### 2.2. Instrumental Analysis of the Visual Method and its Application

The methodological-instrumental analysis focuses on identifying which visual methods are utilised, how they are applied, and which techniques and tools they involve. Furthermore, it acknowledges the methodological role of images within the research process and assesses whether the studies present or do not present visual results as part of their findings, enabling a deeper understanding of the role of visual material in data collection and analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Two searches were carried out, in Spanish and in English with the same Boolean syntax in both languages. The differences between the final formulas of both databases respond to the differences between the filters allowed to limit the searches in each of them.

When tables and figures are included in the body of the article, position them after the paragraph in which they are described. When citing the source of information, it must be included at the bottom of the figure in a “source line”. Tables and figures must be numbered and carry a brief and descriptive title.

**Table 1.** Methodological-instrumental analysis model

Categories	Variables	
Reference data	Full article reference	
	University(ies) of affiliation	
	Country	
	Discipline	
	Object of study	
Epistemological and theoretical frameworks	(Descriptive) Relationship between epistemological approach and visual approach to the object of study	
	Methodological approach	Quantitative, qualitative or mixed
Methodology	Method	Documentary
		Conversational
		Observational
		Experimental
		Creative
		(+ combinations)
	Data collection/creation techniques	Interview, questionnaire, participant or systematised observation, focus group, documentary-videography, etc.
Exposure of visual results	Visual tools and media devices used	Photography, video, illustration, graphic design, other
	Incorporation of visual creation	Creation yes or no
	Technique of analysis	Use and nature of the image
	Has visual results	Yes or no + descriptive
	Function of visual outputs	Dissemination, illustration, alternative science writing
	Form of visual outputs (narrative)	Descriptive

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

For the development of the model, consideration is given to the methodological categorisation of Mapcom (Mapa de la Investigación en Comunicación en las Universidades Españolas de 2007 a 2018), one of the key studies on communication research in Spain. The authors address the issue of methodological plurality by establishing a taxonomy based on levels. Firstly, they differentiate data collection methods according to the primary source into conversational, observational, documentary, and experimental (Caffarel et al., 2018; Gómez-Escalonilla, 2021).

In this case, the decision was made to include a fifth option: creative methods, a category originating from art and humanities (Mannay, 2017); in addition to incorporating the possibility of composite methods (conversational-creative, observational-creative, documentary-creative, and experimental-creative). The various methods have been stipulated based on the primary source of data collection. Thus, documentary methods are those that rely on the gathering and analysis of pre-existing documents, which may be of diverse nature. Conversational methods obtain data directly from dialogue with the researched subjects, while observational methods derive from the actions of subjects as observed by the researcher. Experimental methods are those in which variables are manipulated, and results are compared, and creative methods are those that start from the creation of data, whether by the subjects, the researchers, or through their collaborative work. All of these can be applied in a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed manner depending on the research object, the intention of the study, and the chosen techniques.

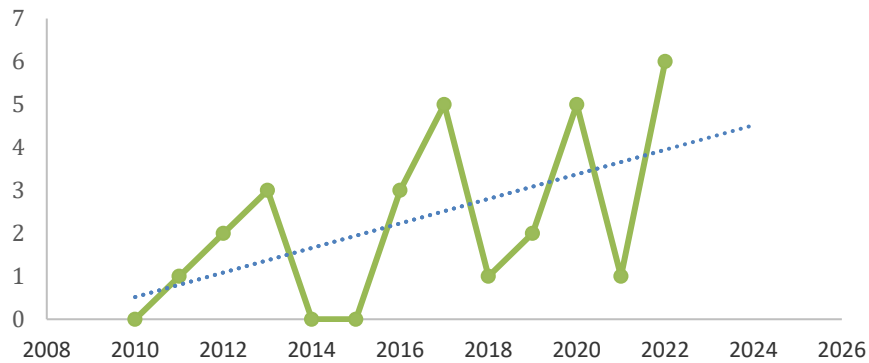
### 3. Results and Discussion

The final sample comprises 30 interdisciplinary empirical studies that link communication with political science, anthropology, and urban studies. All articles present the use of qualitative methods, with the exception of one that employs a mixed approach. The primary journal where these works are published is *Visual Communication* (33%), followed by *Media, Culture & Society*, *International Journal of*

*Communication*, and *Media and Communication*, all internationally recognised in the field of communication. Others focus on social and urban issues, such as *Urban Planning* or *Social & Cultural Geography*, featuring studies that utilise tools like photography and videography to analyse the transformation of cities and their visual complexity.

