

Framing Political Scandals: Exploring the Multimodal Effects of Isolation Cues in Scandal News Coverage on Candidate Evaluations and Voting Intentions

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Previous framing effects research has largely examined textual and visual influences separately, thus neglecting potential interaction effects between the two communication channels. The present study used a 2 × 2 experiment to examine the textual and visual influences in a separate manner and in an integrated way. It was tested how, if at all, textually and/or visually isolating a politician involved in scandal affects news consumers' perceptions. Results revealed that textual isolation cues had no effect. In contrast, visual isolation resulted in more negative candidate evaluations. Yet, this effect was only detected in the absence of textual isolation cues. Negative evaluations, in turn, decreased participants' intention to vote for the politician depicted.

Keywords: political scandal, visual framing effects, candidate evaluation, voting intention

As scandals are a regular part of contemporary politics, the news media frequently report about political norm violations of political candidates (Allern, Kantola, Pollack, & Blach-Orsten, 2012; Allern & von Sikorski, 2018; Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012; Pollack, Allern, Kantola, & Orsten, 2018; von Sikorski, 2017). Scandals have been defined as the "intense public communication about a real or imagined defect that is by consensus condemned, and that meets universal indignation or outrage" (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1041). Thus, intense and repeated coverage of a particular norm violation is one central condition for a scandal to emerge (Allern et al., 2012; Thompson, 2000; von Sikorski, 2017). Put another way, if the news media do not report about a norm violation, there is no scandal.

Previous research has revealed that political scandals can significantly affect news consumers' candidate evaluations (e.g., Carlson, Ganiel, & Hyde, 2000; Funk, 1996; von Sikorski, 2018a; von Sikorski & Knoll, 2018) and voting intentions (e.g., von Sikorski, Knoll, & Matthes, 2018; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2016). That is, by framing an alleged norm transgression as scandalous (Entman, 2012; Entman & Stonbely, 2018), news reports may trigger significant framing effects (Joslyn, 2003; Kepplinger, Geiss, & Siebert, 2012).

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As “purely verbal messages are typical of little more than radio broadcasting, purely visual messages are equally scarce” (Dan, 2018, p. 6; Kress, 2010), news consumers are regularly exposed to multimodal information (see also Kress, 2010). In principle, cues embedded in both the verbal and the visual components of news stories can impact the way audiences think about scandals and those involved in them. Monomodal cues (i.e., verbal, visual cues) can interact in such a way to reinforce or contradict each other (see Dan, 2018). Thus, as pointed out by Coleman (2010), it is necessary to study words and visuals in an integrative way.

Yet, previous experimental studies have almost exclusively focused on textual information (i.e., the text body of newspaper articles) and have largely neglected the potential effects of news visuals and their potential interplay with the verbal component. This is surprising because news images may (re)frame and affect news consumers’ evaluation of political scandals (Entman, 2012). As the verbal component of news articles on emerging scandals tends to be vague and ambiguous (e.g., “Kelly increasingly isolated as Porter scandal rages on”¹), specific news visuals may yield stronger effects. This is because such depictions may be perceived as “being closer to the truth than other forms of communication are” (Messaris & Abraham, 2001, p. 217).

In this context, scholars have emphasized that one central moment of political scandals is when political allies distance themselves from a politician involved in a scandal and isolate them (Entman, 2012; Esser & Hartung, 2004; von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018). Journalists regularly use both verbal and visual means to articulate this loss of political support (Entman, 2012), implicitly suggesting that a political candidate has lost political support (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Isolation cues are part of what Grabe and Bucy (2009) refer to as the *sure loser frame*, which they found to be quite characteristic of the TV coverage of political candidates. According to these authors, isolation cues are offered, for instance, when candidates are depicted “with only a few supporters in attendance, shown scattered around, in sparsely filled spaces, often with empty chairs” (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 292). Through means such as these, news visuals can be used to illustrate the (alleged) isolation of a scandalized political candidate (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015) from whom others have distanced themselves (or entirely turned away; Entman, 2012).

On the other hand, it has been argued “that the widely held notion that vivid images drive public opinion is overly simplistic” (Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002, p. 131). Instead, scholars have demonstrated that the role of visuals is more complex and that news images unfold particular effects in interaction with textual information (Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015, 2018; Van Gorp, Vettehen, & Beentjes, 2009; see Dan, 2018, for a recent review). That is, when visuals are added to a verbal message, the former can counter, enhance, or have no noteworthy effect on audiences (Domke et al., 2002; Powell et al., 2015, 2018; Van Gorp et al., 2009).

To examine potential framing effects triggered by textual and/or visual information highlighting the isolation of a political candidate, we conducted an experimental study. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has systematically examined the effects of visual and textual information in connection with scandalous political information in an integrated way. The purpose of the examination was threefold. First,

¹ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/13/kelly-porters-scandal-white-house-407242>

it examined how news coverage consisting of textual framing devices (textual isolation cues) and visual framing devices (visual isolation cues) affected participants' evaluation of a politician involved in a scandal (i.e., scandalized politician). Second, it analyzed how textual and visual isolation cues interacted in terms of their influence on candidate evaluations. Third, it examined whether candidate evaluations mediated the influence of visual and textual isolation on intention to vote for a scandalized politician.

