Seeing into the future: Anchoring strategies in future-oriented Twitter visuals
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Abstract
How do public actors visualize the future? Mediations of the future often construct audiences’ prospective actions, and offer insights into society’s imagination of desirable and undesirable futures. In the visually-saturated environment of social media, projections are often visual. Unlike their textual counterparts, future-oriented election visuals have remained understudied. Thus, our paper explores how public actors substantiate their future-oriented, multi-modal claims and the rhetorical outcomes of different strategies. Building on the notion of technologies’ “temporal affordances”, we utilize an inductive qualitative approach to visual rhetoric and analyze projection anchoring strategies using a sample of 400 future-oriented multi-modal tweets. We find that anchoring is carried out in two layers: evidential (the validity of the future-oriented narrative), and visual (the level of aesthetic realism in the image). Examining recurring patterns of anchoring strategies across the sample result in a rhetorical typology of future-oriented visuals, in two modes (consumerism and competition). Overall, our findings highlight the rhetorical pliability of visual anchoring, through which actors utilize an interplay of temporal and technological strategies to generate alternative anchoring in sharing their projections, and to remain authentic in visualizing the unknown.

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Introduction
The future is, naturally by definition, unknown. Thus, any attempt to truthfully visualize it contains an inherent paradox. Nevertheless, imagining society’s future is an integral part of the public discourse that foregrounds both individual and public acts of future imagination. Futures are constantly engaged, constructed, and negotiated as a central aspect of public discourse, through the introduction of projections, and the discussion of possible implications (Ananny and Finn, 2020; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, et al., 2022). Often, such future mediations are anchored: substantiated by external sources or reliant on information which helps validate the future-oriented claim. Anchors may relate to a host of cultural, political, and
professional domains, from references to collective memories used to substantiate collective imagining, through to expert projections of upcoming events in meteorology, sports, and politics (Hajek, et al., 2016; Frick and Wicker, 2016). Since their popularization, social media have deeply transformed the way in which public actors, such as experts, journalists, and politicians discuss the future with their audiences, utilizing a new flow of information that allows messages to disperse widely and quickly, bypassing traditional mediators, such as reporters and journalists (while being subjected to new algorithmic forms of mediation) (Bode, 2016; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). In this digital environment, multimodal messages, including visual tweets, grew to be an integral part of public life (Wessels, 2018; Stuart, et al., 2019; Gomez, et al., 2015) and are often perceived as more credible than purely textual messages (Hameleers, et al., 2020). [1] Building on the notion of technologies’ “temporal affordances” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2015) and on an inductive approach to visual rhetoric (Foss, 2004), this paper turns its attention to social media, and the new opportunities they offer candidates to address this paradox via future-oriented election rhetoric.

The purpose of our paper is to expose the rhetorical strategies that assist politicians in benignly delivering unverifiable messages, through the paradoxical venture of visually communicating an election future. In doing so, it addresses a scholarly gap placed at the intersection between current explorations of future-oriented discourse, rhetoric, and visual communication on social media. It also highlights the societal and political implications of future visuals’ anchoring strategies in furthering disinformative discourse that may contribute the deterioration of public discourse, as well as contribute to bringing forth undesirable futures. In what follows, we rely on a corpus of future-oriented Twitter visuals to suggest that future visuals rely on strategies comprised of two anchoring layers — evidential and visual. While evidential anchors’ prevalence in textual narratives is well-established in existing scholarship, we rely on Foss’ (2004) work to suggest that visuals may play a role in substantiating future-oriented rhetoric, and thus propose the concept of visual anchoring. Our analysis continues as we explore the rhetorical outcomes of different anchoring strategies in our sample, and define two categories of future-oriented visual rhetoric, containing five types of visual, future-oriented argumentation. We conclude by discussing the cultural, temporal, and technological resources that the practice of visual anchoring draws from, their manifestation in different anchoring forms (collective memory, visualized emotionality, and liveness anchors), and their use of temporal, affective and technological references to supplement visual future-oriented discourse with authenticity. These insights highlight future oriented visuals’ wider implications, as they may be used to misinform, but also to ratify the exclusion of those edited out of said future visualizations.

Theoretical framework

The mediated construction of collective futures

The mediation of temporalities has long been a necessary part of public life, as public discourse often includes references and complex interrelations between past, present, and future. Notably, public actors, such as journalists, act as agents of mediated prospective memory, which simultaneously both constructs remembrance of past events and sets future agendas (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2015). Digital and analogue platforms, such as books, films, and social media, each offer distinct forms of mediation through their unique future-oriented functions. Accordingly, each of these media and their specific temporal affordances shape the anticipatory dynamics of the society that consumes them (Ananny and Finn, 2020).

Invoking different temporal layers (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016), election coverage may range from updates of anticipated upcoming events (e.g., regarding the date of the primaries, or the candidates’ identities) to projections of a distant conjectured future (e.g., the possible implications of a specific election outcome). Journalistic mediations of prospective discourse may utilize a host of cultural, political and ideological resources: by referring to candidate biographies, focusing on policy positions and ideologies, or emphasizing the competitive stakes of the electoral race and its closeness (Patterson, 1994; Vaccari and
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Valeriani, 2021). Within this context, predictions can be substantiated by evidential anchors (e.g., past events, polling data), and may be assessed with regard to both their probability of occurring and their normative or affective implications (Amit-Danhi and Shifman, 2020; Couldry, et al., 2010; Papacharissi, 2016). Projections are not limited to journalists, as various actors often utilize them to suggest behavioral implications. For example, politicians may incorporate projections made by journalists and experts into their campaigns in order to warn audiences of dangers, to propose actions for future improvements, and to suggest election outcomes and implications (Bossetta, 2018; Couldry, et al., 2010; McLaughlin, et al., 2019).