Regarding temporal evolution, it is observed that from 2015 onwards, there has been a progressive increase in the use of visual methods, particularly in urban studies and communication.

**Figure 1.** Number of publications per year and trend line

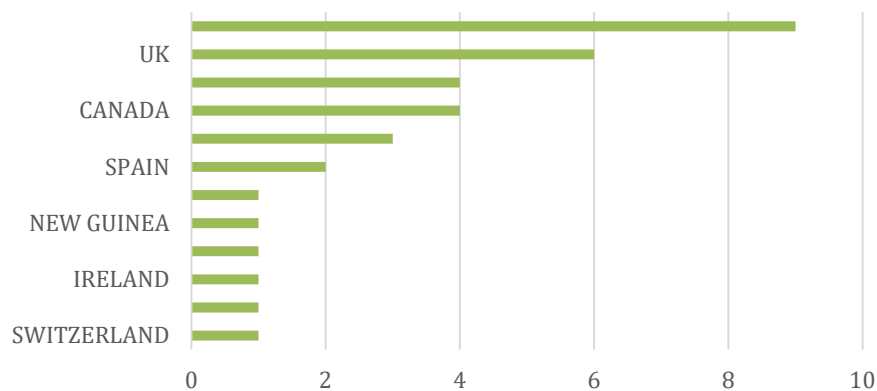


Source: own elaboration, 2025.

### 3.1. Diversity of Universities and Countries Represented

The studies analysed originate from various universities and academic institutions worldwide, reflecting the plurality of methodological and cultural approaches in the use of visual techniques in communication research.

**Figure 2.** Ranking according to number of publications by country



Source: own elaboration, 2025

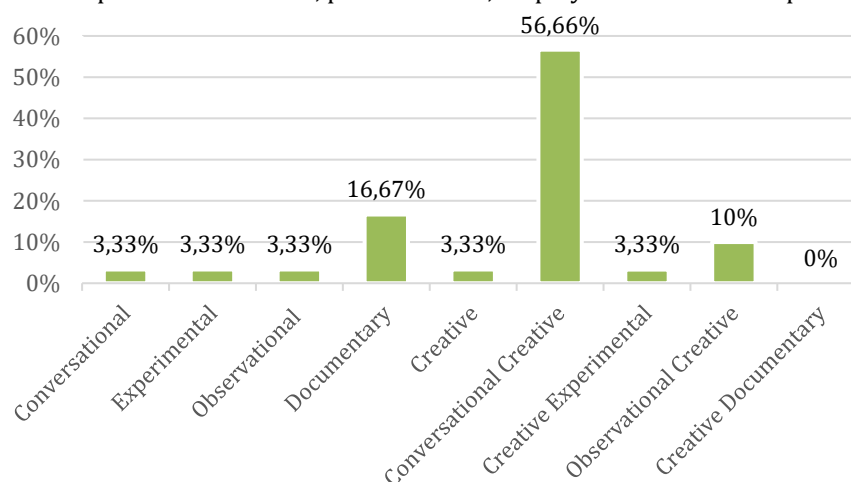
Studies are found to come from a wide variety of universities: University of Brighton, University of South Australia, Monash University, University of San Diego, Lancaster University, University of Copenhagen, Columbia University, and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, among others. Universities in the United States lead the ranking based on the number of publications by country, followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, countries with research groups that have a recognised track record in this field. Notably absent are European countries such as France and Latin American countries, both cases showing no impact in these databases despite having a well-known history in the use of visual methodologies as evidenced, for example, by the International Conference on Visual and Multimodal Methods, which in 2025 held its fifth edition (Ibáñez-Bueno et al., 2017; Cyrulnik, 2021; Thiburce et al., 2021; Catoir-Brisson and Jankleviciute, 2014; Flores and Torresan, 2018; Yvart et al., 2023; Emery and Marín, 2024; Le Goarer, 2024).

## 3.2. Application of Visual Methodologies

### 3.2.1. Methods, Techniques and Tools Utilised

Seventy percent of the studies combine traditional methods (observational, documentary, conversational, and experimental) with creative visual approaches, with the combination of conversational methods and visual techniques standing out (56.66%), thus indicating a predominance of the conversational-creative method.