News Framing Effects and the Interaction of Verbal and Visual Information

Political scandals are not prefabricated. Rather, journalists frequently frame alleged norm transgressions as political scandals (Allern et al., 2012; see also Kepplinger, 2018; Kepplinger & Viererbl, 2018). Framing can be defined as the process by which specific textual and/or visual information is selected and made more salient "in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Scholars have emphasized that highlighting some aspects of a media message (while neglecting others) increases the respective applicability of message-relevant aspects (e.g., Scheufele, 1999) and have thus conceptualized the framing effect as an applicability effect (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In respect of the underlying mechanisms of the framing effect, it has been pointed out that it is important to differentiate between applicability and accessibility effects (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). That is, when exposed to salient (textual and/or visual) information of a media message, those message aspects that were highlighted are rendered more applicable. At the same time, the activation of particular aspects of a media message temporarily increases the accessibility of respective information (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), and this makes it more likely that frame-consistent memory traces are activated in future encounters with similar media messages (e.g., a follow-up article on a political scandal). However, although the activation of a construct can temporarily render particular information more accessible, the framing effect has been conceptualized as an applicability effect that can have a persistent impact on news consumers' perceptions and evaluations (e.g., Lecheler & de Vreese, 2011).

A large body of research has revealed that textual as well as visual information may elicit considerable news framing effects in political communication. First, studies examining textual framing effects (e.g., de Vreese, Boomgaarden, & Semetko, 2011; Matthes & Schemer, 2012; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997) have revealed systematic effects on individuals' voting intentions (e.g., Schemer, Wirth, & Matthes, 2012) and candidate evaluations (e.g., Luechtfeld & Richards, 2016). Schemer et al. (2012) showed that political news frames regarding the issue of naturalization of immigrants in Switzerland significantly affected citizens' voting intentions (direct-democratic campaign). Furthermore, Luechtfeld and Richards (2016) showed that news articles that highlighted a candidate's policy positions (compared with a control condition without policy-related information) resulted in significantly more positive candidate evaluations.

Second, studies examining visual framing effects (e.g., Arpan et al., 2006; Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010; Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2011; Grabe & Bucy, 2009) also have revealed influences on recipients' voting intentions (e.g., Grabe & Bucy, 2009) and candidate evaluations (e.g., Maoz, 2012). For example, Maoz (2012) showed that a marginal visual manipulation of a politician's portrait picture—enlarged

eyes and lips—positively affected participants' evaluation of the politician compared with the identical photograph showing the politician with shrunken eyes and lips.

Third, textual and visual information can elicit relevant framing effects in the context of political scandals (e.g., Kepplinger et al., 2012; von Sikorski, 2018b; von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018). Some researchers have started to examine the effects of textual and visual frames in an integrated way—testing for interaction effects—instead of studying respective framing effects separately (Powell et al., 2015, 2018; also see Dan, 2018). Yet, the empirical evidence regarding such effects is scarce and effects on voting intentions and candidate evaluations have not been examined. Domke et al. (2002) showed that an available visual news frame accompanying a news article (synopsis on the Vietnam conflict, 25 years after the fall of Saigon) made certain information more accessible to news recipients and consequently affected several political evaluations including attitudes toward former political candidates (U.S. presidents). Thus, Domke et al. showed that participants used available visual information (the textual information remained unchanged between conditions) to process the available textual information and that this interplay of textual and visual components affected their political evaluations. Van Gorp et al. (2009) showed that textual frames can also influence the interpretation of visual information. In their experiment, they exposed participants to a news article on asylum. Whereas the visual information (news photo) remained the same, they varied the textual frame depicting asylum seekers either as innocent victims or intruders. The results showed that the textual frame influenced the interpretation of the available visual information. However, both of the aforementioned studies only varied one type of frame. Domke et al. varied the respective visual information and kept the textual information constant, whereas Van Gorp et al. (2009) kept the visual information constant and only changed the respective textual frame.

Powell et al. (2015) systematically examined the separate and combined effects of textual and/or visual news frames on the perception and evaluation of an ongoing conflict in the Central African Republic. Their results revealed stronger framing effects when participants were exposed to visual information about the conflict without any textual information compared with a text-alone condition. For example, participants in the visual-alone condition reported higher support for an intervention in the Central African Republic. However, this changed when participants were exposed to both textually and visually framed information in an integrated way. In this case, the framed textual information caused participants' support for the intervention. Thus, when textual and visual information were presented together, "the frame carried by the text influences opinions regardless of the accompanying image" (Powell et al., 2015, p. 997). In summary, the available results show that both textual and visual information may trigger relevant framing effects. However, more research is needed to better understand how visual and verbal information interact and whether previous results (i.e., Powell et al., 2015) extend to news about political candidates.

Textual and Visual Isolation

Previous research has shown that individuals react very sensitively to spatial distances (Henderson, Wakslak, Fujita, & Rohrbach, 2011). According to Williams and Bargh (2008), "the principle that distance equals safety is deeply ingrained in humans' biological makeup" (p. 303). That is, individuals keep their distance from ambiguous or stigmatized others and approach people who are perceived to be harmless and likeable (see Williams & Bargh, 2008).

In this regard, construal-level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003), more generally, predicts that psychological as well as spatial distance affect an individual's perception of other persons. That is, distance affects social judgments (e.g., close distance can positively affect the evaluation of other persons; Henderson et al., 2011). This is also supported by Williams and Bargh's (2008) results revealing that the mere presence of distance cues negatively affected an individual's evaluation of other persons and those persons' relationship with family members.

In Hall's (1966) seminal work on *proxemics* or "the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space" (p. 1), Hall described four relative distances that individuals frequently use in communication situations. According to these classifications, people who work together usually do this at close distance. In contrast, individuals usually conduct impersonal business at social distance. Most notably, two aspects are of particular importance in this respect. First, culturally established norms and conventions regarding what constitutes appropriate use of space exist, and violations are likely to be deemed uncomfortable and even be sanctioned with negative evaluations (Sorokowska et al., 2017). Second, similar to interpersonal interactions, individuals regularly interpret interpersonal spacing (e.g., verbal and/or visual cues regarding the distancing of other politicians) and cues referring to proximity, distance, or isolation depicted in mediated messages (e.g., in images; Barry, 1997; von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018).