Collective imaginations of the future are also structured through technology. Affected by various production conditions and economic incentives, different media offer distinctive temporal affordances: print media is traditionally oriented toward the past, while television broadcasts, with their perceived liveness, bridge a gap between recent past and present (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2015). Moreover, digital technologies, and particularly social media, allow for a rich temporal repertoire. As specific platforms enable users to live-share, and unique features mandate an ephemerality to content (e.g., Snapchat; Bayer, et al., 2016), they are generally present-oriented. These features seep into the types of performances that candidates portray on social media, as they increasingly dedicate more and more of their campaign content to cultivating a personal, present-oriented image, rather than a future-oriented, professionally-curated one (Mohamed, 2019). Yet, from iconic photographs (Boudana, et al., 2017; Serafinelli, 2020), to the use of “evidentiary screenshots” [2], digital and social media also engage in mediating past events (Cervi and Divon, 2023; Humphreys, 2020), which can, in turn, prompt memory work when imagining how future experiences would look and feel. Thus, we suggest that social media offer a complex set of temporal affordances that relies on past and present discourse to address the paradox of representing an unknown election-future.

**Social media election campaigns and visual future-oriented rhetoric**

Beyond data-based and evidential scenarios, temporal narratives can also take visual forms. While certain visual genres, such as photographs, bear a strong affinity to the past (Boudana, et al., 2017; Serafinelli, 2020); others, such as polling visualizations have become synonymous with political futures (Rossini, et al., 2018). Accordingly, both online and off-line political campaign messages employ visual rhetoric, defined as “the actual image or object rhetors generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating” [3]. Employing such rhetoric, public actors utilize visuals to convey a more favorable self-depiction to that which the audience might find in elsewhere (van Dijck, 2013).

Social media campaigns are abundant with visuals, ranging from photographic imagery (Mendonça and Caetano, 2021; Prøitz, 2018; Gomez, et al., 2015; Stuart, et al., 2019), through videos (Cervi and Divon, 2023; Towner and Muñoz, 2020) to complex data visualizations. Politicians’ visual social media strategies have been studied from several angles, including recent analyses of the effects of specific visual formats on social media engagement (Amit-Danhi and Shifman, 2020), candidate favorability (Goodnow, 2013) and the collective imaginary of ongoing events (Musarò, 2017). Outside of the context of elections, iconic social media visuals have been known to aid audiences in sense-making of complex ongoing events and to better orient themselves towards a favored solution (Prøitz, 2018).

Despite the versatility and ubiquity of visual rhetoric in digital politics, the visual rhetorical means applied by candidates to discuss the future on social media have yet to receive systematic scholarly attention, making the study of future visuals a unique opportunity for the exploration of both mediated temporality and visual political communication. Twitter, in particular, has become a central tool for political campaigning, allowing immediate and personalized contact between candidates, journalists, and audiences (Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss, et al., 2018; Graham, et al., 2018; Meganc, et al., 2019). The affective storytelling streams of Twitter (Cervi and Divon, 2023; Papacharissi, 2016) may, moreover, allow politicians to supplement their future-oriented discourse with strategic temporal images, thus reimagining society and negotiating political futures. Building on the above literature, which stresses the significance of both visual anchoring and temporal affordances to social media campaigns, this paper examines the anchoring practices
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politicians apply in their future-oriented visual rhetoric through two inter-related research questions. First, in order to fill a scholarly gap in regard to visual substantiation of future-oriented rhetoric, we ask a preliminary question — (RQ1) How do candidates anchor their visual, future-oriented claims? We then utilize our initial findings to answer a subsequent question — (RQ2) What are the rhetorical outcomes of different anchoring strategies for candidates visual, future-oriented claims? — by providing a typology of future-oriented visual rhetoric, reliant on various anchoring practices. The combination of both questions is designed to reveal the informational and cultural resources that are used to substantiate the rhetoric of the unverifiable — the future. As mediations of the future often construct audiences’ actions towards it, unveiling the ways in which arguments are constructed is prudent to society’s ability of conduct an informed, rational discussion around it.

Case study: One year, three elections

This paper looks at future visuals through the prism of the two parliamentary elections held during 2019 in Israel. The first round positioned incumbent Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against centrist challenger Benny Gantz, head of “Blue and White”, a new political alliance. The April 2019 elections resulted in a slightly right-leaning, hung parliament. Netanyahu was entrusted with forming a government, a task in which he was unsuccessful, and Israel was once again election-bound. In the following two years, Israel held three additional elections, in September 2019, March 2020, and March 2021. Throughout the four rounds, the political map changed its composition repeatedly, and Israel entered a period of extreme political uncertainty.

The April and September 2019 elections differed in terms of the future expectations and projections characterizing them. While Netanyahu’s April win was accurately predicted by most journalists and pollsters from an early stage of the race (Aharoni, et al., 2022b), the announcement of a second election was received with considerable surprise [4]. Thus, due to the prominence of future-oriented discourse, both 2019 elections pose a fruitful case study for examining politicians’ future-oriented discourse in heightened political uncertainty. Similar to its dominance with journalists and politicians across the world (Jungherr, 2016), Israeli Twitter is used heavily by campaigners and journalists alike, and has been found to serve politicians in communicating questionable, false, or misleading propagandist narratives (Manor and Crilley, 2018). In this study we therefore analyze the visual rhetoric applied by politicians in their Twitter campaigns during the two successive Israeli elections in 2019.