**Figure 3.** Proportion of methods, pure or mixed, employed across the sample of articles.



Source: own elaboration, 2025

The combination of methodological approaches stands out due to the integration of traditional techniques with visual creation tools. For example, the observational-creative combination involves filming participant observation or the use of photography as a visual recording tool during observation (which could complement or substitute note-taking) (Komarova and McKnight, 2013; Heng, 2022). In those studies, opting for the mixed conversational-creative method (57%), the creative techniques employed are as follows:

- Interviews with visual creation: this can involve an audiovisual recording of the interview as a “multimodal interview” (Castelló et al., 2021), aimed at enabling a subsequent analysis that includes, for instance, non-verbal communication and other elements typically omitted in textual or transcribed interviews. Another option is the application of elicitation using images created with tools such as photography, visual storytelling, drawing, or graphic design. The study by Warfield (2017), for example, uses the taking and subsequent publication of selfies on social media to explore the expressive potential of participants.
- Creation of visual archives: this technique, which can be applied participatively or individually, involves the collaborative creation of images that later form the corpus of analysis and may collectively constitute the research object.
- Mobile visual methods: some techniques, such as the walking with video approach developed by Sarah Pink (2007), combine participant observation with visual creation (photography or video) to document visual perceptions of urban space. This category could also include techniques that monitor movements and create routes or itineraries with data visualisation.
- Videography: this technique is employed in ethnographic studies and can be conducted individually, participatively, or collaboratively, with participants actively contributing to the creation of audiovisual content in the latter cases. It also encompasses research documentaries or the use of filmed observation, a videographic version of participant observation that employs video as a tool to record the researcher’s gaze, becoming a relational instrument (Marín, 2022). It is included in this mixed creative-conversational approach as it is commonly combined with interviews (Verena et al., 2016).

Of the remaining 43%, 30% work with single approaches. The documentary approach (16.67%) involves working with pre-existing visual documents and creating image corpora using collection techniques such as “found images” (Mannay, 2017) or the “accumulation of visual material” (Phillips, 2011). In these cases, as in practices like archive cinema or collage, the researcher does not merely



collect images but engages in a process of curation, selection, and recontextualisation of visual material, which in turn generates new meanings (Contreras and Marín, 2023). Continuing with methods that do not involve image creation but do include visual techniques, we find photo-elicitation or video-elicitation. Photo-elicitation involves the use of photographs (or video, as applicable) as a tool to encourage expression or enhance the understanding of complex concepts. This technique can also be applied with pre-existing (non-creative) images and is generally combined with other methods such as interviews or focus groups (maintaining a purely conversational approach). To a lesser extent (1%), studies with a non-creative focus have appeared, such as Wall (2016), which involves 722 participants in creating a photographic corpus, or those solely experimental (Müller et al., 2012), applying eye tracking.

Regarding mediated visual creation tools, the studies address this aspect in a highly superficial manner, both in terms of technical details and the description of their use. External approaches, such as those by Gómez-Cruz, Sumartojo, and Pink (2017), focus on the processes and digital tools emerging in recent years from digital ethnographic practices, emphasising the importance of mediation devices. Ibáñez-Bueno and Marín (2021a) compile practices of new forms of scientific writing and the application of interactive visual methods that demonstrate creativity both in the implementation of tools and in the processes: 360° cameras, GoPro cameras, interactive documentaries, transmedia narratives, or virtual reality. The incorporation of these tools into visual methods expands research possibilities, facilitating, for example, the analysis of issues related to bodily movement in social interactions or urban environments. However, only two articles from the total sample specify the cameras used, namely GoPro (Marchalse and Sclater, 2019; Wilhoit, 2017). The remaining studies that utilise visual creation devices merely describe their tools as photographic or videographic cameras, without specifying the rest of the audiovisual equipment or the manner in which the researcher interacts with the camera.

### ***3.2.2. Methodological Application and Variety of Research Objects***

The body of research reveals an interdisciplinary character that varies in its methodological choices. Regarding the research objects, three main thematic areas are identified: social issues, communicative phenomena, and matters related to urban visibility and the use of public spaces. No trends or similarities have been found in the selection of specific techniques by research object.

In the area of communicative phenomena such as social movements and activism, the methods employed range from the creation of visual archives of existing images to document phenomena like protests, to creative observation of an anthropological nature. Komarova and McKnight (2013) conduct a visual ethnography adopting an observational-creative method that results in self-produced audiovisual works documenting activist visibility.