Effects on Candidate Evaluation

Transferred to the context of the present study and based on the abovementioned literature, we theorized that a news article with textual information that stated that other politicians have distanced themselves from a scandalized actor—thus one including verbal isolation cues; sure loser frame (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)—would negatively affect recipients' candidate evaluations. In line with Entman (2012) and Esser and Hartung (2004), we expected that the textual information stating that other political actors have turned away from the politician (besides the article's negative and scandalous information) would additionally discredit the political actor, resulting in a more negative evaluation of the politician. Thus, Hypothesis 1 reads as follows:

H1: Participants exposed to a news article that describes a scandalized politician as isolated and alone evaluate the politician more negatively than participants exposed to the same article without textual isolation cues.

In line with our earlier reasoning, and based on previous research on visual framing effects (Arpan et al., 2006; Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010; Brantner et al., 2011; Grabe & Bucy, 2009), with Hypothesis 2, we furthermore expected that depicting a candidate with a loser framing (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) that visually isolates a political candidate would negatively affect news consumers' candidate evaluations:

H2: Participants exposed to a news article illustrated with a news image that depicts a scandalized politician as isolated and alone evaluate the politician more negatively than participants viewing the same article without a photo.

Framing effects researchers have just started to examine the possible interactions between verbal and visual information, and it remains largely unclear how both frame types interact (Powell et al., 2015; 2018; see Dan, 2018). As mentioned above, Powell et al. (2015) showed that when textual and visual information were presented together, “the frame carried by the text influences opinions regardless of the accompanying image” (p. 997). However, in addition, it may be argued that isolating a politician verbally and visually—in line with the literature on dual coding theory (e.g., see Paivio, 1986)—may also produce stronger effects compared with the presentation of visual or textual isolation cues alone. Yet, due to scarce availability of previous results, we formulated the following research question:

RQ1: How do visual and textual isolation cues interact in terms of their influence on candidate evaluations?

Effects on Voting Intentions

Electoral research has shown that there are several factors that can influence individuals’ voting intentions (e.g., candidate evaluations and party identification; Falter & Schoen, 2005). In the present study, we focused on candidate evaluations as a predictor for voting intentions. We applied the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which assumes that the intention to vote for a political candidate can be affected by particular candidate evaluations. Studies—including meta-analytical findings (Kim & Hunter, 1993)—have consistently shown that candidate evaluations are strong predictors of voting intention (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Based on these findings, and as depicted in our theoretical model (see Figure 1), we assumed that candidate evaluations would mediate particular voting intentions.

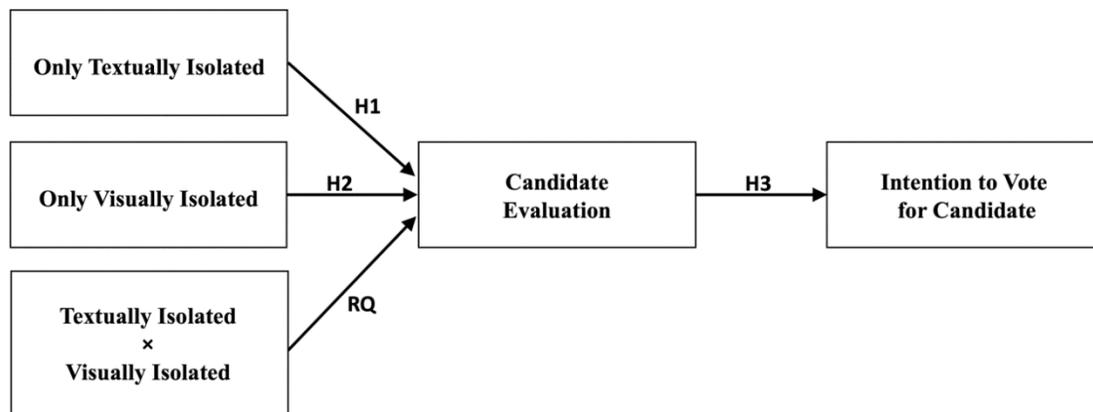


Figure 1. Hypothesized theoretical model.

Thus, Hypothesis 3 reads as follows:

H3: Candidate evaluations mediate the influence of visual and textual isolation on intention to vote for the politician.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted a 2 (modality: verbal/visual) × 2 (isolation cues: yes/no) between-subjects experiment in Austria. Similar to previous research examining visual framing effects (e.g., Arpan et al., 2006; Brantner et al., 2011), we used a student sample ($N = 169$ undergraduate students). According to Druckman and Kam (2011), student samples do “*not* pose a problem for a study’s external validity” (p. 41) and yield valid results when testing a specific theory, as in the present study (effects of textual and visual isolation). Participants’ mean age was 23 years ($SD = 3.31$), and most were women (86%). In terms of political orientation (left- vs. right-leaning), participants were roughly evenly spread ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.17$; 7-point scale). Participants received course credits for taking part in the study.

On arrival at the university’s computer laboratory, the students gave informed consent to participate in the study and took a seat in front of one of eight computers. During the study, participants were separated from each other by opaque noise-absorbing dividers. They were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental groups. First, all participants read a short Wikipedia article about a fictitious male, social democratic member of the European Parliament. The Wikipedia article gave a short introduction about the politician. However, no information on the scandal was provided (see Experimental Treatment for more information). Afterward, participants reported their candidate evaluations and assessed the quality of the Wikipedia article. This was done to ensure that the politician was perceived as real and to obtain a baseline candidate evaluation for each experimental group. Next, participants read one of four versions of an online news article, which served as the experimental treatment. Participants could take as much time as they liked reading the article. Furthermore, participants were told that the article was published recently. Subsequently, participants reported their candidate evaluations a second time, indicated their intention to vote for the politician, and answered several questions related to control variables. Finally, participants were thanked and dismissed.