Method

This paper sets out to define patterns of visual future-oriented rhetoric using qualitative content analysis of future-oriented visual tweets by candidates during the two 2019 Israeli elections (see the Appendix for a list of pages sampled). Our platform selection was informed by the aforementioned cross-influence found between Twitter and news media, which makes it a central influence output on the electorate (Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss, et al., 2018; Meganck, et al., 2019), its centrality in the Israeli political community and popularity with voting-age demographics and journalists (Manor and Crilley, 2018), as well as its character-limit, which we expected would lead to a reliance on non-textual communication. The sample includes tweets which contain both a visual (video, image, or photograph) and a future-oriented claim (e.g., a promise, assessment, or projection). The sample was collected using a combination of automated, manual, and randomized selections of tweets posted in the time periods between dissolution of the Parliament and voting day for both the April and September rounds (24 December 2018 — 9 April 2019; 29 May — 17 September 2019). First, we applied a JavaScript crawler to all official Twitter accounts of the 20 party leaders, which resulted in a documentation of all visual and video tweets (n=3,966). Second, we manually retrieved future-oriented tweets (n=2,133), by visual or textual references to a distant or near, private, or collective future occurrence (i.e., an election outcome, primaries result, coalition formation, issue-oriented predictions, and political power stances). Finally, we randomly selected every fifth tweet, in order to arrive
at a final sample of 400 tweets.

Analysis was carried out in two main stages, corresponding with the two research questions noted earlier. Throughout both stages we utilized an inductive qualitative analysis approach by deconstructing each visual’s attributes in order to expose its meaning-making mechanisms, relating to both visual and textual rhetoric (Foss, 2004; Stastny, 2021), and accounting for its production (Pink, 2007) and exhibition contexts (Ardévol, 2012). The first stage of analysis was designed to address RQ1 through a combination of grounded, inductive analysis, informed by the literature. In this stage, we examined our sample in order to discern the types of anchoring strategies applied. We continuously simplified our definition of said strategies until we arrived at an understanding that the visuals are anchored in two layers: evidential and visual anchoring. Our second stage was designed to approach RQ2 and define the types of future-oriented visual rhetoric that emerge from different anchoring strategies. In this stage, through collaborative inductive work (Kelle, 2007), we grouped the units according to recurring anchoring patterns and examined the different future-oriented rhetorical arguments that they create. This resulted in a rhetorical typology of future-oriented visuals divided between two rhetorical categories: consumerism and competition, including five types of visual future-oriented arguments.

# Findings

**Dual-layered anchoring of future-oriented visual rhetoric**

In order to examine various types of anchoring and their rhetorical output in the multi-modal sample that we collected, we first produced a multimodal analytical logic, inclusive of both textual and visual anchoring strategies. Thus, the findings of our first-stage analysis suggest that multi-modal future-oriented rhetoric is anchored in two layers: evidential and visual. The first refers to the evidential validity of the claim (i.e., the substantiation of the future-oriented narrative attached to the visual), and the second refers to the visual anchoring through the level of realism in the visual (the overt editing and involvement in the visual used to anchor the future-oriented claim). The layers parallel each other, with one dealing with the content of the future-oriented argument, and the second with its visual representation. While the evidential layer is envisioned as binary (anchored/unanchored), visual anchoring poses a continuum between realistic and manufactured aesthetics. Based on the abovementioned literature (Foss, 2004; Finnegan, 2004; Stastny, 2021), we posit that while one can make a future-oriented claim without evidential anchoring, the choice to attach it with a visual makes that visual an extension of the claim, is one that implicitly anchors it.

**Evidential anchoring**

The impetus for the analysis of future-oriented visuals is the inherent contradiction that they embody. Namely, they cannot be entirely truthful, as they portray a state that has yet to occur. The first anchoring layer examines the rhetorical utterance and its substantiation. Since truthfulness is an unattainable goal in future-oriented discourse, we use evidential anchoring to determine whether a future-oriented claim is presented as relying on existing data or knowledge, or not. Evidential anchoring refers to the performance of validity rather than validity itself. For example, Figure 1.1 shows two anchored future visuals: Figure 1.1a, anchors the claim that a party (Zehut) will meet the electoral threshold in polling data; and Figure 1.1b substantiates hope for future peace in an iconic photograph of a past event (the Oslo Accords signing). In contrast, Figure 1.2 demonstrates evidentially unanchored rhetoric: former Prime-Minister Barak suggests a scenario wherein a vote for Blue and White will lead to a Netanyahu government, in which Likud member Miri Regev is Education Minister and centrist challenger Gantz is Defense Minister. While plausible, Barak’s future-claim is an evidentially unanchored representation of a “nightmare scenario”, one that casting the “right” ballot will prevent.
Visual anchoring

The rhetorical mechanism through which visual future-oriented political claims are delivered extends beyond evidential anchoring strategies. The second anchoring layer we propose refers to visual anchoring, applied through the aesthetic realism of the visual. Visual rhetoric is a malleable and versatile tool which affords a variety of rhetorical possibilities (Aiello and Parry, 2019), making it well-suited for both vague and specific portrayals of the future. Relying on both Foss’ (2004) and Finnegan’s (2004) approaches to visual rhetoric, we look at visual anchoring as an additional rhetorical avenue to substantiate or supplement the narrative in the tweet’s text or the title of image. Through grounded analysis, we note that the anchoring strategies of future visuals can be placed on a continuum between realistic and manufactured.