In the case of urban studies, the authors also opt for a variety of methods that involve the articulation of observation, documentation, or conversation with visual creation. In this line, linked to urban visibility and issues of territoriality, photography is used to capture the physical and social transformations in environments, whether through a documentary approach as undertaken by Singh and Christmann (2020) on citizen participation in urban and digital spaces, or through more creative perspectives, such as the research by Fraser and Wilmott (2020) on urban visual imaginaries of the future.

Themes related to social issues such as technological surveillance, childhood, or adults with autism spectrum disorder tend to be participatory or involve the study subjects using techniques like elicitation or the creation of narratives, similar to those addressing communicative phenomena such as video games, user-generated travel journalism, or self-expression on social media.

### ***3.3. The Issue of Authorship in Visual Creation and Participatory Methods in Communication***

Depending on who controls the creation of the images and, consequently, holds the power of representation, three possibilities are identified: a) images created by the researchers, b) images created by the participants, and c) images created collaboratively.

**Table 2.** Percentage of articles with visual creation according to authorship

Category according to authorship	% of articles
Images created by researchers	16,67%
Images created by participants	50%
Images created collaboratively	3,33%
No image created or unspecified	30%

Source: own elaboration, 2025

The figure of the researcher-creator or researcher-documentarian, originating from visual anthropology and ethnographic documentary, accounts for 16.67% of the articles. In these cases, the researcher is positioned in the field of study and engages directly with both the research objects and the represented subjects. The capture of the researcher's gaze through the camera involves accepting the inherent subjectivity of the practice as part of the methodological process, a matter that remains a subject of reflection (Fraser-Emery and Marín, 2024). On the other hand, studies involving individuals as research subjects tend to follow the participatory ethnography approach of Rouch. Komarova and McKnight (2013) explain how the use of the visual constituted a shared experience between the participants in the observed events (protests that took place in Belfast) and the researchers: "this interactive use of digital imaging technologies represents a means of communication between researchers and participants, not only as a visual language but, phenomenologically, as the engagement and interaction during the encounter (...)" (Komarova and McKnight, 2013).

Furthermore, it is found that 50% of the studies in the sample apply the visual method in a participatory manner, either with the intention of accessing the deep meaning of participants' experiences or to enhance their expressive capacity. Waltorp (2013) presents a study on the negotiations between the public and private spheres in the media use of young Muslim women in Copenhagen, focusing on gender social control and the phenomenon of technological moral laboratories occurring in a multicultural city. Traditional ethnographic fieldwork is combined with participatory and visual methods, incorporating media interaction. The empirical data utilised were generated through ethnographic participant observation, interviews, and audiovisual creations. The fieldwork included activities on Facebook (which could be included under Social Media Visual Methods, according to Warfield 2017), photographic and video diaries, workshops, and an activity where the young women showcased part of their work. According to the author, "the interaction with media and technologies, therefore, forms part of my research object, constituting at the same time an integral part of my methodology" (Waltorp, 2013, pp. 558).

### 3.4. Contributions of Visual Methods to Communication Studies

Half of the analysed articles highlight the benefits of integrating images into their studies. The authors note how visual methods enhance interaction with participants and enrich the epistemological process, as also pointed out by Pain (2012) in his review of the reasons leading researchers to choose these methods.

#### 3.4.1. Complex and Multimodal Approach

Warfield (2017) emphasises the importance of encoding qualitatively recorded audiovisual interviews. When processing the interview data, whether manually or through specific software, a separation occurs between the participant's words and their body. The author introduces the concepts of intra-views and posthuman visual methods to contribute to debates on the tendency to objectify data through transcriptions, aiming to capture the discursive, affective, emotional, and contextual complexity of the interview as well. This approach to interview data from its complexity resonates with the multimodal analysis developed by Norris (2020), who proposes a transcription protocol that goes beyond the textual version. The visual transcription technique seeks to address non-verbal and affective forms to achieve a more precise understanding of communicative and interactive phenomena (Geenen et al., 2021).

#### 3.4.2. Facilitator of Expression and Enhancer of Reflection

Studies employing the elicitation technique, whether through visual creation or the use of existing images, underscore the capacity of the image to serve as a vehicle for expression. In 46.6% of the studies,



visual creation is used as a means of eliciting meaning, facilitating the relationship between researchers and participants. The research by Kwezell (2020) seeks to determine how the visual narration of one's own story can empower trauma victims, enabling them to create the narrative they consider real and personal, and providing a space to dialogue about their shared experience. Visual self-narration combined with photo-elicitation is utilised to illustrate the changes arising from the reflective process itself.