Experimental Treatment

Four versions of a one-page online news article were prepared: not visually isolated and not textually isolated, visually isolated and not textually isolated, not visually isolated and textually isolated, visually isolated and textually isolated. The four versions of the article strongly resembled online versions of a well-known Austrian newspaper (*Salzburger Nachrichten*) in writing and layout and were based on original text passages from authentic scandal cases. All articles reported an emerging political corruption scandal of a male Austrian member of the European Parliament (see the Appendix). Because the scandal was just emerging, the case was described as vague. It remained unclear whether the politician was actually guilty of accepting bribes. Similar to previous visual framing effects studies (e.g., Domke et al., 2002), the

scandal and the politician were fictitious. This was necessary to ensure that the participants did not have any specific prior knowledge about the case (e.g., if the politician was actually found guilty or not guilty). Prior knowledge could have undermined the main purpose of the study: establishing a clear causal relationship between isolation (visual and textual) and candidate evaluations (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2012).

Participants were exposed to one of the four versions of an article on the same fictitious scandal involving the same fictitious politician. The four versions were identical except for the manipulation cues as follows: Visual isolation was manipulated by using an image with isolation cues versus no image. In the visual isolation condition, the politician was shown sitting all by himself in the parliament (see Figure 2). This image was paired with news text either with or without isolating cues. The isolating image (cf. Figure 2) depicted the scandalized politician sitting all by himself in the parliament. Textual isolation was manipulated by presenting participants either an article that framed the scandalized politician as isolated from the other members of the parliament (isolation cues) or an article that described just the emerging scandal without referring to any form of isolation (no isolation cues). Although both articles presented mostly the same textual information (i.e., the emerging political corruption scandal), the textually isolated article additionally mentioned four times that other members of the European Parliament had distanced themselves from the scandalized politician and that he was increasingly isolated.



Figure 2. Stimulus photo.

Measurement

We measured candidate evaluations on a 7-point semantic differential scale (1 = *very negative* to 7 = *very positive*). We adopted nine items from previous scandal effects research (Carlson et al., 2000; Funk, 1996). The items included contrastive pairs such as unlikeable–likeable, competent–incompetent, and untrustworthy–trustworthy. Candidate evaluation was measured at two points in time: before the experimental treatment (after reading the mock Wikipedia article) and after the experimental treatment (after reading the online news article). The pretreatment measures were subtracted from the posttreatment measures. Thus, the more negative the resulting difference in candidate evaluations, the more negative participants' posttreatment evaluations were compared with their pretreatment evaluations. The reliability of the resulting difference scale was excellent ($\alpha = .91$, $M = -1.56$, $SD = 1.11$).

We measured intention to vote for the politician by asking participants how likely they were to vote for him provided that there was an election the following Sunday ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.08$). Responses ranged from *very unlikely* to *very likely* on a 7-point scale.

Furthermore, we measured several control variables. In addition to gender and age, participants were asked to assess their language skills as not all of the participants were native speakers. All participants reported sufficient command of language ($M = 6.73$, $SD = 0.82$; 7-point scale). In addition, participants rated the quality of both the Wikipedia article and the online news article in terms of its information value and credibility on a 7-point scale with the endpoints 1 = *low* and 7 = *high*. Both were perceived as quite informative (Wikipedia article: $M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.22$; online news article: $M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.37$; 7-point scale, 1 = *low*, 7 = *high*) and credible (Wikipedia article: $M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.47$; online news article: $M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.28$).

Finally, the questionnaire contained four questions that served as a treatment check. First, participants answered the following question (*yes* or *no* as answers): "Was there an image in the online news coverage?" Furthermore, if participants indicated that they were presented with an image, they were asked to complete the following statement (*yes* or *no* as answers): "The image depicted the scandalized politician as alone and all by himself in the parliament." Also, participants completed the following two questions regarding the textual contents of the article with responses ranging from *I do not agree at all* to *I entirely agree* on a 7-point scale: "Did the news text contain information about the politician depicting him as 'increasingly isolated' and/or that other politicians have distanced themselves from him?" ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 2.6$), and "In your opinion, was the politician depicted as socially isolated in the online news coverage?" ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 2.24$).

Treatment Check and Randomization Check

All of the participants presented with a news visual remembered the presentation of an image. Only 6% came to this conclusion in the nonimage group. The difference was highly significant, $\chi^2(1) = 150.130$, $p < .001$, and demonstrated a large effect ($r = .94$). In addition, more than 90% of the participants presented with an image correctly identified the politician as alone in the parliament. Thus, the visual manipulation worked as intended. Furthermore, participants exposed to the textual isolation ($M = 6.54$, SD

= 1.02) indicated that they had perceived significantly more textual isolation cues compared with participants exposed to the nontextually isolated condition ($M = 1.97, SD = 1.36$). The detected effect was large, $t(163.41) = -24.06, p < .001, r = .88$. Also, participants presented with the textually isolated politician perceived him 2.5 points more isolated ($M = 4.94, SD = 2.00$) when compared with the nontextually isolated politician ($M = 2.30, SD = 1.62$). The textual isolation exerted a large effect, $t(156.21) = 9.40, p < .001, r = .71$, and the manipulation worked as intended.² In addition, a randomization check revealed that the four experimental groups did not differ regarding any of the control variables—gender: $\chi^2(3) = 1.62, ns$; age: $F(3, 165) = 0.38, ns$; language skills: $F(3, 165) = 1.89, ns$; perceived quality of Wikipedia article: $F(3, 165) = 0.02, ns$; perceived quality of online news article: $F(3, 165) = 1.24, ns$.