Visual anchoring is not a measure of the accuracy — naturally, as accuracy in visual depiction of the future is an impossibility — but rather the level of editing and production in the visual representation. Our assumption is that realistic aesthetics creates visuals that are meant to be seen as snapshots of future reality, as they supplement any textual claims that may be expressed (Foss, 2004). Realistic future visuals do not appear to have been ‘handled’ in any way and can therefore be perceived as accurate representations of the past or present, anchoring the future-claim as visual ‘evidence’. In Shifman’s (2018) terms, such visuals reflect “external authenticity” as they adhere to an objective and scientific sense of truth. For example, Figure 1.1b presents a realistic, ostensibly unedited image of a past event, a deliberately externally authentic depiction of the Oslo Accords signing. Alternatively, Figure 2 exemplifies manufactured visual anchoring: the superimposition of opposition members’ faces onto an official government portrait. It is clear that it is not a ‘real’ government but a possible future one. As such, manufactured visuals may evoke “internal authenticity” (Shifman, 2018) which refers to the inner values and beliefs of an individual or a society. In the case of Figure 2, Prime Minister Netanyahu aims to shift his followers’ perception of a new government by evoking a visual form of the Israeli “dagri speech” (Katriel, 2015), and being direct and internally authentic enough to visualize such a government and inviting his followers to prevent this aesthetically unrealistic image from becoming real.
“Buying” into or rooting for a future: Five rhetorical types

Following the conceptualization of a dual anchoring strategy in a future-oriented visual, we turned to examine the rhetorical output of different formulations of visual and evidential anchoring. Upon classification of the entire sample, we grouped distinct types of future-oriented visual rhetoric, characterized by variations in anchoring choices. The five types were grouped into two overarching rhetorical categories (see Figure 3), distinguished by the types of future they refer to: consumerism relates to a collective, national future, while competition relates to an in-group perspective of an election-race future (moment of win/loss, coalition-building and government formation).
Consumerism

The democratic process assigns to citizens the duty to select between different futures (Patterson, 1994). Consumerism future visuals present futures as products competing for the attention and loyalty of a voter-consumer. This category of future visuals is heavily influenced by advertising techniques, which are geared toward making consumers purchase the right product. In the case of election future visuals, the “product” can be either the future itself (what will happen when the candidate is elected) or the candidates themselves (their track record, personality, etc.). Accordingly, this category includes two rhetorical types: Future Product and Informed Choice.

Future Product. Displaying an unanchored, positive emotional promise, Future Product visuals compensate for a lack of evidential anchoring by using realistic imagery to echo the values and emotions conveyed in the tweet’s text. For example, in Figure 4.1 PM candidate Benny Gantz employs Future Product rhetoric by associating the tweet’s text, “time for change”, with a photograph of a warm embrace between himself and former opponent, Yair Lapid. This promise is not substantiated by proof of its feasibility (i.e., it is an evidentially unanchored claim), but by the realism in the visual representation itself. Reflecting on the context of this image’s production (Pink, 2007) and its exhibition context (Ardévol, 2012), this use of unanchored aesthetic realism is invoked in order to convey a rich array of meanings: the candidates associate their win with unity, while implicitly suggesting that an additional Netanyahu term will not provide the same promise. This, we suggest, is done in order to create a visual icon of a historical moment — both Lapid and Gantz have, at that point, exhausted their resources in trying to gain political power against Benjamin Netanyahu, and so their use of emotional and aesthetic realism is aimed to convey an alleged real unity, in hopes that the new joint venture may succeed where others have failed. As Prøitz (2018) claims, a social media visual can offer “a way of transforming complex and unsettled aspects” of a crisis “into something concrete and understandable, contributing to galvanize affective resonance and immediate public response” [5]. Figure 4.1 is also offered as a concretization of a complex emotional and political landscape. Echoing the notion of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016), it invokes a mobilizing emotional symbol, performing hope and fostering connective actions of a silent political majority desperate for change. Put simply, instead of anchoring the future-oriented statement in proof, the image projects to the voters how they would feel if it were realized.

Future Product rhetoric is highly reminiscent of simplistic adverts, which associate a product with the emotional outcome displayed in an image, alongside minimal textual explanation. See, in comparison, Figure 4.2, in which an Uber ad also employs a photographed embrace to associate the ride-share product with familial unity. In both images, the embrace carries a positive emotional association which is transferred onto the product. This type of visual rhetoric creates a very robust, layered argument that invites the audience into the experience of purchasing the emotional merits of a future product, while almost
entirely blocking off any avenues for negative fallout: while the merits of both an Uber ride or a joint Lapid/Gantz run may be contested, the affective narrative of familiality and hope they convey, are much harder to refute.

Informed Choice. This type of visual rhetoric presents the future in an ad for the conscious consumer, allowing the voter to compare candidates and to choose an optimal future. Informed Choice rhetoric provides audiences with the information they need to make an informed decision, rather than demonstrating the future itself. This type primarily utilizes realistic visual anchors, and can convey both evidentially anchored and unanchored claims.

A main component of Informed Choice is the selection between desirable and undesirable futures, implicitly suggested without a side-by-side comparison. In order to evidentially anchor their claims, candidates use quotes from supposedly impartial actors (e.g., journalists or experts) to comment on attributes of the past and present in a manner that suggests what will happen in the future. A tweet by Stav Shaffir (27 January 2019) demonstrates this anchoring pattern: she uses a screen-capture to cite a journalist’s (Keren Neubach) tweet, which reports hospitalization overload statistics. Shaffir assigns blame for the overload by suggesting: “we must replace ... the thieves in power.” Her claim is anchored by evidence of current reporting of the present state, which also serves as realistic visual anchoring for what may appear on the news, should the alleged ‘thieves’ stay in power. Here, situating the visual in its production context points to the use of screen-captures as digital memory — by including the original tweet as posted in the Twitter app interface, Shaffir invokes an “evidentiary screenshot” [6]. Building on the journalists’ informational trustworthiness (Aharoni, et al., 2022a) allows Shaffir, a former social activist and often a Leftmost marker in a centrist party, to amplify her own credibility.

Candidates also use visual references to memorable past moments to realistically anchor their good or bad depictions of the future and contrast them with alternatives. For example, the iconic image of the Oslo Accords signing in Figure 1.1b anchors a claim that peace is feasible, which also supports the criticism over the current administration’s lack of efforts in that arena. This allows Tamar Zandberg, head of the left-wing Meretz party, to utilize the affective engagement and collective significance associated with iconic photos (Boudana, et al., 2017) to shift the debate about the possibility of peace from a value based discussion (whether one agrees peace is important to pursue), to a fact-based statement (it was possible once, therefore

Figure 4: Future Product.