### ***3.4.3. Mediation in the Research-Participation Relationship***

The use of visual tools (capture devices) determines the researcher's role in the field and the relationship established with the research object. In this regard, Lallier (2011) refers to the practices of filmed ethnography as work on relationships; the relationship between the filmed subject and the filmmaker, the presence of the research, and the use of movement and space: "The filmed sequence arises from the social relationship between the observer-filmmaker and the filmed individuals (p. 107)."

On the other hand, participatory video or photography in research constitutes a process of intervention in which participants have access to the tools. These uses, which align with collaborative research practices akin to participatory action research, view video as a tool to reorient the researcher's gaze and give voice to the subjects/participants. Several studies from the selected sample, such as those by Liou and Literat (2020), Wall (2016), Walby and Davis (2022), and Marshalsey and Sclater (2019), highlight the capacity of visual methods in this respect. Wall (2016) conducted an empirical study on images of risks encountered in everyday life based on participatory photography, involving a total of 722 young people. For example, the study by Marshalsey and Sclater (2019) proposes a mixed creative methodology that combines visual ethnography with participatory action research, employing techniques such as photovoice or the creation of visual narratives and utilising new devices and social media (GoPro cameras and Snapchat). According to the authors, participants in the research become empowered co-investigators during visual research activities, working in formats familiar to them and making their own decisions. The reflective actions stimulated by questions and activities facilitated participants' expression and allowed the identification of patterns in their social behaviours, lending meaning to their collective thinking.

### ***3.4.4. Accessing Data through Visuality - Building of Visual Corpora***

A significant contribution of visual methods to communication is the generation of knowledge through visual perception, the visual experience in understanding reality, and the interpretations of visual information found, collected, or created. Pauwels (2016) highlights the potential benefits of using visual sources given the variety and quantity of available resources, ranging from historical photographs to family photographs, illustrations, or images generated by artificial vision such as Google Street View. In this vein, documentary methods align with creative ones. The development of self-generated visual corpora allows access to visual patterns extracted from the dataset, which are subsequently analysed and categorised.

## **4. Limits of the Analysed Studies and Future Challenges for Research with Visual Methodologies**

### ***4.1. The Problem of Terminology in Visual Methods***

Seventy-three percent of the analysed articles incorporate image creation as part of the method. The remaining studies utilise pre-existing images or apply photo-elicitation techniques without generating new images (Day-Good, 2013; Philipps, 2011; Rowsell et al., 2012; Tschirhart, 2015). One of the most recurrent challenges in the field of visual methods is the lack of consensus in the terminology used by authors. Within the framework of this article, we understand "visual methods" as those techniques that involve image creation as part of the data collection and knowledge generation process. That is, these are methods where the image (whether produced by the researchers, the participants, or collaboratively) acts as an epistemological tool to access the investigated social reality. This approach positions visual creation as a central element in the construction of knowledge, not merely as a complement or illustration of the data. The use of pre-existing images can be considered part of these methods if it involves a creative process. Otherwise, images serve to evoke responses or reflections

without being products of the scientific process. The confusion increases when no distinction is made between creating images as part of the method and using images, which generates ambiguity and hinders comparison between studies that employ images for different purposes under the same label.

Banks (2001) defined the visual method broadly as one that involves the use of visual materials by a social researcher during the process, differentiating between three forms of image generation: observation, creation for research purposes, and documentation. Prosser and Loxley (2008) categorise visual data by distinguishing between found data, data created by the researcher, and representations of results. The integrated framework of Pauwels (2010) for visual social research starts with the understanding of visual data, its conceptualisation, collection, and analysis. The bodily and subjective relationships (MacDougall, 1995; Ruby, 2000) involved in the visual experience and the construction of representation exemplify the multiple ambitions of these methods, which require reflection on the generated data—an aspect not always sufficiently considered (Buckingham, 2009; Switzer, 2018).

Another complexity arising from this label is the transcendence of the purely visual. As Sarah Pink explains, the future of this field lies in the sensory experience incorporated into the audiovisual (Bueno and Marín, 2021b); beyond the mere presentation of visual results (Bouldoires et al., 2018). Depending on the stage of the research, Yvart et al. (2023) identify three phases of work: experimentation (image creation, constitution of visual corpora), scientific communication (data visualisation), and dissemination (distribution of preceding or ad hoc created images). The integrative ambition of visual methods challenges the ethics, visibility, gaze, role, and corporeality of the researcher, as well as the ways of creating and sharing knowledge.