Results

Before testing our hypotheses and answering Research Question 1, we used a dependent samples t test to examine whether reading the online news article about the scandalized politician actually led to a decrease in candidate evaluations. This was the case. As expected, participants reported less positive evaluations after reading the article (before: $M = 5.03, SD = 0.74$; after: $M = 3.47, SD = 0.86$). The effect was strong and highly significant, $t(168) = 18.26, p < .001, r = .67$. Following the recommendation by Darlington and Hayes (2017), we calculated a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and controlled for the influence of gender, age, language skills, and perceived quality of the Wikipedia and news articles because doing so “can yield more precise estimates and more powerful tests” (Darlington & Hayes, 2017, p. 176). In terms of the covariates, the analysis yielded a significant effect of gender, $F(1, 160) = 5.54, p < .05$, partial $\eta = .03$, and significant effects for both of the quality assessments—Wikipedia article: $F(1, 160) = 6.70, p < .05$, partial $\eta = .04$; news article: $F(1, 160) = 5.23, p < .05$, partial $\eta = .03$. Female participants showed a stronger decrease in evaluations when compared with male participants, and participants who perceived the Wikipedia article or online news article as higher in quality also showed a stronger decrease in evaluations. The two other covariates exerted no effect—age: $F(1, 160) = 1.11, ns$; language skills: $F(1, 160) = 2.79, ns$.

Visual isolation (not visually isolated vs. visually isolated) and textual isolation (not textually isolated vs. textually isolated) entered the analyses as independent variables, and the evaluation difference (after – before) was the dependent variable. Hypothesis 1 posed that textual isolation would have a negative impact on candidate evaluations. However, textual isolation exerted no significant main effect, $F(1, 160) = 0.41, ns$, indicating that textual cues referring to isolation had no negative effects on candidate evaluations. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was rejected. Hypothesis 2 posed that visual isolation cues would have a negative impact on candidate evaluations. The results supported Hypothesis 2 and showed a significant main effect of visual isolation, $F(1, 160) = 4.20, p < .05$, partial $\eta = .03$. Research Question 1 asked whether visual and textual isolation information interacted in terms of their influence on candidate evaluations. The analysis revealed

² We decided to not excluded participants from the analyses who did not pass the manipulation check. Excluding them did not change our main findings. However, it lowered the overall power of our analyses. Therefore, we kept them in the analyses because these participants may have actually been affected by the media content (stimulus) but may have failed to correctly answer the respective items in the manipulation check.

a significant interaction effect (see Figure 3), indicating that the isolating image led to a stronger decrease in evaluations only when it was accompanied by an article without any textual isolation cues. Planned contrasts revealed this stronger decrease as highly significant, $t(160) = -2.96, p < .01, r = .05$.

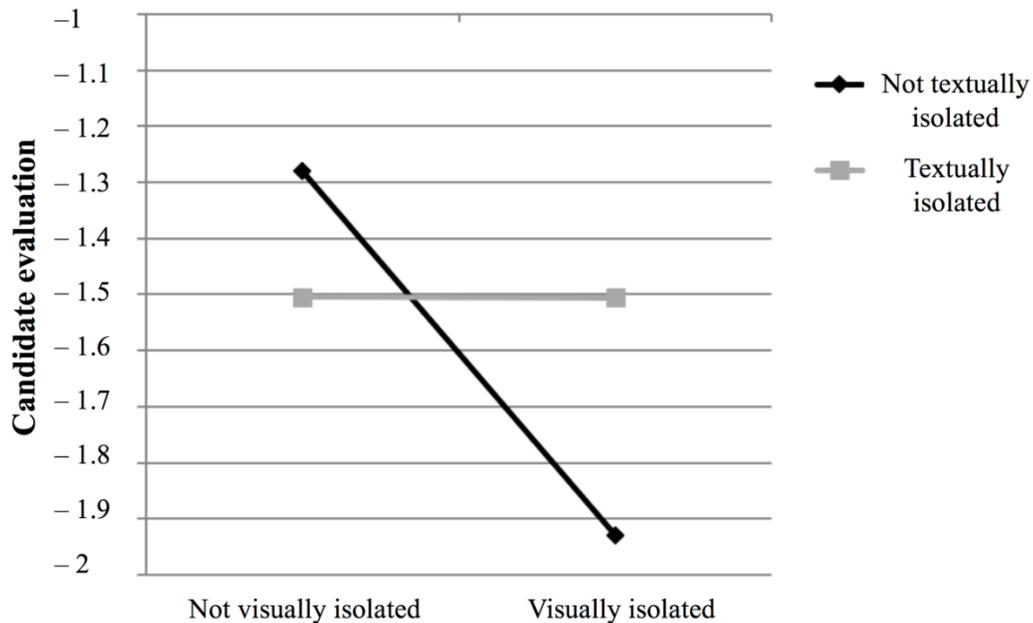


Figure 3. Effect of visual isolation on candidate evaluation moderated by textual isolation.

When the image was accompanied by a news article with textual isolation cues there was virtually no effect (see horizontal gray line in Figure 3). Furthermore, textual isolation did not lead to any stronger significant decreases in evaluations, neither unaccompanied by an isolating image nor accompanied by an isolating image.

The third hypothesis assumed that candidate evaluations would mediate the influence of isolation on intention to vote for the politician. The mediation was tested by applying a regression analysis using the SPSS macro Process (Model 8; Hayes, 2013). Visual and textual isolation were dummy coded (not visually isolated = 0 and visually isolated = 1; not textually isolated = 0 and textually isolated = 1).