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it can be done again). Thus, while textual claim for peace efforts from Zandberg might not be engaging enough, we suggest that this visual reference to the Israeli collective memory is meant to capture a voter into an informed, pro-peace, electoral decision.

In lieu of an actual anchor, some informed choice tweets produce lifelike evidence and objects from the future. One notable example is the image in Figure 5 which, at first glance, seems to present a document as proof. A closer examination, however, reveals that this is an unanchored, manufactured future protocol. Mediating multiple temporalities (Humphreys, 2020; Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2015), Lapid manufactures a believable artifact from the future, which aesthetically resembles an existing historical document from the past, to anchor his claim for a better future if he is elected Prime Minister. As a challenger, Lapid cannot draw from actual documentation in order to suggest that he is a better, informed choice for Prime Ministership, thus, a manufactured future-oriented visual is invoked to supplement the proof needed.

**Figure 5:** “this is how our first government meeting will look like, once we get elected” (Lapid, 17.10.19).

Informed Choice videos introduce manufactured visual anchoring into this rhetorical type. These videos expose a claim concerning an opponent, evidentially-anchored in a past or present event, in order to suggest that their electoral success would result in a disagreeable national future. Informed Choice videos reveal major flaws in a competitor’s product, offering a sensible alternative. For example, the video in Figure 6.1 presents a claim made by Yair Lapid (1 April 2019) that Prime Minister Netanyahu operates a network of
fake Twitter accounts. The video starts by presenting its main evidence — newspaper clippings from Ynet [2] and the New York Times [8] (Figure 6.1, left) — as well as screenshots of the fake accounts they associate with Netanyahu. The argument is presented using an ominous animated machine which controls the alleged fake accounts (Figure 6.1, center) to make the accusation that Netanyahu is using it to try and “steal the election” (Figure 6.1, right). While evidentially-anchored in both visual and textual journalistic artifacts and quotes, this video employs well-worn negative advertising techniques by focusing on the weaknesses of another product (Bostanci, et al., 2023) in its visual rhetoric, which create close links between Netanyahu and his alleged “trolls.” Similarly, in its “Scroogled” campaign, Microsoft emphasized Gmail’s tracking policies in order to persuade users to switch over to Microsoft’s e-mail service (Figure 6.2), with ads that expose that Gmail reads “every word, in every email.” This ad performs an almost identical rhetorical act to Lapid’s tweet — anchoring claims with both screenshots and journalistic footage as “proof”, highlighting the negative traits of the opponent, and only briefly referring to their ‘product’ as the alternative. According to Bostanci and colleagues (2023), while such negative advertising offers informational benefits, it tends to reduce differentiation between competitors in the long run. Thus, while Lapid’s video may be effective in visually anchoring the faults of a Netanyahu government, it does not necessarily enable audiences to see the merits of any alternatives. Nevertheless, utilizing both emotionality and evidentiality in its visual rhetoric, this video further cements not that Lapid’s government would be better — an unverifiable claim, as Lapid has yet to win an election — but rather that Netanyahu is the wrong choice.

![Figure 6](image)

**Figure 6:** Selected frames from Microsoft’s “Scroogled” ad (2013) compared with selected frames from a manufactured Informed Choice video (Lapid).

**Competition**

Elections are a competitive environment in which prowess is defined by the number of supporters a competitor has managed to recruit. As uncertainty grew in the Israeli political system throughout 2019, competitive narratives were understandably prevalent. In contrast to the consumerist framework, competition future visuals do not depict a post-election future state but rather a crucial moment within the process of its realization. This is achieved through a focus on the campaign process and its culmination on Election Day, or the coalition negotiation strategies that follow it and determine the composition of the government. In this category, the “right” future must be fought over and won, via the active participation of the audience. Competition future visuals enlist the voter as a member of a soon-to-be winning/losing team, expecting them to contribute their part. The competition category is divided into two rhetorical types (see Figure 3): *This* Close and Plays and Tactics. Both categories are supported by distinct types of anchoring strategies, now leading to a focus placed on the competitive aspect of the election, rather than its future...
An election is a high-stakes race. *This* Close visuals emphasize the meaning of a loss in terms of its toll on team morale. This rhetoric relies on highly realistic, unedited images that convey evidentially-unanchored claims about the team’s standing in the race. The candidates often face a smartphone camera in the midst of their day (see Figure 7) and inform their supporters of the probability of their win or loss. The visuals are often vertically oriented (i.e., in “portrait mode”), a main visual characteristic of Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram Stories, suggesting that they have been recorded live, very recently, thus utilizing the temporal affordances (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2015) of the apps they emulate (Snapchat, Instagram Stories, etc.) to situate their message in an ephemeral present, or an emerging future (Bayer, et al., 2016), rather than a verifiable past. Unlike in other campaign materials, the candidates appear tired, frustrated, or ecstatic as they call on the audience to pull their weight and get the team through to the finish line. This category was especially prevalent during Election Day and the days preceding it.

For example, in an April 2019 Election Day video, challenger Gantz addresses the camera directly, surrounded by a huddle of stern and worried supporters (see Figure 7, bottom row, left image), rather like a coach giving a harsh halftime talk. He orders his supporters to “fly” to the ballot boxes and to stay there to assure a victory. This format is repeated in similar huddle videos (see Figure 7) by most party leaders. In one of them, Netanyahu (See Figure 7, right) is seen coaching market-goers to dig in and save the team from defeat, because of high turnout in the rival camp. This strategy is invoked at crucial times: during voting days, primaries, or right before a candidate is about to attend a key event. Throughout this sample, peripheral actors and challenging candidates tend to claim an impending victory and call on the audience to give them the final competitive edge, while primary actors, such as Netanyahu, claim that they are about to lose. For example, both Gantz’s claim that an opponent is “narrowing the gap” and Netanyahu’s warnings of high turnout among the rival camp, lack evidential anchoring. When considering the typical timing in which these videos are created and disseminated, coupled with raw, unedited aesthetics, we suggest that this visual strategy is meant to convey a sense of urgency, which does away with the need for fact-checking and allows for a benign delivery of unanchored or questionably anchored claims.