#### ***4.2. The Absence of Visual Results and Alternative Scientific Writings to the Text***

Although a high percentage of the studies mention visual creation, it is striking that none present elaborated visual results. While some studies include examples of created images, it is important to distinguish between including illustrative images and developing visual results as part of scientific communication (Ibáñez-Bueno and Marín, 2021a). That is, the design and production of products to communicate findings visually, such as research web documentaries, exhibitions, or scientific installations.

This deficiency could be explained by various reasons: legal restrictions and rights issues concerning images, which may pose problems for their dissemination; the lack of space or format limitations in scientific journals; or technical difficulties. Consequently, a contradiction is observed in the way visual methods are utilised and presented, as they are employed to generate knowledge, yet their products are rarely disseminated. This issue has recently been highlighted by Lamboux-Durand et al. (2024)<sup>2</sup>, who point out the lack of journals and dissemination platforms that allow the publication of content in audiovisual formats, the shortcomings in researchers' training in this regard, and the limitations of the scientific system itself.

#### ***4.3. Improvements in the Description of Analysis Techniques***

Across the body of articles, a significant lack of systematisation and clarity is evident in the use of techniques employed for the analysis of visual data. This issue has previously been noted from critical perspectives on the indiscriminate use of creative visual methods in media research (Buckingham, 2009). A notable portion of the studies presents vague or superficial descriptions, and a predominant tendency is observed to avoid specifying the models or procedures used. Some authors mention the use of qualitative analysis and critical visual analysis (Rowse et al., 2012; Tschirhart, 2015), visual semiotic analysis (Phillips, 2011), or the diffractive reading of images (Warfield, 2017), but without adequate systematisation. This lack of detail limits the replicability of the studies and their potential to contribute to a consistent methodological approach. Exceptions exist, such as the works of Castelló et al. (2021) and Kwezell (2020), whose processes are detailed and robust, with clear descriptions of the analysis phases and the models employed.

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<sup>2</sup> The French national initiative Canal U is an example of a platform for the dissemination of scientific audiovisual content. See the example of the dissemination of a conference with video proceedings <https://www.canal-u.tv/chaines/visualmodi>.

#### 4.4. Limitations of Research on Visual Methods

There are several limitations to consider in understanding both the results obtained, and the problems encountered, which prevent addressing the entirety of published research. In his analysis of topics and approaches in Information Sciences research over the last two decades (2000-2019), Tramullas (2020) integrates and contrasts the findings of previous studies conducted up to that point. His findings highlight the same primary deficiency we have identified: the lack of a clear consensus in the classification of research methods and techniques.

The search for relevant scientific literature is a priority for the research, despite not always yielding satisfactory results. The process of this work reveals the need to develop methodological filters that ensure access to and screening of scientific literature. For the growth and consolidation of new methodological proposals, it is crucial to identify references and studies that employ these same methods to understand, compare, and even contrast the procedures. As has also been noted in other disciplines, methodological filters are proposed as effective and necessary tools for the search and collection of clinical evidence, enabling the retrieval of information with a high degree of relevance and minimising the acquisition of superfluous or redundant information as much as possible (Arencibia, Pérez-León-Solórzano, and Araújo-Ruiz, 2004). The filter of searches by keywords, in this case "métodos-visuales," does not yield pertinent results, as the search engines do not distinguish between scientific methods used as part of the research's methodological framework and studies that address visual methods as a research object.

### 5. Conclusions

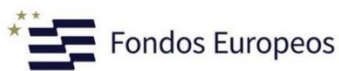
In this work, the need is observed for the systematic implementation of agreed terminology in the drafting of scientific texts employing this methodology in communication, both in the title and the abstract and keywords. This will facilitate the identification of studies among researchers and the search for references.

The opportunity is evident to promote and legitimise visual methods as a distinct methodological approach, yet one not detached from traditional methods. Likewise, visual techniques can complement or enrich more commonly used approaches. For example, the observational method can be conducted with visual tools for observation and image creation, such as videography or photography. If a quantitative approach is preferred, a systematised observation can be enhanced through the capture of visual data to aid subsequent analysis. This not only broadens the options but also recognises the richness, versatility, and identity of these techniques.

In conclusion, the scenario presented offers opportunities to harness the creative potential and methodological imagination that this framework provides, particularly in the field of communication. The studies identified, published in internationally high-impact journals, show a growing trend in this methodological framework that Spanish communication research could adopt.

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