The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 1. The left half of the table presents the dependent effect of visual isolation on candidate evaluations that had already been revealed by the ANCOVA. The right half presents the effect of candidate evaluations on intention to vote for him when controlling for the dependent effect of visual isolation. This effect was highly significant ($B = 0.34, p < .001$). Multiplying the dependent effect of visual isolation on candidate evaluations (ANCOVA, right half of the table) and the effect of candidate evaluations on intention to vote (left half of the table) revealed an indirect

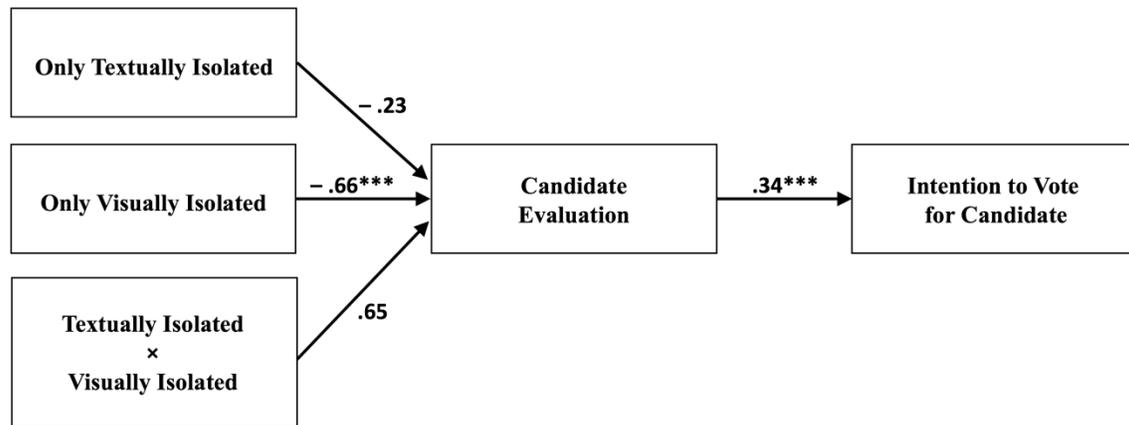
effect of -0.22 (bias corrected 95% CI $[-0.45, -0.08]$). That is, intention to vote for the candidate decreased by 0.22 points on the applied 7-point scale when the politician was visually but not textually isolated as compared with when he was depicted with no visual and no textual isolation. There was no direct effect of visual isolation, that is, the indirect effect on intention to vote for the candidate was completely mediated by candidate evaluations as assumed in the third hypothesis (Hayes, 2013).

Table 1. Regression Results for Testing the Indirect and Dependent Effect of Visual Isolation on Intention to Vote Mediated by Candidate Evaluations (N = 169).

Predictor	Predicted variables							
	Candidate evaluation (difference)				Intention to vote for the politician			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> ₍₁₆₀₎	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> ₍₁₅₉₎	<i>p</i>
Constant	-0.30	1.31	-0.23	.82	5.17	1.30	3.97	<.001
Gender	-0.55	0.23	-2.35	<.05	-0.06	0.24	-0.25	.80
Age	0.03	0.03	1.05	.29	-0.02	0.03	-0.84	.40
Language skills	0.17	0.10	1.67	.10	-0.24	0.10	-2.39	<.05
Quality Wikipedia	-0.18	0.07	-2.59	<.05	0.04	0.07	-0.57	.57
Quality news	-0.14	0.06	-2.29	<.05	-0.07	0.06	-1.09	.28
Candidate evaluation	-	-	-	-	0.34	0.08	4.31	<.001
Visual isolation	-0.66	0.22	-2.96	<.00	-0.08	0.23	-0.36	.72
Textual isolation	-0.23	0.22	-1.00	.32	0.04	0.23	0.18	.86
Visual × Textual	0.65	0.32	2.05	<.05	-0.02	0.32	-0.07	.95
$R^2 = .19$				$R^2 = .16$				
$F(8, 160) = 4.71, p < .001$				$F(9, 159) = 3.34, p < .001$				

Note. Regression coefficients for visual isolation and textual isolation represent dependent effects because their interaction is included in the model. They display the influence of the respective predictor when the other predictor included in the interaction is zero (i.e., not visually isolated or not textually isolated).

In conclusion, visual isolation did indeed lead to a stronger decrease in candidate evaluations (H2). Yet, this influence was qualified by a significant interaction with respective textual information: Answering Research Question 1, the article with the isolating image only led to a stronger decrease in candidate evaluations when it was accompanied by textual information without any isolation cues. There was no main effect of textual isolation (H1). Candidate evaluations mediated the impact of visual isolation on intention to vote for the politician (H3; see Figure 4).



*****p < .001.**

Figure 4. Unstandardized path coefficients.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine textual and visual framing effects in an integrated way. We used a fictitious political scandal as a test case and analyzed the contribution of isolation cues in each modality independently and together. The results of the current study add to the literature on framing effects (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2011; Domke et al., 2002; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Matthes & Schemer, 2012) and extend our knowledge on the interaction of textual and visual information and corresponding effects (Powell et al., 2015). Furthermore, the findings add to the literature on the effects of political scandals (e.g., Carlson et al., 2000; Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2016).

Interestingly, the results did not show any textual framing effects. That is, participants exposed to the article with a sure loser frame (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) highlighting the isolation of the scandalized politician via the text only did not report more negative candidate evaluations compared with participants exposed to the article without the sure loser frame operationalized through textual isolation cues. Our treatment check clearly indicated that participants exposed to the textual isolation frame—as intended—perceived the politician to be significantly more isolated compared with participants in the condition without the isolation frame. Therefore, we are confident that our manipulation worked in the intended way and that the textual isolation indeed did not influence the participants' evaluation of the scandalized politician.