![Figure 7: Frames from *This* Close videos by Netanyahu, Lapid, Shaked, and Gantz.](image-url)
Plays & Tactics. In this category, the addressed audience is clearly supposed to be aligned with one side in the competition. Plays & Tactics futures are the result of the competition, i.e., the moment of win or loss, and projections as to its aftermath: coalition-building and government composition. Plays & Tactics future visuals tend to uncover hidden truths about other candidates’ allegiances by revealing that they might betray their team, pointing to their weakened moral fiber. This type of rhetoric, although primarily evidentially anchored and aesthetically realistic, does include a smaller portion of evidentially-unanchored, manufactured visuals, which highlight the competitive tensions.

Plays & Tactics rhetoric often utilizes evidential anchors such as newspaper headlines and audio recordings regarding the opposing party’s coalition-building plans. In a tweet by Labor Chairman Avi Gabbay (18 March 2019), a recording broadcasted by News 13 is cited as evidence that Gantz is working against the leftist narrative of toppling PM Netanyahu, as the candidate mentions considering a joint government with Netanyahu. The visual anchoring in this category is found in the production of the image: copy/paste and screenshot practice, wherein minimal editing (e.g., adding headlines) allows visual “facts” to speak for themselves. Thus, the future claim is anchored in realistic aesthetics and evidential anchors. As a leading opponent to Netanyahu, Avi Gabbay’s choice is to approach the paradox of visualizing the future by relying on the “evidentiary screenshot” [9] as its main credibility component, rather than their own personal ethos.

However, as tensions run high in competitive environments, several Plays & Tactics videos take an emotional and humoristic approach via manufactured visual anchors. In a video posted by Ehud Barak (Figure 8), a former Prime Minister and Chief of General Staff in the IDF who returned in these elections after a long hiatus in the private sector, Barak questions the very notion of a “right-wing union government” by pretending to Google it, only to associate the concept with leftist cowardice. Barak’s public stature assists in grounding this visual rhetorical exercise, as he utilizes visual markers to highlight the contrast between the two possible governments: the left-wing government appears in color, while the right-wing option is edited to appear in black and white. In this case, visual rhetoric supplements the spoken narrative of the video (Foss, 2004; Finnegan, 2004) by endowing the options with temporal markers: age and outdatedness to one option (black-and-white), and youth or vibrancy (color) with the other. The visual layer of this argumentation type further supplements the spoken one by utilizing an animated visual metaphor to enrich the collective imaginary of the election (Musaró, 2017), with a perception of Gantz as two-faced. We see the prospective Prime Minister’s face torn vertically as the government options shift between right and left, and an animated quiver is added to the word “fear”, portraying Gantz as a cowardly player who lacks the commitment to take his team all the way. While both Plays & Tactics and Informed Choice utilize similar amalgamations of visual and evidential anchoring, these categories visualize different futures: Informed Choice futures are national, post-election futures, while Plays & Tactics visuals discuss competitive futures, which can relate to the moment of loss/victory or the ensuing processes.

![Figure 8](image-url)“What is a right-wing union government?” (Barak).
**Rooting for the right product: Trash Talk**

Following the four rhetorical types included in competition and consumerism, one category is located in the overlap between the two categories: Trash Talk. These visuals compare two futures in a consumerist fashion, utilizing aesthetically manufactured visual anchoring, which convey both evidentially-anchored and unanchored claims. Trash Talk rhetoric notes the faults of an adversary with little or no substantial evidence for their future-claim. It is often employed in videos, in which one candidate mocks the plausibility of their adversary’s claims by visually attacking their track record.

For example, in a video captioned “Choosing the right path,” posted by Netanyahu, two hikers stand at a fork on the Israel National Trail. They must choose between two options: “Proven Leadership” on the right and “Beware!” on the left (see Figure 9). The hikers debate the options when Netanyahu joins in, helping them to choose his path. He promises that his challenging path will reach summits, and will lead to a rise in Israel’s status. When the hikers ask about the left path, a third hiker runs back and details the horrors of the alternative government. The video offers no evidential anchoring for the claims made both regarding the attractiveness of Netanyahu’s future leadership and its alternative, but utilizes visual metaphors and humor to solidify them. In this, Netanyahu does the opposite of what Lapid has done in the examples in the protocol in Figure 5. While both cases since he has the ethos of what he claims to be successful leadership in his tenure as Prime Minister, he is able to utilize his own reputation to insert two competing images into collective imaginary of the unfolding election (Musarò, 2017). In this point in time, Netanyahu’s party, the “Likud” and the “Blue and White” alliance, were within mere percentiles of each other in the polls, contributing to the sense that these future as are indeed an unfolding event (Musarò, 2017), which may result either in a continued Netanyahu leadership, or a nightmarish alternative, led by his challengers.

![In Hebrew: “Beware!” on the left arrow, “Proven Leadership’ on the right.](image)

**Figure 9:** “Choosing the right path” (Netanyahu, 31 August 2019).

Returning to the distinction that separates the two overarching categories we defined, the question remains: which future is discussed in Netanyahu’s video? Since he speaks of Israeli growth and success, we can naturally place it in a consumerism frame, as the future is a national future. However, this message is delivered through distinctly personalized, competitive rhetoric, with a hefty dose of heckling of those in the
out-group, by also referring to their coalition-building and competitive failings. We therefore suggest that Trash Talk forms a single competitive-consumerist rhetorical type which uses competitive themes to deliver Informed Choice arguments.

