

Victims or survivors? Visual rhetoric in crowdfunding campaigns in times of crisis

Persuasion through visual content plays a significant role in crowdfunding discourse (Cudmore & Slattery, 2019). This paper focuses on visual contents (pictures, short videos, photographs) in the web-based crowdfunding campaign calls by North American, Finnish and Ukrainian companies during two worldwide crises: Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. In general, crisis-based representations concerning fundraisers' survival have been previously analyzed by focusing on individuals' crowdfunding campaigns (e.g. Campeau & Tao, 2023). Moreover, previous studies analyze the verbal discourse of crowdfunding (e.g. Kedves, 2016; Palmieri et al., 2022; Eronen-Valli, 2023), but research on visual rhetoric used by companies going through a crisis is scarce.

The aim of the research is to study what kind of role visual content plays in the crowdfunding campaign calls by companies suffering from such mega-crises as the global Covid-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war that do not just pose an economical threat to companies but threaten the whole societies on many levels with a global impact (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Helsloot et al., 2012). We are especially interested in the ways the companies use visual content to narrate victimhood and survival as part of their crowdfunding campaigns.

The idea that people going through a crisis may want to express themselves as survivors instead of victims stems from a previous study focusing on visual self-representations as protests by victims of illness, war, and violence (Jones, 2009). Moreover, crowdfunding campaign calls are particularly interesting concerning discourses on victimhood and survival: as Koçer (2015) points out, crowdfunding forms a generative discursive space that involves value-related rhetoric with the possibility to contribute to societal ends that are sometimes more important for fundraisers than obtaining finances. This study, therefore, sees crowdfunding platforms as potential contexts that give public voice to those who are directly affected by crises.

Against this backdrop, our study involves four research questions: 1) What is represented in the visual contents of the campaign calls? 2) Who are represented as victims and survivors of the crises? 3) How do the rhetoric of victimhood and the rhetoric of survival work as means of persuasion in the campaign calls? and 4) What kinds of similarities and differences are there in the visual representations of war and Covid-19 pandemic as part of the crowdfunding rhetoric?

The data consists of 65 campaign calls of companies and entrepreneurs suffering from crises: 18 campaigns on Indiegogo (USA and Canada) and 20 on Mesenaatti (Finland) belong to business fundraisers living in the middle of the pandemic, and 27 Kickstarter campaigns belong to Ukrainian companies fundraising during the war. 27 of the 65 campaign calls were produced by companies specialized in food and drinks, 14 in games, 12 in fashion and design, 6 in New Age, 2 in music and arts, 2 in health and wellness, 1 in mobile gadgets, and 1 in films. Most of the campaigns were launched online in 2022, but the research material also involved Covid-19 related campaigns that were older and launched already in 2020. The visual material was first collected in September to November 2022, and updated in November 2023. Moreover, only those visual contents were selected for the study which were explicitly represented as crisis related. Based on this contextual selection, 366 visual contents altogether are analyzed in the present study (179 from Kickstarter, 113 from Indiegogo, and 74 from Mesenaatti).

First, the data was analyzed by content analysis to answer research questions 1 and 2, and to identify the representative images for close reading (questions 3 and 4). Then, an analysis of visual rhetoric was

performed for the representative images since it takes into consideration the broader social, cultural, and political aspects of visual representation (Wright 2011). In our visual analysis, we combine Barthes' (1961/1983; 1964/1977) denotation and connotation and the importance of metaphors and metonyms (Feng, 2017) to the analysis of image events which holds that visual representations do not just inform or represent but also DO things, especially in contexts of activism and protest (DeLuca 1999; Jones 2009). From the viewpoint of rhetorical analysis, this study focuses on ethos (the character) and pathos (emotions) since these means of persuasion play a central role in the ways that people suffering from crises represent themselves (see Jones, 2009).

The preliminary findings of the study suggest that there are three kinds of visual rhetoric in the crisis-contextualized crowdfunding campaigns: 1) visual rhetoric of victimhood, 2) visual rhetoric of survival, and 3) ambiguous visual contents. Visual rhetoric of victimhood is focused on pathos, and these contents, often representing physical damage and suffering, serve as triggers of both compassion and anger. Such rhetoric was more strongly present in the campaign calls by Ukrainian companies compared to Finnish or North American companies in the pandemic context. The visual rhetoric of survival, on the other hand, was typically part of a national ethos narrative of Ukrainians as persistent and unified people aiming at a peaceful future. Such representations of Ukrainians as survivors have also been pointed out by previous studies focusing on Ukrainian social media discourse (see Horbyk & Orlova, 2022).

The campaign calls by Finnish and North American companies suffering from the Covid-19 were often ambiguous in their visual narrating: meanings of survival and victimhood were often simultaneously present. While war-related visual contents were more human-centric, the visual representations by Covid-19 contextualized companies were depersonalized. In the Covid-19 material (both in Indiegogo and Mesenaatti), it was typical to narrate the crisis through pictures of empty buildings that are waiting for new customers. Moreover, human characters were also photographed at a distance: they were literally represented in landscape photographs, wearing masks, or sometimes represented in anthropomorphized images of animals or toys. In general, the findings of the study suggest that visual representations in crowdfunding campaigns during mega-level crises are not only rhetorical ways of raising funds but also ways of giving social meanings to crises and achieving social ends.

Keywords: crowdfunding, visual rhetoric, crisis, victims, survivors

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