In contrast with the insignificant textual framing effects, depicting a politician as visually isolated resulted in significantly more negative candidate evaluations. However, this effect could be detected only when the isolating visual was accompanied by textual information without isolation cues. When the text highlighted the isolation of the politician, the isolating image had virtually no effect. Thus, the textual frame cancelled out the negative evaluative effects of the image.

These findings blend in well with earlier research on visual framing effects (von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018; see also Domke et al., 2002; Grabe & Bucy, 2009) and predictions made by the illusory causation phenomenon (ICP) described in psychological science (Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Ploutz-Snyder, & Breitenbecher, 2002; McArthur, 1980). "Illusory causation occurs when people ascribe unwarranted causality to a stimulus simply because it is more noticeable or salient than other available stimuli" (Lassiter et al., 2002, p. 299). For example, research informed by the ICP paradigm has examined effects triggered by exposure to certain forms of videotaped footage of custodial interrogations (Lassiter, Diamond, Schmidt, & Elek, 2007). Individuals were exposed to either a videotape in which the camera directly focused on a suspect during an interrogation (alone, no other individuals visible) or footage showing the identical interrogation taped from multiple camera angles (both suspect and interrogator visible). Footage showing suspects alone led participants to judge suspects more negatively (e.g., assessing them more likely to be guilty; Lassiter et al., 2007). Importantly, it has been demonstrated that ICP is a perceptual phenomenon triggered by visual stimuli that is not influenced by higher-order reasoning processes (Lassiter, 2002) or by a better recall of stimulus-relevant information (e.g., particular details of visual information; Lassiter et al., 2002).

Based on visual framing and the ICP paradigm, the results of the present study can be explained as follows. Exposing participants to the news article accompanied by an isolating news visual—in line with predictions made by the framing approach (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007)—rendered the isolation of the scandalized politician more applicable. That is, the aspect of isolation became applicable for individuals' candidate evaluations (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018). At the same time, it led participants to ascribe unwarranted causality to the scandalized politician (i.e., he is responsible for the scandal) simply because he was visually depicted in a noticeable way (Lassiter et al., 2002). Similar to previous research and based on this perceptual phenomenon (Lassiter, 2002), participants' evaluations of the scandalized politician were thus negatively affected. However, the effect was nullified when participants were additionally exposed to explicit information referring to the isolation of the politician via the textual frame. It is possible that the availability of explicit textual isolation information counteracted the rather implicit visual framing effect and the ICP (as a visual phenomenon). The rationale behind this is that explicit textual information (in contrast to the implicit visual information) may have triggered a more rational processing of the available scandalous information, prohibiting a framing effect and the ICP. For example, participants may have engaged in higher-order reasoning processes such as whether it is reasonable that other politicians turned away from the scandalized politician based on the rather unclear facts in this emerging scandal case. This more rationale processing triggered by textual cues may have then nullified the influence of the visual. This finding is actually in line with current visual framing effects research (von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018). When individuals are exposed to both textually and visually framed information at the same time, textual information carried by a particular frame overrides respective information provided by a visual frame (Powell et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the effect of candidate evaluation on intention to vote for the scandalized politician was highly significant. In line with the abovementioned findings and extending previous findings in framing effects research (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Schemer et al., 2012; see also von Sikorski et al., 2018), intention to vote for the candidate was significantly decreased when the politician was visually but not textually isolated as compared with when he was not visually and textually isolated. Importantly, the effect on intention to vote was completely mediated by candidate evaluations (no direct effect).

Also, the results revealed that both male and female participants were affected, but at different intensities. Yet, the effect was even stronger for women. That is, women showed more negative candidate evaluations than men. Although we were not primarily interested in gender effects, this result corroborates previous scandal effects research showing that women evaluate politicians involved in scandal more harshly than men (Smith, Powers, & Suarez, 2005). One explanation for this result is the assumption that women and men tend to engage in different kinds of moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1993) and that women are generally "less willing to accept a politician involved in scandal" (Smith et al., 2005, p. 122). Furthermore, the present results showed a stronger decrease in candidate evaluations in individuals who perceived the online information to be of higher journalistic quality. Again, this supports previous findings on the effects of political scandals revealing that negative candidate perceptions are enhanced when scandal allegations derive from high (compared with low) credibility sources (e.g., a quality newspaper; Botero, Castro Cornejo, Gamboa, Pavao, & Nickerson, 2015).

There are noteworthy limitations to this study that should be taken into account when interpreting the present results. First, we used a student sample. As mentioned above, we—in line with Druckman and Kam (2011)—are confident that this did not pose a threat to the validity of our study and that it is appropriate to use student samples when testing a specific theory in political communication, as in the present study. Yet, future research should try to replicate the present results using representative samples and in other countries, testing whether the general effect can be replicated for older and less educated samples. Second, we used a corruption scandal, and future research may test whether the detected effects extend to other types of scandals (e.g., a sex scandal). Third, we used an online quality media outlet in Austria (*Salzburger Nachrichten*). Future research may test whether the present findings can be replicated in connection with a less credible news medium (e.g., a tabloid newspaper) and other types of media channels (e.g., TV). Fourth, the results revealed that participants perceived the stimulus articles as rather credible, and we did not find any relevant group differences for perceived credibility. Yet, we asked participants to assess the general credibility of the news coverage. Future research may test whether visual framing (i.e., depicting a scandalous politician as isolated and alone) affects the perceived credibility of the allegations brought against the politician. This would be a valuable avenue for future research. Fifth, we examined particular effects on candidate evaluations and voting intentions only. Yet, emotions can be regarded important for both the study of scandals and the effects of news visuals (e.g., see Kepplinger et al., 2012). Future research extending our approach should also account for discrete emotions. Also, we need more content analytical studies that explicitly assess distance and isolation in the depictions of candidates involved in scandal. Previous research looking at presidential campaigns has accumulated valuable results in this respect (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Scholars should extend this line of research and specifically study visual candidate depictions in connection with mediated scandals. Sixth, we found relevant influences on individuals' voting intentions. Yet, it should be noted that we used a fictitious case and examined the scandal of an alleged EU politician. Besides influences triggered by certain media depictions,