Another example of this mixture of consumerism and competition is a series of Trash Talk videos posted by Avigdor Lieberman titled “Ali Bibi Stories”, in which the incumbent prime minister’s reputation is attacked using his own past statements (Figure 10). In this election, the second of those sampled in this study, Lieberman, head of ‘Yisrael Beiteinu’ and former ally of Netanyahu, held the “balance of power” (Pant, 2019) and the ability to tip the scale towards the opposition. In these videos, Lieberman implies that Netanyahu cannot keep his election promises by visually equating Netanyahu’s speeches to the folk tale of Ali Baba. The pun on Netanyahu’s nickname (Bibi), accompanied by oriental music and imagery, is meant to dismiss his promises as a mere tale. Netanyahu’s past statements (which appear as archival footage and news clippings) serve as evidential anchors that suggest that he will, once again, disappoint. These videos point to an amalgamation of credibility strategies in the visual rhetoric: as a former ally, and a pillar of the right-wing camp in Israeli politics, Lieberman’s credibility allows him to supplement the evidential anchors (archival footage) with racial, humoristic, and emotional references executed by the visual rhetoric of the videos, making them into a far more forceful attack.

![Figure 10: Selected frames from “Ali Bibi Stories” videos (Lieberman, 18 July and 13 August 2019).](image)

While the notion of a direct attack on an adversary’s reputation belongs more intuitively within the competitive frame, Trash Talk future visuals often discuss a communal future and thus show an overlap between the two categories. This is due to the nature of the futures depicted in this category: unlike other competitive rhetorical types, Trash Talk rhetoric often attacks the character and validity of candidates from a consumerist, post-election perspective.

Discussion
Our paper set out to explore the types of anchoring strategies prevalent in Twitter election visuals, and the rhetorical output of such strategies, in order to unveil the makeup of visualized, future-oriented argumentation. We proposed that visuals can be used to supplement or create anchors where those cannot be found in traditional evidence, through different forms of visual anchoring. Our findings showed that candidates tackle the challenge of discussing the unknown by adopting either a consumerist or competitive approach through various formulations of evidential and visual anchoring. Since true external authenticity (i.e., the adherence to measured, scientific reality; Shifman, 2018) is impossible in visualizing the future, instead of implementing evidential anchors (e.g., polls, journalistic assessments, or past experiences), candidates rely on visual anchoring in order to show the future, thus expanding the existing scholarly conceptualization of projections’ anchors. The varied and rich use of visual anchoring found in this sample evokes the notion of “internal authenticity,” which aligns with the priority given in social media to values, emotions, and beliefs, rather than to “external” authenticity (Shifman, 2018).

We propose that visual future-oriented election rhetoric provides a unique meeting ground between mediated collective memory (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2015) and internal and external authenticity, enabled by different technologies of visual representation on social media. Across our findings, such strategies took three forms: collective-memory anchors, which convey external authenticity through the use of iconic photographs as a citation of the past; visual emotive anchors, which communicate the digital value of internal authenticity through a visual, stock-like imagery, meant to evoke an emotional response, creating a unique temporal blend of past, present, and future; or liveness anchors, which imitate ephemeral social media and the sense of live broadcast in order to be excused from the need to fact-check. The three visual anchor forms we identified also reflect distinct technological references, enlisting the “temporal affordances” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2015) of both veteran and new media: the first is reliant on overtly outdated technologies (often through black and white photographs), the second on hyper-realistic digital photography via stock-like images, and the third on the visual-technological abilities of the smartphone camera.

Visual collective memory anchors are achieved via iconic imagery of historical events which prompt public attention and discussion (Boudana, et al., 2017). While externally authentic anchors hinge on what pollsters predict will occur, visual memory anchors strengthen the rhetorical act by relying on the communal recollection of past events to depict what we know to have happened. They rely on the prospective logic of post hoc, ergo propter hoc, by stating that history is likely to repeat itself. While the argument is not entirely unfounded — the implication for a repeat of history is without evidential anchors. Visual collective memory anchors often operate through medium-oriented performances of the temporal reference: black and white images, specks of imperfection, and blurred film, all support and substantiate the recollection act. Thus, visual collective memory anchors recruit both the realistic photographic evidence in iconic images (Boudana, et al., 2017; Serafinelli, 2020) and the robust nature of collective memory to create external authenticity, in the form of pseudo-evidence of what is to come.

Alternatively, visual emotive anchors do not predict the future per se, but suggest what a specific future will feel like, thus evoking internal authenticity. Though seemingly illustrative, future visuals that utilize visual emotive anchors evoke earlier findings as to the role of internal authenticity in supplementing evidential anchoring (Amit-Danhi and Shirman, 2020), and thus require further unpacking. This tactic is most prominently applied in Future Product rhetoric through emotionally-laden photographic visuals which endow evidentially unanchored messages with internal authenticity. Visual emotive anchors are unique in their temporal orientation, as they demonstrate a future experience that relies on emotions evoked in the present, by capturing a moment in the near-past: When audiences are relived and comforted to see the opponents embracing in Figure 4, the sense of unity they feel about the near-past is used to substantiate the reality of the change promised. We suggest that this temporal merge is the result of technological mediation: digital, hyper-realistic, digitally enhanced (though seemingly untouched) photographic images that allow the emotional experience to traverse past, present, and future.

