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## Constructing trustworthiness through pictorial and multimodal metaphor an exploration of corporate visual rhetoric

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## **Constructing trustworthiness through pictorial and multimodal metaphor: an exploration of corporate visual rhetoric**

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Trust is a pervasive feature of social life and a basic element of both intimate and distant interpersonal relations. Every decision to trust other people, however, involves a certain degree of risk, as our ability to attain full knowledge of their intentions and motives is, in most situations, inescapably limited (Gambetta, 1988; Marková and Gillespie, 2008). Our decisions to trust others are thus influenced and guided by our subjective perceptions of their *trustworthiness* (Hardin, 2002; Linell and Keselman, 2011). These considerations apply not only to interpersonal relations between individuals, but also to those between business organizations and their stakeholders (Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010).

This paper investigates how large multinational corporations use images to construct a trustworthy corporate identity across different genres of business communication. We analyze a corpus of images collected from the websites of some of the world's largest corporations operating in high-impact industries such as the oil and gas, banking and pharmaceutical sectors, where stakeholders' trust is key to ensuring social legitimation and long-term viability. The goal of the analysis is to identify and describe the pictorial (monomodal) and multimodal metaphors (Forceville 1996, 2002; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009) employed by these companies to convey three fundamental attributes of trustworthiness: a) *ability*, which regards a company's skills and expertise in a specific domain, b) *integrity*, which relates to its moral and ethical values, and c) *benevolence*, which refers to its care for and goodwill towards the stakeholders (Mayer et al., 1995; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010).

Following Koller (2009), this paper emphasizes the centrality of pictorial and multimodal metaphor in companies' discursive construction of their corporate identity, focusing on a specific and crucial dimension of corporate identity, i.e. trustworthiness. In addition, this study adds to the existing literature on metaphor by investigating how pictorial and multimodal metaphors are used, for persuasive purposes, in emerging genres of corporate communication. More generally, the study has the twofold aim of contributing to our knowledge of how trustworthiness is constructed through visual and multimodal resources, at the same time advancing our understanding of the discursive dynamics of trust, which is still limited and fragmentary (Linell and Keselman, 2011).

*Keywords: trust, trustworthiness, pictorial and multimodal metaphor, business discourse, multimodality, persuasion*

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