other factors that can also affect voting intentions, such as individuals' specific prior attitudes (i.e., party identification), should be accounted for in future studies. Party identification should be a particularly important predictor of voting intentions when a well-known politician is involved in a domestic scandal (Falter & Schoen, 2005). Seventh, future research should also compare different types of isolating and nonisolating images and test whether the results of the present study can be replicated. Eighth, based on the present data, we cannot say anything about the actual reception process and how individuals used available textual and visual information during media reception (i.e., interplay of textual and visual framing devices). Future observational studies (e.g., using eye-tracking methodology) may specifically tackle these questions (see Dahmen, 2011).

Conclusion

The findings of the present study underscore the importance of examining textual and visual framing effects in an integrated way. The results suggest that the interplay of visual and textual information is more complex than previously thought. Textual scandal coverage with isolation cues did not result in more negative candidate evaluations compared with the identical article without isolation cues. In contrast, visually depicting the politician as isolated and alone significantly deteriorated candidate evaluations. Negative candidate evaluations, in turn, significantly decreased individuals' voting intentions for the politician. Yet, this visual effect only occurred when textual isolation cues were absent.

Thus, the present study provides new insights on the meaningful role of visuals in mediated scandals (Entman, 2012) and the importance of news images as relevant framing devices. The results have several important implications. First, future studies should regularly account for both textual and visual framing devices and scholars should expand their theorizing toward a multimodal framing theory (cf. Dan, 2018; Powell et al., 2015, 2018). Second, journalists should be very careful when selecting certain news visuals. Images do not only serve decorative functions, but can effectively influence public opinion and may result in unjustified prejudgments toward political actors (von Sikorski, 2018b; von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018), especially when initial scandal allegations turn out to be wrong at a later point in time (Kepplinger et al., 2012). Third, from a media literacy perspective, visual literacy (Messaris, 1998) can be regarded as highly important in making news consumers aware of the circumstance that images may simply (and implicitly) suggest that something may or may not be (Moriarty, 1996), neither being true nor false. News consumers should take this into account, particularly when judging politicians (allegedly) involved in a political scandal.

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Appendix

Excerpt of News Article (Control Condition Without Isolation Cues):

Corruption scandal over EU politician Reindler [HEADING 1]

Corruption allegations against Austrian Council of Europe politician [HEADING 2]

[Vienna] - As the public prosecutor in Vienna announced last Monday, preliminary investigations were taken because of the suspicion of infidelity and corruption against the Austrian EU politician Johannes Reindler. He has been a member of Austria's delegation to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg since 2009 and is a member of the Infrastructure Committee. The politician is accused of having accepted payments of at least € 274,000 between 2011 and 2014 as part of his work for the EU 2020 fund. In return, Reindler is said to have campaigned for "that EU funding specifically targeted certain projects. Primarily in infrastructure projects in Eastern Europe. There are various evidences for this", said prosecutor Julien Malou. At the same time, however, Malou stressed that the preliminary investigations were still at the very beginning and it was unclear whether the allegations against Reindler can actually be substantiated.

EU politician rejects allegations of corruption [SUB-HEADING]

"The allegations against me are wrong. I feel that these are deeply defamatory. The investigation will show that the allegations against me are unfounded", said Reindler.

Reindler moved in 2008 on the state list of the Social Democratic Party SPÖ in Austria's National Council. He then moved to Strasbourg in 2009 on his own request to the EU Infrastructure Committee.

Excerpt of News Article (Experimental Condition With Isolation Cues; *bold*):

Corruption scandal: EU politician Reindler **increasingly isolated** [HEADING 1]

Corruption allegations against Austrian Council of Europe politician [HEADING 2]

[Vienna] - As the public prosecutor in Vienna announced last Monday, preliminary investigations were taken because of the suspicion of infidelity and corruption against the Austrian EU politician Johannes Reindler. He has been a member of Austria's delegation to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg since 2009 and is a member of the Infrastructure Committee. The politician is accused of having accepted payments of at least € 274,000 between 2011 and 2014 as part of his work for the EU 2020 fund. In return, Reindler is said to have campaigned for "that EU funding specifically targeted certain projects. Primarily in infrastructure projects in Eastern Europe. There are various evidences for this", said prosecutor Julien Malou. At the same time, however, Malou stressed that the preliminary investigations were still at the very beginning and it was unclear whether the allegations against Reindler can actually be substantiated. **Several EU politicians have already publicly distanced themselves from Reindler.**

EU politician rejects allegations of corruption [SUB-HEADING]

"The allegations against me are wrong. I feel that these are deeply defamatory. The investigation will show that the allegations against me are unfounded", said Reindler.

Reindler moved in 2008 on the state list of the Social Democratic Party SPÖ in Austria's National Council. He then moved to Strasbourg in 2009 on his own request to the EU Infrastructure Committee.

However, corruption allegations have recently **led to the isolation of Reindler**. Former colleagues and also members of the delegation of Austria in the Council of Europe **increasingly turn away from the EU politician**.