
Visual analysis of social media communication

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Methods

Research approach and strategy

This article draws on the methods of previous studies on using social media images as data in social science research (Chen et al. 2023) and conducts a scoping review of research articles published in Scopus between January 2020 and August 2025. The literature search was completed on September 15, 2025, and retrieved a total of 9,584 articles after deduplication. These articles were identified based on the complete query code with the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in Table 1. Compared to previous studies, we made appropriate adjustments to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. There are three reasons for these adjustments. First, we updated the time frame. To perform a comparison and identify trends, we did the search from 2020 to August 2025. Second, we added an asterisk (*) to all image-related keywords in the search terms, for example, “image” was replaced by “image*”. This approach increased search coverage and allowed us to identify more articles. Third, due to the recent popularity of memes online, we added “meme” to the image keywords. We believe these changes are reasonable and in line with current academic and social developments.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the present review.

Inclusion	Exclusion	Filter in Scopus / Screening step
Research papers published in English	Papers published in languages other than English	LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")
Peer-reviewed journal research articles	Conference papers, book chapters, books, reviews, technical reports, theses, or other non-journal publications	DOCTYPE (ar) AND SRCTYPE (j) AND PUBSTAGE (final)
Research papers published between 2020 and 2025	Research papers published before 2020 or after 2025	PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2026
Articles containing at least one visual-content keyword in the title, abstract, or keywords (e.g., <i>image*</i> , <i>picture*</i> , <i>photo*</i> , <i>selfie*</i> , <i>meme*</i>)	Articles lacking any of the specified visual-content keywords	TITLE-ABS-KEY (image* OR picture* OR photo* OR selfie* OR meme*)
Research situated within one or more social science disciplines	Research located entirely outside the social sciences	LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "SOCI")
Research that analyses social media images as a primary or substantial data source	Research that does not analyse social media images as a primary component of the data	Keyword filter "social media" followed by manual content screening
Studies in which analysis of social media visual data forms a core part of the research question, using computational or data-driven analysis	Studies where visual social media data are peripheral or not analytically examined with computational or data-driven methods	Manual full-text screening after retrieval
Complete query code: ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (image*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (picture*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (photo*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (selfie*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (meme*)) AND ("social media") AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2020 AND DOCTYPE (ar) AND SRCTYPE (j) AND LANGUAGE (english) AND PUBSTAGE (final) AND SUBJAREA (SOCI)).		

References

- Chen Y, Sherren K, Smit M and Lee KY (2023) Using social media images as data in social science research. *New Media & Society* 25(4): 849–871. DOI: 10.1177/14614448211038761.