The third visual anchoring strategy is liveness anchors, which rely on an ongoing present temporality. Here,
we suggest that social media aesthetics free candidates from the obligation to demonstrate external authenticity through evidential anchoring, most prominently used in *This* Close rhetoric. Since our sample did not include truly live videos, we argue that this strategy is achieved by *emulating* ephemeral social media aesthetics that give the impression of a ‘breaking news’ sensibility as a visual anchor. Social media ephemeral aesthetics has been associated with more authentic performances of the self (Bayer, et al., 2016), and has been harnessed by candidates in their campaigns to show a more personal side (Mohamed, 2019). *This* Close videos are thus intentionally imperfect and incorporate emulated ephemeral aesthetics (such as vertically oriented, unstable smartphone videos) to emphasize their internal authenticity and to reference other ephemeral platforms (such as Snapchat or Instagram and Facebook Stories). The unkempt appearance of the candidates suggests that there is no time to properly set up a studio, let alone check facts, and the audience is expected to forgive inaccuracies, as they would a journalist reporting live from the scene of an evolving crisis (Reynolds and Barnett, 2003). These emulated ephemeral aesthetics create a unique form of intimacy with the candidate in a display of internally authentic visual claim anchoring. Both ephemeral and live-cast aesthetics reflect an ongoing present (Ananny and Finn, 2020; Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016), one which is meant to be engaged with, rather than verified. The rhetoric of the ongoing present gives a sense of urgency and agency to the audience in creating the preferred future: the game is still ongoing, and the team needs them. The three visual anchoring types supplement for a lack in evidential anchoring through a myriad of strategic temporal references achieved by the use of different media. These forms of anchoring demonstrate the pliability of visual rhetoric and its ability to deliver claims about the unknown future in an authentic manner.

In our exploration of future-oriented visual arguments, we also find it prudent to note that the combined usage of collective memory, internal authenticity, and technological mediation may contribute to the muddling of negative phenomena in digital political discourse. Beyond their misinformative potentials, the use of visual rhetoric to anchor and portray political futures carries important societal implications, as these visuals take part in the information ecology that informs the collective imagination of where society is headed, but also of *who* society is. By drawing on a rich array of temporal, technological, and emotive resources to supplement evidentiality of future claims, future-oriented visuals portray identity preferences that result in implicit and explicit acts of exclusion: they reveal the kind of preferred citizen they address, and encode a “true” patriotic identity; highlight the subgroup to which the candidate belongs, effectively and openly “othering” non-supporters; and, at times, serve as a visual litmus test, solidifying the *right* identity through agreement with the visual’s message. Visual anchors thus utilize their temporal, emotive, and technological richnes to visually anchor who its preferred members *are* by creating visuals depicting who they *will be* and implying who they *are not*. In doing so, they perpetuate existing societal chasms and enhance social media patterns of polarizations and echo-chambering, as political identities strengthen internal authenticity at the expense of political inclusion.

**Conclusion**

Our paper began with the definition of a paradox: the future is yet to happen, and therefore, a truly reliable visual representation of it is an impossibility. In exploring the rhetorical acrobatics exercised by candidates to benignly visualize futures on Twitter, we relied on the case study of the 2019 Israeli elections on Twitter to propose that future visuals’ anchoring strategies are constructed in two layers: *evidential* and *visual* anchoring. We then noted recurring patterns of anchoring strategies, which produce distinct rhetorical types, resulting in a typology of visual future-oriented rhetoric. Overall, our findings reveal that actors compensate for a lack in traditional anchors through an interplay of temporal, emotive, and technological mediation strategies that generate alternative visual anchors. We conclude by highlighting that such visuals not only supplement validations for precarious future-imaginations, but also substantiate an inward look into who society is in the present, through implicit and explicit acts of visual exclusion from its visualized future.

This study contributes in several ways to the narrowing of the scholarly gap on visual future rhetoric. By
defining rhetorical categories of future visuals, we have charted the pathways through which politicians employ visual rhetoric in order to include and exclude audiences. Furthermore, our discussion of visual rhetoric as alternative anchoring contributes to the understanding of the elections’ informational environment on social media, and its misinformative potentials. Finally, through the conceptualization of visual anchoring strategies, we were able to note the role of collective memory rhetoric and authenticity in amplifying the persuasive power of the evidentially-unanchored future visuals.

This paper focused on a sample of visuals produced in Israel and disseminated through a specific platform (Twitter). It therefore has limitations that will hopefully be addressed in future research, which might apply similar methods to future visuals posted on other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook or Instagram) and cultural contexts (for example, sports predictions). Such limitations also extend to the corporate culture reflected in the platform’s design and regulatory practices, which trickle down and affect the ways in which politicians and audiences operate within it. Our findings thus relate to the management culture at the time of the sampled election (2019–2020). While our study was conducted in a time when Twitter has been considered as a relatively trustworthy platform to disseminate, curate, and consume news and political information (Aharoni, et al., 2022a; Papacharissi, 2016), this may no longer be the case following the company’s acquisition in 2022. Future studies should therefore examine the visual representation of collective future, not only in additional cultural contexts, but also as part of different technological and digital platforms. Additionally, while the historical precedent of two election rounds in one year has undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of future-oriented rhetoric in an uncertain environment, future studies would do well to explore visual future rhetoric both in elections and in stable political settings. Finally, it is our hope that our typology and insights into the workings of visual anchoring will serve as a foundational layer for new methodological examinations of visual rhetoric.

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Notes

1. Naturally, this depicts Twitter discourse and usage from the platform’s popularization up to the year 2021. With Twitter’s acquisition by Elon Musk in October 2022, studies show that the new ownership may have caused a violent shift in discourse with all political accounts, and specifically candidate accounts (e.g., Ray and Anyanwu, 2022).
2. Frosh, 2022, p. 175.


4. “The Knesset was ultimately dissolved,” Ynet (30 May 2019), at https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5517559,00.html [Hebrew].


8. “This is how a huge hoard of fake accounts serves the Likud campaign,” Ynet (1 April), at https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5487465,00.html [Hebrew].


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Seeing into the future: Anchoring strategies in future-oriented Twitter visuals


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doi: [https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857025029](https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857025029), accessed 9 September 2023.


Appendix: Accounts sampled.

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### Editorial history

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